



Anti-racist protesters mass in front of the fascist rally at Emancipation Park in Charlottesville. The Robert E. Lee statue is visible in the center background.

REPORT FROM CHARLOTTESVILLE & RICHMOND

By Phil Wilayto

RICHMOND, VA, Aug. 14 -- News of the brutal murder of 32-year-old Heather Heyer by a white supremacist in Charlottesville, Va., along with injuries to dozens of other people, has spread around the world. Solidarity statements are being issued from many countries. U.S. politicians of all stripes - with the notable exception of President Donald Trump - are condemning the emerging "white nationalist" movement that led to the outrage.

And it's not over. The Virginia Flaggers, a pro-Confederate group that heavily promoted the so-called "alt-right" rally in Charlottesville, is reporting on its website that a group called Save Southern Heritage plans to hold a noon rally on Sept 16 at the Robert E. Lee statue on Richmond's Monument Avenue.

As the former capital of the Confederacy and, until relatively recently, the major promoter of the revisionist Lost Cause mythology, Richmond is ground zero in the fight over Confederate monuments. This means the September rally, if it happens, is likely to be the next national focus for white supremacist organizations. Local anti-racist groups, including the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, are already mobilizing to oppose the rally.

One early sign of the pending struggle was last night's vigil at Richmond's Abner Clay Park, where some 200 people mourned Heather Heyer's death and then took to the streets in a militant, unpermitted march to the Lee statue, chanting "No Trump! No KKK! No fascist USA!" On their way back to the park, the group stopped at the statue of Confederate Gen. J.E.B. Stuart, where one agile young protester scaled the pedestal and planted an anti-fascist banner between the legs of Stuart's horse.

BACKGROUND TO THE EVENTS

Charlottesville, home to the prestigious University of Virginia, is a predominantly white, Democratic-voting town with a population of around 47,000. Last February, at the initiative of African-American City Council member Wes Bellamy, the council voted to take down its statues of Confederate generals Robert E. Lee, located in Lee Park, and "Stonewall" Jackson, located in Jackson Park. Both men held Black people as slaves. The City then changed the park's names from Lee to Emancipation and Jackson to Justice.

Local right-wing blogger and VCU graduate Jason Kessler was outraged. He did some digging and found some controversial tweets Bellamy had sent out years ago, resulting in the council member resigning from both his high school teaching job and his position on the nine-member Virginia Board of Education. He was able to keep his seat on council. Bellamy has since apologized for the tweets.

That was the beginning. On May 13, alt-right leader Richard Spencer led an evening torch-lit rally of more than 100 racists at the Lee statue, evoking chilling images of old-time Ku Klux Klan rallies. Protesters came out and there were some scuffles, but no arrests. Spencer, who is “credited” with coining the whitewashing term “alt-right,” is a graduate of UVA and president of the Arlington, Va.,-based white supremacist National Policy Institute.

Kicking up the momentum, a KKK faction from North Carolina held a rally July 8 near the Jackson statue. Opposed by more than 2,000 angry protesters, the three dozen Klansmen were only able to hold their “rally” due to a massive police presence. Attempts to block the Klan from leaving the area resulted in police using tear gas and arresting 23 protesters.

Calling the Klan event an embarrassing failure, Kessler then called for another rally at Emancipation Park, for Aug. 12. With support from the Virginia Flaggers, a right-wing group that promotes displaying the Confederate battle flag, the call attracted a broad range of extremist figures and organizations, including Spencer, the National Socialists (Nazis), Traditional Workers Party and American Vanguard (neo-Nazis) and other white-supremacist groups, including some motorcycle gangs invited for “security.”

THE BATTLE OF CHARLOTTESVILLE

Appeals for protesters went out from Black Lives Matter-Charlottesville, Standing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)-Charlottesville and a group of local clergy members who called for 1,000 religious leaders to come to town to confront the right wing. Noted educator and political activist Cornel West was one who responded.

Other local figures urged people to stay away from the right-wing rally. UVA President Teresa Sullivan called on students and faculty to avoid any protests and instead participate in “diversity” events on campus.

That turned out to be unfortunate advice. On Friday evening, Aug. 11, more than 200 fascists, almost all of them young white males, marched through the UVA campus carrying bamboo tiki torches. Chanting the white supremacist slogan “You will not replace us!” they encircled and brutally attacked a group of about 30 Black Lives Matter protesters. It was only then that the police, who had stood by watching, declared the unpermitted gathering illegal.

The next day some 500 fascists gathered at Emancipation Park. Many came prepared for battle, with helmets, shields, body padding and visible weapons, including guns. Thousands of defiant protesters massed in the surrounding streets. Shouted insults morphed into throwing water bottles, then more dangerous projectiles, then fistfights. Pepper spray and some kind of tear gas left many people choking and gasping for air, but the protesters kept up their presence mere feet from the fascists.



Squaring off outside Emancipation Park.



Local clergy had put out a call for religious leaders to join them in nonviolently confronting the fascists. Noted educator, philosopher, author and political activist Cornel West, center, was one of those who responded.



The Defenders kept their banner visible despite several attempts by fascists to take it down.

THE NON-ROLE OF THE POLICE

State Police, who were in charge of law enforcement activities that day, stayed in the park, ignoring the rising tensions.

“People punched and kicked each other during various scuffles, which often were broken up from within crowds, without police intervention,” reported CNN.

There was more trouble elsewhere in the city.

The online news source ProPublica reported that “At about 10 a.m. today, at one of countless such confrontations, an angry mob of white supremacists formed a battle line across from a group of counter-protesters, many of them older and gray-haired, who had gathered near a church parking lot. On command from their leader, the young men charged and pummeled their ideological foes with abandon. One woman was hurled to the pavement, and the blood from her bruised head was instantly visible.

“Standing nearby, an assortment of Virginia State Police troopers and Charlottesville police wearing protective gear watched silently from behind an array of metal barricades - and did nothing. It was a scene that played out over and over in Charlottesville as law enforcement confronted the largest public gathering of white supremacists in decades.”

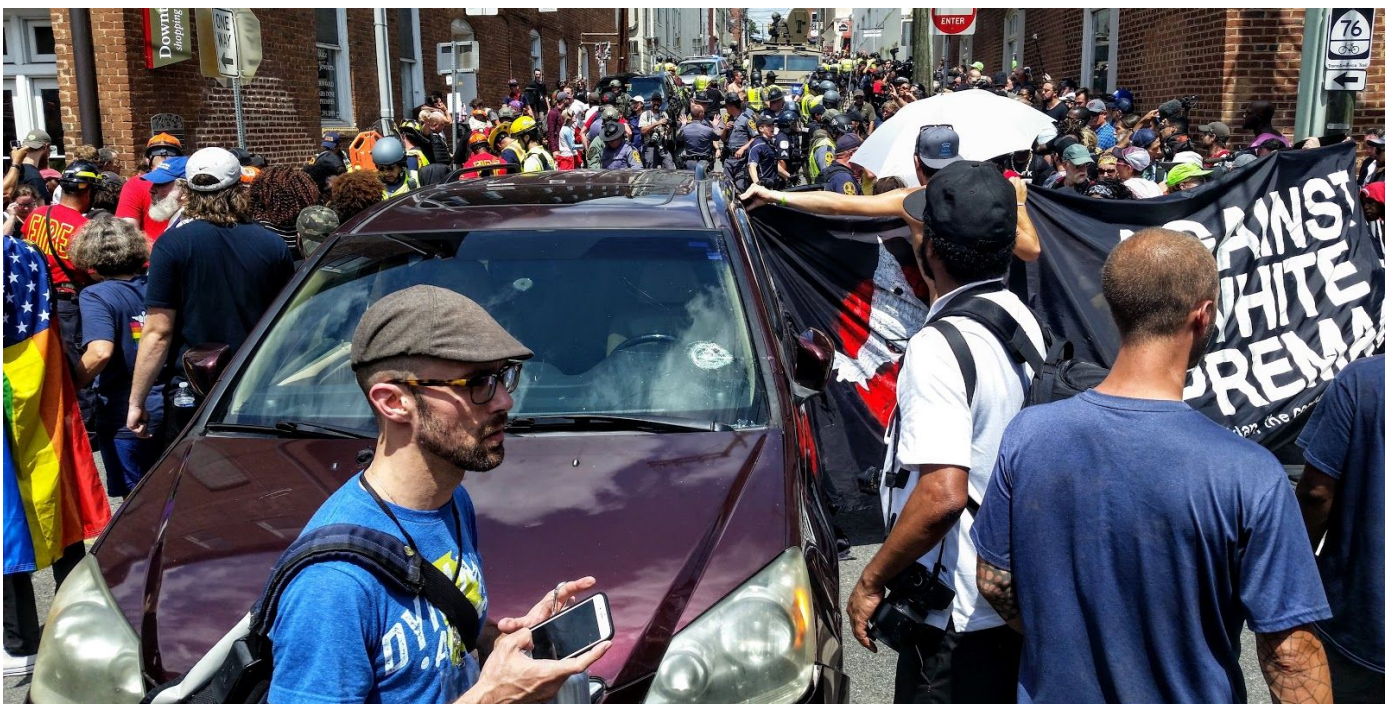
All this, despite the fact that more than 1,000 officers were expected to be deployed, according to city officials.

Back in Emancipation Park, minutes after the white supremacist rally officially began, a wave of protesters broke through metal barriers the police had erected. State Police called off the rally and Gov. Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency, although it was unclear what that meant, since other than evicting the fascists from the park, the police did nothing to prevent further fighting between the two sides.

HEATHER HEYER IS MARTYRED DEFENDING THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Rumors spread that the routed fascists were going to march on a nearby predominantly Black housing project. Protesters quickly massed at an intersection on the anticipated march route, intending to physically stop the fascists.

The Defenders were a block away, headed for the protest line, when scores of protesters began running toward us. A car that had stopped a short distance from the line suddenly rapidly accelerated and plowed into the crowd of protesters, sending at least five people flying into the air and then slammed into the back of another car at the intersection. The assaulting driver then threw the car into reverse and sped away, front bumper trailing on the ground, hitting more people.



Minutes after a car driven by a white supremacist plowed into a crowd of protesters, people stayed on the scene, some stunned, other comforting each other.



Volunteer medics tend to the wounded until EMS workers arrived. Twenty people were injured. One, Heather Heyer, did not make it.

Heather Heyer, a Charlottesville paralegal, waitress and student helping to hold the anti-racist line in defense of the Black community, was killed. Nineteen others were injured, nine of whom were reported to be in serious or critical condition. (As of Monday afternoon, a [GoFundMe](#) campaign created to support Ms. Heyer's family had raised more than \$225,000.)

James Alex Fields Jr., a 20-year-old white male from Ohio, has since been arrested and charged with second-degree murder, malicious wounding and leaving the scene of an accident in which someone has died. News media is reporting he was previously spotted at the fascist rally, holding an American Vanguard shield.

Although it was clear that some kind of confrontation was going to happen, we didn't see any cops in the area. It was only after the crash that police showed up - complete with a military-style State Police armed personnel carrier, topped by a cop in military garb pointing what appeared to be an automatic weapon at the now-traumatized crowd.

Also on Saturday, a State Police Bell 407 helicopter, reportedly involved in surveillance related to the fascist rally, crashed and burned in a wooded area just outside the city. On board were two pilots, Lt. H. Jay Cullen and trooper-pilot Berke M.M. Bates. The crash is being investigated by federal authorities, but State Police already have said there is no indication of foul play. The deaths raised the number of people killed in connection with the fascist rally to three. In all, dozens were injured.

By Saturday evening, Charlottesville was international news and politicians from both major parties were condemning the white supremacists. (Trump initially condemned both the racists and the protesters. Succumbing to heavy criticism, he today laid the blame where it belonged: on white supremacists, Nazis and bigots.)

THE COMPLICIT ROLE OF THE DEMOCRATS

It's easy to blame Trump and the Republican Party for fostering the racist climate that emboldens these reactionaries, but the Democrats are equally responsible.

The vote in Charlottesville City Council to take down the city's two Confederate statues was close: 3-2. Mayor Michael Signer, a Democrat, voted no. This past weekend the city cops, under the authority of the mayor, and the State Police, under the authority of Democratic Gov. McAuliffe, did not deploy any forces outside the area of the fascist rally.

Gov. McAuliffe is now crying crocodile tears over the casualties, speaking at a Democratic Party-organized vigil for Heather Heyer Aug. 13 in Richmond. But McAuliffe was in charge of the State Police who took a hands-off approach to the fascists, a major factor in Heyer's murder. The Defenders are not calling on the state for protection from fascists, just pointing out that it didn't provide it.

Also speaking at the Richmond vigil was Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney, a Democrat who has stated he wants the city's Confederate statues to stay right where they are, but with added "context," like signage. Despite the events in Charlottesville, Stoney repeated that stand today.

A FIGHTING SPIRIT IN CHARLOTTESVILLE



Many political organizations were represented in Charlottesville. This was the time for cooperation and mutual support. The feeling of solidarity was palpable.

People came from near and far to protest the fascist rally. Many appeared to be first-time protesters. The Democratic Socialists of America had a large turnout. Several other socialist and anarchist organizations were present, including Refuse & Resist, Workers World Party, the Industrial Workers of the World and Antifa Seven Hills. Some of the most militant youth seem to belong to small groups operating as units. Several armed youth identified themselves as members of Redneck Revolt, a network of mostly working-class, white, rural anti-racists whose slogan is "Putting the Red Back in Redneck!"

The Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, a founding affiliate of the United National Antiwar Coalition, are proud to have been among the many organizations that answered the call from local groups to come to Charlottesville and stand against the fascists. We were in the thick of things all day, carrying our banner that read "No Shrines to White Supremacy - Take 'Em Down NOW!" (Besides the political message, the heavy canvas banner also stopped four flying bottles.) Equipped with simple hand towels soaked in water, we were able to operate through the tear gas and pepper spray used by the fascists. We assisted several people dealing with tear gas attacks. One of our members, a Marine vet and former civilian nurse, applied CPR to one of the people seriously injured in the car attack.

(For videos of some of the street actions, see www.DefendersFJE.blogspot.com.)

We collaborated in this effort with SURJ-Richmond, which also is supporting the Defenders' ongoing campaign to win a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park on the Richmond site of what once was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade. (See www.sacredgroundproject.net)

OUR ANALYSIS OF THE EVENTS

We believe the events this past weekend in Charlottesville represent a qualitative change in the development of a fascist movement in the United States. We don't believe we are yet facing the kind of threat that emerged in the 1930s in Germany and Italy. That happens when a country is going through a severe economic crisis, the workers are in mass rebellion and the ruling one-percent fears it can't contain social unrest with just the police and legal repression. Their answer is to foster an extremist mass movement to crush all opposition through naked violence.

We are not in that extreme situation today, but we do have a deeply polarized society with many economic problems. The failure of the Democratic Party to offer anything but an anti-worker program of neo-liberalism is what led to the election of Donald Trump, a racist, misogynist, war-hungry egomaniac who would have felt right at home at the alt-right rally. (Trump's White House Chief Strategist, Stephen Bannon, a Virginian who attended a private high school in Richmond, formerly headed Breitbart News, which he described in 2016 as "the platform for the alt-right.")

In addition, there is a growing racist movement that tells anxious white workers that their economic problems are the result of supposedly massive immigration (the numbers have actually been declining since 2000) and neoliberal trade deals. (That part is true.) Claiming that removing Confederate statues is an attack on their racial identity combines economic fears with an appeal to feelings of white superiority to create a movement.

Fascist movements always start small, then grow if they can project an image of strength. They appeal to the frightened middle class that no longer believes the government can offer them relief from their economic insecurity. As the movement grows, it pulls in sections of the working class - just as university-educated Spencer and Kessler are aligning with more working-class organizations. To ignore this threat is to allow it to grow. We do that at our peril.

This weekend's events in Charlottesville offer two important lessons: One, extreme white-supremacist organizations are growing and becoming more aggressive and physically dangerous. And two, we cannot rely on the police to protect us, our communities and our movements.

Progressive forces need to take this threat very seriously and take practical steps to prepare for the increasingly difficult struggles ahead.

The only other option will be retreat.

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