

Under fire — from GOP — Trump digs in on Confederate icons

BRIDGEWATER, N.J. (AP) — With prominent Republicans openly questioning his competence and moral leadership, President Donald Trump on Thursday burrowed deeper into the racially charged debate over Confederate memorials and lashed out at members of his own party in the latest controversy to engulf his presidency.

Out of sight, but still online, Trump tweeted his defense of monuments to Confederate icons — bemoaning rising efforts to remove them as an attack on America’s “history and culture.”

And he berated his critics who, with increasingly sharper language, have denounced his initially slow and then ultimately combative comments on the racial violence at a white supremacist rally last weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Trump was much quicker Thursday to condemn violence in Barcelona, where more than a dozen people were killed when a van veered onto a sidewalk and sped down a busy pedestrian zone in what authorities called a terror attack.

He then added to his expression of support a tweet reviving a debunked legend about a U.S. general subduing Muslim rebels a century ago in the Philippines by shooting them with bullets dipped in pig blood.

“Study what General Pershing of the United States did to terrorists when caught. There was no more Radical Islamic Terror for 35 years!” Trump wrote.

Trump’s unpredictable, defiant and, critics claim, racially provocative behavior has clearly begun to wear on his Republican allies.

Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina said Trump’s “moral authority is compromised.”

Tillerson, Mattis insist military options remain for North Korea

WASHINGTON (AP) — America’s diplomatic and defense chiefs sought Thursday to reinforce the threat of possible U.S. military action against North Korea after President Donald Trump’s top strategist essentially called the commander-in-chief’s warnings a bluff.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stressed after security talks with close ally Japan that the U.S. seeks a peaceful solution to the standoff over North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. But he said a U.S.-led campaign of economic pressure and diplomacy needs to be backed by potential military consequences.

Washington is “prepared militarily” to respond, if necessary, he said.

Tillerson spoke after he and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis held annual security talks with Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera and Foreign Minister Taro Kono at the State Department. Much of the discussion focused on North Korea, which also poses a threat to Japan.

Neither Tillerson nor Mattis responded directly to strategist Steve Bannon’s argument in an interview published Wednesday that there’s no military solution to the North Korean threat. But both Cabinet members sought to rebut the claim.

“In close collaboration with our allies, there are strong military consequences if DPRK initiates hostilities,” Mattis said, referring to an abbreviation of the North’s official name, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

Mattis said that if North Korea launches a missile toward Japan, the U.S. Pacific island of Guam, the United States or South Korea, “we would take immediate, specific actions to take it down.”

Tech companies banishing extremists after Charlottesville

NEW YORK (AP) — It took bloodshed in Charlottesville to get tech companies to do what civil rights groups have been calling for for years: take a firmer stand against accounts used to promote hate and violence.

In the wake of the deadly clash at a white-nationalist rally last weekend in Virginia, major companies such as Google, Facebook and PayPal are banishing a growing cadre of extremist groups and individuals for violating service terms.

What took so long? For one thing, tech companies have long seen themselves as bastions of free expression.

But the Charlottesville rally seemed to have a sobering effect. It showed how easily technology can be used to organize and

finance such events, and how extreme views online can translate into violence offline.

“There is a difference between freedom of speech and what happened in Charlottesville,” said Rashad Robinson, executive director of Color of Change, an online racial justice group. The battle of ideas is “different than people who show up with guns to terrorize communities.”

The First Amendment offers hate groups a lot of speech protection, but it applies only to government and public settings. A private company is typically free to set its own standards.

‘Red Alert’ over Zimbabwe first lady, accused of assault

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — Lawyers for the young model who claims she was assaulted by Zimbabwe’s

first lady Grace Mugabe in a Johannesburg hotel said Thursday that her family had been approached with an offer of money to drop the allegation.

South African police issued a “red alert” to prevent Mugabe from leaving the country after Zimbabwe’s government requested diplomatic immunity.

Lawyers for 20-year-old Gabriella Engels threatened to go to court if South Africa’s government grants Mugabe immunity, saying it cannot be used to “escape prosecution from grave crimes.”

The lawyers said Engels’ family had been approached with an offer of “financial compensation” by a third party, which Engels refused.

“They made an offer and said ‘Let us talk, this will go away.’ ... There was no amount mentioned,” said Gerrie Nel, a prominent South African lawyer who has offered his assistance to

Engels.

In a letter sent Thursday to the South African government, Willie Spies, another lawyer involved in the case, said the offer was made Tuesday and suggested that Engels should “come up with a figure so that parties could meet in order to settle the matter quietly.”

The scandal has become a diplomatic mess for South Africa’s government and Zimbabwe’s 93-year-old President Robert Mugabe, who arrived in South Africa’s capital late Wednesday apparently to deal with the crisis. He came early for a regional summit of southern African nations this weekend.

South Africa’s minister of police, Fikile Mbalula, said all borders had been notified to prevent Grace Mugabe from leaving the country before the matter is resolved, the African News Agency reported. “The red alert has been put,” Mbalula told reporters.

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