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Trump deepens appeal to fascist right

By Patrick Martin

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In a series of tweets Thursday morning, US President Donald Trump intensified his appeal to racist and fascist forces, bemoaning the loss of “beautiful statues and monuments” of Confederate generals like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

Trump’s comments were a calculated overture to the neo-Nazis and white supremacists who rioted in Charlottesville, Virginia last Saturday over efforts to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee. In the course of the violence, one neo-Nazi drove his car into a group of peaceful anti-racist protesters, killing a 32-year-old woman, Heather Heyer.

The president provoked widespread popular outrage with his comments at a Tuesday afternoon press briefing at Trump Tower in New York City, where he openly defended the neo-Nazi demonstrators in Charlottesville, saying there were “many fine people” among them, while declaring that anti-racist protesters bore an equal share of the blame for any violence that ensued.

Trump tweeted Thursday, “Sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues and monuments. You can't change history, but you can learn from it. Robert E Lee, Stonewall Jackson—who's next, Washington, Jefferson? So foolish! Also the beauty that is being taken out of our cities, towns and parks will be greatly missed and never able to be comparably replaced!”

Posing as a lover of history, culture and beauty is ludicrous and implausible for someone most famous—before the 2016 election campaign—for hosting a reality TV program and erecting vulgar monuments to his own wealth and celebrity.

Moreover, by equating Washington and Jefferson, leaders of one of the great liberating struggles of mankind, the American Revolution, with the military leadership of the Confederacy, a slaveowners' rebellion, Trump demonstrates that he knows nothing about American history.

Nonetheless, there is a logic in this seemingly bizarre conduct. Acting on the advice of his fascist advisers, particularly chief political strategist Stephen Bannon, Trump is cultivating a definite social layer of ultra-rightists, white supremacists and outright neo-Nazis.

He is sticking to his guns in the face of near-universal criticism from the media, the Democratic Party and the bulk of the Republican Party, seeking to lay the basis for the development of a fascist movement in the United States, which would combine racism, religious fundamentalism, economic nationalism and militarism.

Trump combined his tweets defending Confederate monuments with blasts against critics within the Republican Party, including senators Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Jeff Flake of Arizona. He even endorsed Flake's newly announced opponent for the Republican Senate nomination in Arizona in 2018, denouncing Flake as "toxic."

The neo-Nazi violence in Charlottesville has touched off a wave of protests nationwide against Trump's public embrace of the white supremacists, as well as actions by local and state governments to shut down Confederate memorials or remove them outright.

The city of Baltimore removed all four of its remaining Confederate statues on Wednesday night, while the state of Virginia and the city of Richmond, between them home to a vast array of Confederate memorials, began taking similar action.

In Durham, North Carolina, a group of protesters pulled down a Confederate statue outside the county courthouse. Eight were arrested—many more than the number of white supremacists arrested after the Charlottesville rampage, although no one was injured in Durham.

The vast majority of Confederate memorials were erected, not in the aftermath of the Civil War itself, but during the era of the imposition of Jim Crow segregation, from 1895 to 1930, and later during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. In both periods, they were directed against demands for equal political and civil rights for African Americans, the descendants of the slaves freed by the Civil War.

The response to Trump's remarks within the corporate media and the capitalist political establishment has been dominated by fears that the president has too blatantly revealed the orientation of his administration to neo-Nazi and white supremacist forces, thus discrediting the US government both at home and abroad.

Particularly significant is the response of the military brass. Each of the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top commanders of the Air Force, Army, Marines, Navy and National Guard, issued statements condemning race hatred and white supremacists, although making no mention of the conciliation of these forces by Trump.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, visiting China for talks on the North Korea crisis, told reporters he agreed with the comments of the other commanders. “I can absolutely and unambiguously tell you there is no place—no place—for racism and bigotry in the US military or in the United States as a whole,” he said, again without mentioning Trump.

These statements were given huge prominence in the daily press, including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, alongside the condemnations of Trump’s comments by an array of Republican officeholders, senators, representatives and governors, and the walkout from White House advisory panels by dozens of corporate CEOs and bankers.

None of these representatives of the ruling elite objected to Trump’s Muslim ban, his persecution of immigrants, his demands for sweeping cuts in social spending, or his militaristic bullying of countries around the world. Their main concern is that his latest comments have revealed, too openly and crudely, the anti-democratic essence of the American capitalist state, shattering the pretense that the United States is the leader of the “free world” and the advocate of democracy against tyranny and oppression.

Similarly, the Democratic Party politicians have mainly attacked Trump from the right, portraying him as too soft on Vladimir Putin and beholden to Russia for its alleged interference in the 2016 US elections.

The bourgeois critics object not to Trump’s defense of Wall Street and American imperialism, but to the methods he employs, which they regard as too reckless, potentially provoking a movement from below that would threaten the interests of American capitalism as a whole.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is itself riven with conflicts that reflect the deepening divisions within the ruling elite. Press reports cite widespread (but anonymous) leaks from White House staff and cabinet officials thrown into consternation by the political firestorm that has followed Trump’s public defense of neo-Nazis.

The highest-ranking Jewish member of the White House staff, chairman of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn, former president of Goldman Sachs, was said by the *New York Times* to be “disgusted” and contemplating resignation—a report that touched off a selloff on Wall Street, with the Dow Jones average down 247 points on Thursday. Other reports suggested that Cohn was hanging on in the expectation that he would be appointed next month to succeed Janet Yellen as chair of the Federal Reserve Board.

A *Wall Street Journal* column noted that the wave of resignations by CEOs from Trump advisory councils was at least in part sparked by concerns that his increasingly abrasive relations with congressional Republicans would cripple his ability to push through the expected tax cut for corporations and the wealthy, the key issue as far as corporate America was concerned.

Billionaire Rupert Murdoch, owner of the *Wall Street Journal* and Fox News, was reported to have urged Trump to fire chief strategist Stephen Bannon at a dinner meeting in the White House, as part of an effort to reorganize his administration and redirect it to the main political tasks demanded by the financial aristocracy, especially tax cuts.

Bannon responded with an unusual interview to the liberal publication *American Prospect*, in which he publicly attacked Cohn and the Treasury Department, headed by another Wall Street multi-millionaire, Steven Mnuchin, for opposing a hardline economic nationalist policy in relation to China.

He gloated over the political impact of the Charlottesville events. “The Democrats,” he said, “the longer they talk about identity politics, I got ’em. I want them to talk about racism every day. If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats.”

The Trump adviser is not talking about an electoral competition, but about the mobilization of ultra-right and fascist forces, along with the police and military, to provide the basis for an authoritarian regime based on war and social austerity.