

Defiant Trump insists anew: Blame both sides

NEW YORK (AP) — Combative and insistent, President Donald Trump declared anew Tuesday “there is blame on both sides” for the deadly violence last weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia, appearing to once again equate the actions of white supremacist groups and those protesting them. He showed sympathy for the fringe groups’ efforts to preserve Confederate monuments.

The president’s comments effectively wiped away the more conventional statement he delivered at the White House a day earlier when he branded members of the KKK, neo-Nazis and white supremacists who take part in violence as “criminals and thugs.”

Trump’s advisers had hoped those remarks might quell a crush of criticism from Republicans, Democrats and business leaders. But the president’s retorts Tuesday suggested he had been a reluctant participant in that cleanup effort and renewed questions about why he seems to struggle to unequivocally condemn white nationalists.

The blowback was swift, including from fellow Republicans. Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida said Trump should not allow white supremacists “to share only part of the blame.” House Speaker Paul Ryan declared in a tweet that “white supremacy is repulsive” and there should be “no moral ambiguity,” though he did not specifically address the president.

Trump’s remarks were welcomed by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, who tweeted, “Thank you President Trump for your honesty & courage to tell the truth.”

Violence broke out Saturday in Charlottesville, a picturesque college town, after a loosely connected mix of white nationalists, neo-Nazis and other far-right extremists assembled to protest the city’s decision to remove a towering statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. Heather Heyer,



AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

President Donald Trump speaks to the media in the lobby of Trump Tower in New York, Tuesday.

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— Sen. Brian Schatz, Democrat, Hawaii

32, was killed when a man plowed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters.

In the immediate aftermath, Trump placed the blame on “many sides.” On Monday, at the urging of his aides, he delivered a more direct condemnation of white supremacists. But he returned to his original arguments Tuesday during an impromptu press conference in the lobby of his Manhattan skyscraper, declaring “there are two sides to a story.”

He acknowledged there were “some very bad people” looking for trouble

in the group protesting plans to remove the statue. “But you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides,” he said.

Trump sided with those seeking to maintain the monument to Lee, equating him with some of the nation’s founders who also owned slaves. Confederate monuments have become rallying points for supporters of both preserving and toppling them.

“So, this week it’s Robert E. Lee,” he said. “I noticed that Stonewall Jackson’s coming down.” I wonder, is it George Washington next week and is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You really do have to ask yourself where does it stop?”

He continued: “You’re changing history. You’re changing culture.”

The president’s comments mirrored rhetoric from the far-right fringe. A post Monday by the publisher of The Daily Stormer, a notorious neo-Nazi website, predicted that protesters are going to demand that the

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Washington Monument be torn down.

Trump’s handling of the weekend violence has raised new and troubling questions, even among some supporters. Members of his own Republican Party have pressured him to be more vigorous in criticizing bigoted groups, and business leaders have begun abandoning a White House jobs panel in response to his comments.

White House officials were caught off guard by his remarks Tuesday. He had signed off on a plan to not answer questions

from journalists during an event touting infrastructure policies, according to a White House official not authorized to speak publicly about a private discussion. Once behind the lectern and facing the cameras, he overruled the decision.

As Trump talked, his aides on the sidelines in the lobby stood in silence. Chief of staff John Kelly crossed his arms and stared down at his shoes, barely glancing at the president. Press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders looked around the room trying to make eye contact with other senior aides. One young staffer stood with her mouth agape.

Kelly was brought into the White House less than a month ago to try to bring order and stability to a chaotic West Wing. Some Trump allies hoped the retired Marine general might be able to succeed where others have failed: controlling some of Trump’s

impulses. But the president’s improvisations on Tuesday once against underscored that he cannot be controlled by his advisers.

Democrats were aghast at Trump’s comments. Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine said on Twitter that the Charlottesville violence “was fueled by one side: white supremacists spreading racism, intolerance & intimidation. Those are the facts.” Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawaii said on Twitter that he no longer views Trump as his president.

“As a Jew, as an American, as a human, words cannot express my disgust and disappointment,” Schatz said. “This is not my president.”

When asked to explain his Saturday comments about Charlottesville, Trump looked down at his notes and again read a section of his initial statement that denounced bigotry but did not single out white supremacists. He then tucked the paper back into his jacket pocket.

Trump, who has quickly deemed other deadly incidents in the U.S. and around the world acts of terrorism, waffled when asked whether the car death was a terrorist attack.

“There is a question. Is it murder? Is it terrorism?” Trump said. “And then you get into legal semantics. The driver of the car is a murderer and what he did was a horrible, horrible, inexcusable thing.”

Trump said he had yet to call Heyer’s mother but would soon “reach out.” He praised her for what he said was a nice statement about him on social media.

As he finally walked away from his lectern, he stopped to answer one more shouted question: Would he visit Charlottesville? The president’s response was to note that he owned property there and to say — inaccurately — that it was one of the largest wineries in the United States.

Iranian president threatens to revitalize country’s nuclear program

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran’s president warned Tuesday that it could ramp up its nuclear program and quickly achieve a more advanced level if the U.S. continues “threats and sanctions” against his country, which signed a landmark nuclear accord with world powers in 2015.

Hassan Rouhani’s remarks to lawmakers were his most direct warning that the deal could fall apart and risked ratcheting up tensions with the United States. President Donald Trump has repeatedly said he wants to scuttle the accord, which limited Iran’s ability to produce a nuclear weapon while ending most sanctions against it.

Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said late Tuesday: “The nuclear deal must not become ‘too big to fail.’”

Earlier this week, Iran’s parliament voted to increase spending on the country’s ballistic missile program and the foreign operations of its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. The move came in response to U.S. legislation passed earlier this month imposing mandatory penalties on people involved in Iran’s ballistic missile program and anyone who does business with them. The U.S. legislation also applies terrorism sanctions to the Guard and enforces an existing arms embargo.

If Washington continues with “threats and sanctions” against Iran, Tehran could easily step up its nuclear activities, Rouhani said in parliament Tuesday.

“In an hour and a day, Iran could return to a more advanced (nuclear) level than at the beginning of the negotiations” that preceded the 2015 deal, Rouhani said.



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