

From: [Robert J. Zimmer](#)
To: [Members of the University Community](#)
Subject: Charlottesville and Free Expression
Date: Tuesday, August 22, 2017 12:23:11 PM

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I write to share some thoughts on recent national events.

The values of free expression and open discourse have stood as a foundation of the University of Chicago since its inception. We continue to emphasize their centrality and importance to an environment of intellectual challenge, openness, and inclusion in our University community, and by extension, to our society more generally.

Recent events in Charlottesville saw a group claiming to act on the basis of free expression, but whose behavior demonstrated the opposite. The celebration of Nazi flags and uniforms, torches and hoods of the KKK, accompanied by powerful weapons visibly carried by those espousing hate and exclusion with a clear intent to menace and threaten, and the death of an innocent person must be seen for what they are—an attempt to intimidate, overtly threaten, and arrogate for themselves an exclusive right to speech. Such overt efforts to intimidate and to threaten the safety of others are not within the “freedom of expression” espoused by our University.

The University’s Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression, the basis for the “Chicago Principles” on free expression, is clear to distinguish between open discourse, even if offensive to some, and threatening behavior. It is a travesty to label as free speech the combination of brandished weapons, the killing of an innocent person, threats, and the symbols that represent destruction to so many.

While the targets of the marchers in Charlottesville were broad, including immigrant communities, the tactics, symbols, actions, and threats they employed had a particular focus on two minority communities, for whom these threats had a painful historical resonance: the African American community that endured hundreds of years of slavery and another century of ongoing violence and legal exclusion from many aspects of American life; and the Jewish community around the world that, after a decline in overtly violent acts of anti-Semitism since the murders of massive numbers of Jews during the Second World War, is seeing a resurgence of anti-Semitism in its many destructive forms.

Despite the efforts of the marchers in Charlottesville to label their actions as protected speech, and efforts of others to defend this behavior in a similar way, their conduct belies their claims, and is totally contrary to the values we must continue to espouse and protect as a University and community.