

Commentary: How UVa helped its students recognize the evil around them

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By Thomas G. Palaima

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This is a hard time to strive to be a decent human being, but an important time to do so. The recent loss of life and harm to flesh and blood and hearts and souls in Charlottesville, Va., on Aug. 12 involved students from the University of Virginia.

We live in one of the centers of civilized culture and higher education in our state. We may be tempted to view Charlottesville as an isolated remote event. This would be a mistake.

We saw in images and in words the deep-rooted feelings of hatred and anger that motivated individuals on both sides in Charlottesville to act as they did.

It can't happen here we might say. Only we know it can.

A key figure in the Unite the Right rally, Richard W. Spencer, spoke in Charlottesville on the morning of Aug. 12. Last December, he spoke at Texas A&M and was scheduled to speak again until A&M officials — citing the “risks of threat to life and safety” — recently canceled the event. Were they wrong to do so? If your child were on the A&M campus, what would you want to happen?

Keep in mind that the organizers of the planned Spencer event issued a press release saying, “Today Charlottesville, Tomorrow Texas A&M.”

Spencer himself did not react to what happened in Charlottesville with the horror and sorrow a great many of us felt. He declared, “It was a huge moral victory in terms of the show of force.” He rejoiced that the “political violence” that he thought “had just become impossible” was right there just waiting to happen.

Ahead of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, UVa president and former University of Texas graduate dean Teresa Sullivan called for students to view the demonstrators as provocateurs and simply ignore them. Indeed, they did on Friday night. During their torch-lit rally, the white supremacists paraded through the UVa campus peacefully, despite their hate-filled chants. The violence Spencer longed for — that took him back to the days of 1930’s Nazi Berlin — came on Saturday.

Think it cannot happen here?

White and black extremist groups are on the Southern Poverty Law Center Hate Map throughout Texas. The United White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, aka the Texas KKK, proudly lists chapters in 31 towns and cities; 18 are concentrated north of I-20 in the far northeast.

The KKK is multifaceted. It directed hatred in the 20th century against immigrants, blacks, Jews, Catholics and even unionized workers. The SPLC Hate Map lists a neo-Nazi Web site, The Daily Stormer, right here in Austin. Given the economic, social, racial, gender and educational disparities and tensions in our country right now, almost every community should consider itself a tinderbox.

Would you want to be a university president making the kinds of decisions that had to be made at A&M and at UVa? In my opinion, UT Austin president Greg Fenves offers us a way forward by example. Fenves mobilized all forces on campus in response to what turned out to be a true perception that incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault have been vastly underreported.

The CLASE report of Spring 2017 brings out into the open — as Charlottesville did for race hatred — the true nature of the problem. One figure suffices: Fifteen percent of female undergraduate students surveyed reported having experienced rape since enrollment at UT.

Fenves' decision was gutsy and risky in these days of spin. However, I would want my child attending an institution where a problem is known and acknowledged and faculty, staff, students, mental health counselors and police officials are informed and aware and sensitive to it.

We can only fight the enemy we see.

Sullivan made half the right call. She let the event take place. She should have made sure that those called upon to show the restraint of Gandhi's followers or civil rights demonstrators who put their faith in Martin Luther King would get their say at soon-to-be-held open public forums.

A&M officials responded in good faith to protect the students in their charge — but they might have erred in not letting those students give witness to the open-minded decency and self-discipline they possess.