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# Silence under Charlottesville's Dark Shadow

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

August 15, 2018

The anniversary of Charlottesville provides an opportunity to reflect on racial hatred and white supremacy; how each of us deals with that ugly side of America. We can also reflect on how the leader of our nation has equivocated about Nazis and White Supremacists in stark contrast with our national goal of equality for all.

Each of us has the opportunity by word and deed to live our lives committed to that value and aspiration – to live up to the meaning of our national motto: *E Pluribus Unum* – “out of many, one.”

But our top elected leader -- a person who claims “good people” are found in White Supremacy groups, a person known for ugly, harsh and harmful attacks – routinely singles out people of color for some of his worst verbal assaults.

Of particular concern is how Republican leaders – members of Congress and candidates – remain mostly silent as the President deeply divides America in a hollow effort to strengthen his political hand. Their values are crassly set aside to protect their political positions.

Some of them may claim the President is only trying to correct “political correctness,” or just call his insults simply “racially-tinged” or “racially-insensitive.” Some may actually think, based on his decade’s long record, that he is a stone-cold racist. One or two of them may occasionally speak out. But from most GOP leaders, we hear nothing but the echoing sound of silence.

Sir Thomas More, modernly made famous in the award-winning play and movie “A Man for All Seasons” tells his accusers of the maxim of law “*Qui tacet consentit*” – “Silence gives consent.” Much of our Republican leadership is, in their silence, consenting to the shredding of our values by the current temporary occupant of the White House. Let us all hope that the diminution of our fundamental values will be only temporary.

The premise of America is that the people are supreme, thus it’s important how each of us deals with this assault on our values. American values can be restored if each of us lives by them and demands the same from our leaders. Meanwhile, we must find our voices while many of our leaders remain voiceless.

By speaking out we honor our citizenship. My voice, my speaking out, is also honoring what I learned from my parents.

In 1952, when I was seven years old, my Mom and Dad operated a movie theater in a small central Montana town, where over the years the KKK had a presence. With few television sets in those days, the “picture show” was the center of social activity. Live entertainment was often onstage. My folks booked a touring piano player, Robert Allen,

to perform onstage. Allen had won the Horace Heidt Amateur Hour on radio – like today’s American Idol. When Mom and Dad promoted the event with photos in the weekly newspaper, it was clear that Allen was African American. City “leaders” came to my father, telling him that while Mr. Allen could entertain, the sun was not allowed to set with a “negro” in town so he’d have to immediately leave after the show.

My brothers and I, ages 10, 8 and 7, listened as my parents struggled with the problem. Outraged and offended, they refused to bend to the community code. Dad went to each motel and hotel in town to book a room but, not surprisingly, was told there were no rooms available. They talked openly about the choice of doing what was right or adhering to the community norm. They chose to do what was right. They decided that Mr. Allen could stay overnight at our house, within the town limits, and offered that to him.

That powerful lesson has never left the consciousness of the three of us. I strive daily to live up to those American values set by my folks.

Most of us learned to appreciate the values of America in our own way, in our own families. While those experiences may not have been as dramatic, they are personally determinative. If we all live up to our values, our nation will benefit.

In the shadow of Charlottesville, silence does give consent. Do not be silent.

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*Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, retired in 2017 after 48 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and occasionally teaches Montana history and contributes to community and economic development projects.*

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