A New Form of Antisemitism Surfaces in Charlottesville

Thomas Jefferson Statue at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Va. (Perry Spring/iStock/Getty Images)
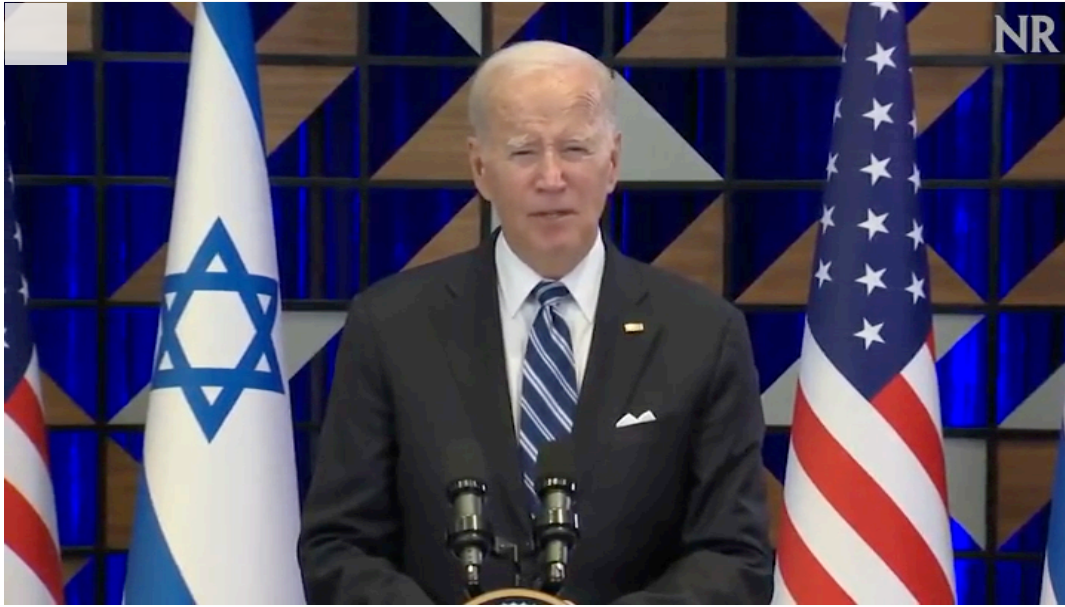
By **ANNA KRIEBEL**

October 17, 2023 6:30 AM

The dehumanizing rhetoric of a student group at the University of Virginia flies in the face of the school's Jeffersonian principles.

Six years after Unite the Right, an insidious new brand of antisemitism has taken hold in Charlottesville, home to the University of Virginia. Shortly after Hamas launched its brutal attack on

Israel, the group Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) at UVA released a statement declaring its unequivocal support for resistance "by whatever means they deem necessary." In essence, it justified the slaughter of Israeli civilians.

I sympathize with those experiencing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and don't pretend to condone every military decision made by Israel, the United States, or any other country, for that matter. However, I am deeply unsettled by the antisemitic implications of many of my peers' statements, as well as their attempts to stifle free discourse.

Even amid the outpouring of anti-Israel sentiment from collegiate groups across the country, SJP at UVA's message managed to stand out as particularly callous for its full-throated embrace of Hamas's attack. The statement lauds Hamas for successfully capturing "occupation soldiers," with no reference to the hundred-plus civilians being held hostage. It assigns full blame for the killing on Israelis, glorifying Hamas as a group of freedom-fighting underdogs, while demonizing its civilian targets as colonial oppressors finally getting the retribution they deserve.

Last Thursday evening, SJP at UVA organized a demonstration on the steps of UVA's Rotunda, the architectural centerpiece of the school, that included this chant: "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." Often employed by Hamas, the slogan is commonly interpreted as a call for the elimination of Israel and its people to establish a Palestinian state stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Though it's subtler than "Jews will not replace us," it flows from the same rhetorical source.

Over a hundred students attended this "teach-in," carrying signs with messages such as "end apartheid," "decolonize," and "end aid to Israel," familiar terminology for this ongoing controversy. But the largest banner read: "No dialogue with white supremacy." The participating students are apparently unaware that Jews themselves have been prime targets of white supremacists, or that most Israeli Jews are not "white" (as in of European descent). Moreover, it is a bit rich for SJP at UVA to declare its support for terrorists, then claim the moral high ground by rejecting any discussion as engaging with "white supremacy."

I don't believe SJP at UVA speaks for the majority of the university's students. Yet its message is emblematic of the rampant groupthink plaguing the political culture of higher education and distorting our understanding of critical issues.

SJP at UVA's professed unwillingness to engage in discourse about the conflict shows the pernicious effects of ideological monocultures on university campuses. As we isolate ourselves from dissent, group polarization takes over, driving the collective toward an ever more extreme position. When good-faith dialogue deteriorates, you wind up with half-baked justifications for slain children.

The group's rhetoric also highlights the hazards of filtering every issue through the lens of pre-existing culture-war narratives. Attempting to shoehorn Jews into the framework of white-supremacist colonizers flattens discussion of an incredibly complex topic. It insulates students from nuance, provides the illusion of moral clarity, and allows them to claim the mantle of righteousness. All of this undermines engagement with opposing viewpoints, causing students to dig in their heels on the issue.

SJP's language epitomizes the semantic games that frequently replace substantive arguments in campus discourse. Hamas is not "simply a political party," as a speaker at the protest claimed. These "resistance fighters" are still guilty of murdering women and children, regardless of what students at our university choose to call them. A terrorist going by another name is still a terrorist.

A group of Jewish UVA students who objected to SJP's message for seeming to "celebrate the deaths of our family members, friends, and loved ones" anonymously published a piece in the *Cavalier Daily*, the student newspaper. In it, they denounced SJP at UVA's characterization of the killings as a positive step forward and implored peers to "recognize the profound inhumanity that has taken place." The students' decision to remain nameless shows the fear SJP has stirred, even if the group's members would never themselves inflict violence. With antisemitic incidents already on the rise across the country, the desire of these Jewish students for anonymity is understandable. But it's a sorry reflection of our campus culture that they feel the need to hide.

At the same time, SJP at UVA encouraged protesters to hide their identities for fear of violence, doxing, or other forms of retaliation. Their solution was to show up at the Rotunda wearing masks. It was a perfect metaphor: We literally can't talk about this issue face to face.

This same pattern is playing out at universities across the country. But to see it here is particularly troubling, given UVA's deep connection to Jeffersonian principles of free speech and religious tolerance. It is our responsibility as students to seek out respectful engagement with one another. Simultaneously, we must call out religious intolerance where we see it infecting our dialogue. Passions are running high. But we owe it to ourselves and our university to give this issue the nuanced, empathetic discussion it deserves, and not to resort to dehumanization.

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WILLISKRIEBEL   Oct 17

Excellent analysis and commentary. Hopefully the author represents the majority of students and faculty at UVA.

Reply

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kevin_moriarty   Oct 17

Time flies. Seems like just yesterday tiki-torch right-wing marchers chanting "Jews will not replace us!" were hitting the streets of Charlottesville.

Is the author implying that the tiki torchers were members of the SJP?

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Ursuletulmare Oct 17

Kevin, Thanks for posting, It reminds me, I need to check out that new blocking system.

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3 replies

Ursuletulmare Oct 17

I can remember when the CD masthead said "For we here are not afraid to follow the truth wheresoever it shall lead us". Guess that UVA is gone

Reply

doublehoo Oct 17

I had forgotten about that. Those were the days.

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RagnarLothbrok Oct 17

So we've gone from "There were good people on both sides" equating to horrific racism, to "The terrorists are the only good people" being the acceptable idea.

Wonderful.

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Ursuletulmare Oct 17

You can do italics in the new system. *Excellent!*

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1 reply

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