Plus

Williams: What's changed since Charlottesville's deadly racism rally? Not nearly enough.

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When Charlottesville, of all places, became a dateline synonymous with hate, some of us were naive enough to think the resulting revulsion would usher in an era of positive change.

"When I saw those torches ... it was akin to a KKK rally," recalled Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney. And the chaos of the following day — culminating with a car plowing into a crowd of people, killing activist Heather Heyer — "shows us that racism is right at our doorstep. And we have to redouble our efforts to combat it when it rears its ugly head."

But as quickly as you can say "very fine people on both sides," that notion took a hit. One year removed from the violent Unite the Right rally of Nazis, Klansmen, neo-Confederates and other white supremacists, have we redoubled — or equivocated?

The spectacle of racism, beamed into America's living rooms, once had the capacity to set off a round of soul-searching and even meaningful legislation.

The violence and oppression of the 1960s presaged the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and the Kerner Commission Report, which famously concluded: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal."

It warned that a failure to address these inequities would result in "continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values."

Today, America is as polarized as at any moment in my lifetime. Democratic values are on the ropes, under assault. And the abhorrent Charlottesville rally — where two Virginia State Police troopers also died in a helicopter crash — became just another news event in the Age of the Short Attention Span, with the fleeting shock value of a mass shooting in a school.

"I'm not sure anything's changed. And I'm struggling with that a little bit," said state Sen. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond.

Certainly, few minds have been changed.

We have moved from the ridiculously hyped "post-racial America" to an era pundits have decried as "post-factual." I'd argue that we're a post-persuasion nation, where people are locked into their beliefs.

"The one thing that maybe has changed is there's more of an awareness that racism and white supremacy is still there," McClellan said. "There's more of an awareness among white people who never thought about it. I think more white people were surprised by what happened in Charlottesville than black people were.

"More people are woke. But I don't think that's necessarily translated into action on a systematic scale."

Stoney echoed that.

"For a lot of people, Africans-Americans throughout this city, throughout this state, throughout this country, nothing has necessarily changed," he said. But "for the general population, I think it was the wake-up call."

Charlottesville, we hardly knew you.

Some of us bought into the notion of this university town as a progressive oasis of goodwill. As it turns out, there's U.Va., white Charlottesville and black Charlottesville. And Jason Kessler, the organizer of that deadly march, is a University of Virginia grad and a local.

The Rally for Racism didn't so much open a new wound as rip the scab off an existing one as old as the story of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.

In Charlottesville, the chaotic march launched an extensive round of second-guessing that presaged political change.

Nikuyah Walker, a longtime advocate on behalf of Charlottesville's often-forgotten black community, is now the city's mayor, presiding over a period of painful re-examination.

Can we say the same about Richmond and America?

Is Richmond, a divided city of considerable self-regard and a stockpile of unresolved history, a potential victim of the same sort of naiveté that has humbled Charlottesville a year after an unthinkable calamity?

"The short answer is that I'm not sure any community — including Richmond — could be fully prepared for what took place in Charlottesville last August, and I think a crisis like that would always result in some amount of soul-searching," said Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities.

"The more nuanced answer is that I think there are pockets in the Richmond region where folks are deeply naive and others where people are painfully aware of inequities and injustices. Bryan Stevenson argues that the foundational step toward achieving justice is proximity. In the Richmond region, it is very easy to not be proximate to those who have different lived experiences. People can then assume that their experience is the dominant or only experience."

Stoney says that where Richmond is concerned, he's not wearing rose-colored glasses.

"I recognize we are the former capital of the Confederacy, and it's clear to me that the vestiges of Jim Crow are all around us," he said. Those disparities manifest themselves in public housing, public education, transportation, health care and economic opportunity.

"It's all around us," he said. "So I embrace the fact that that is our history, and we as an administration need to do something about that. We do recognize there's a lot of healing and reconciliation left to do. So for me, there's still much work to be done."

That work requires people to make themselves vulnerable and engage in uncomfortable conversations, Stoney said. "We have a lot of scar tissue in this city. And we can't be blind of that."

Stoney's Monument Avenue Commission released its findings last month, including its recommendation that the Jefferson Davis statue be removed. But state law currently prohibits that.

As McClellan pointed out, the Charlottesville march "all started over a conversation about Confederate monuments, in Virginia at least. That conversation hasn't progressed." She noted that several legislative bills to give localities local control of the monuments "got very little attention and didn't go anywhere."

But what's more frustrating is that even if the monuments came down tomorrow, black residents would still face the systemic racism at the heart of disparities in wealth, housing and education, among other issues, she said.

"There's a lot more focus on symbolism than systematic change. So what I struggle with is, if we're stalled on symbolism, what's it going to take to make systematic change?"

McClellan has traveled the state engaging in community conversations as chair of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Commission.

When the audience is asked where we go from here, "part of it is we need to have an honest dialogue about the what and the why things are happening in our community. And we need to do that with people we don't agree with — not an echo chamber of people who are going to nod their head. If we don't do that, nothing will change," McClellan said.

Zur, meanwhile, perceives a growing awareness in Richmond of "the residue from the past and the inequities that persist."

But much work remains to be done.

"My hope is that one major lesson from last August in Charlottesville is that we cannot wait for a crisis to begin trying to build trust and advance equity," Zur said. "That work instead has to be woven into the fabric of our daily interpersonal interactions and our institutional policies and practices.

"Only then can we have the opportunity to not just prevent a tragedy like what happened last summer," he said, but also to "work on the deeper, sustained issues that keep us from being a truly inclusive and equitable region."