



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on August 30, 2023

Is “Divisive Rhetoric” to Blame for the Murders in Jacksonville?

Once again, reactionaries on the Left are clamoring for a clamp down on free speech, blaming “divisive rhetoric” for the recent murder of three people by Ryan Christopher Palmeto, an alleged neo-Nazi, at a Dollar General Store in Jacksonville, Florida, on Saturday. The gunman committed suicide after his heinous act.

Rather than recognizing the responsibility of Palmeto for the death of three innocent people, Jacksonville City Council member Rahman Johnson [appeared on MSNBC](#), pointing the finger at hateful speech.



AP Images

“When we have this kind of divisive rhetoric, this is exactly what happens,” Johnson said. Remarkably, Johnson is a professor of journalism, someone you’d expect to be an ally of free speech, even when it is “divisive.”

Later on in the interview, Johnson doubled down on the nonsense, mentioning the recent changes to the way certain subjects are to be taught to children enrolled in Florida’s public schools.

Rhetoric got the blame for pulling the trigger in a statement made by the city’s mayor, as well. “The division has to stop, the hate has to stop, the rhetoric has to stop,” Mayor Donna Deegan said, as [reported by Reason](#).

The list of officials and pundits pinning the blame for one man’s madness on “the attack on wokeness” — which everyone by now recognizes as a dog whistle used by the Left to blame conservatives, Republicans, or other traditionalists — would be impressive if it weren’t so insulting.

It’s insulting to relieve the murderer of the blame for his crimes. Blaming groups is easier and it is, after all, the historical tactic of collectivists — collectivists, including, ironically, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or, as they are commonly called, Nazis.

Now, Nazis were collectivists and they were fascists. Collectivists like to blame groups for situations where doing so wins them popular approval of their policies. Fascists, as I’ve written before, use the sword of state to silence those openly opposed to those policies. Such severe retribution historically has a “chilling effect” on the free press and the right to speak freely, as people perceive themselves to be in danger from those whose hands wield the sword of state, or from those who command those hands.

In the case of the murders committed by Ryan Palmeto in Jacksonville, those blaming his alleged admiration of Hitler for his acts are using the same collectivist tactics used by the very organization they claim caused Palmeto to kill.

One [op-ed published in the Florida Times-Union](#) actually blamed the city’s response to anti-semitic banners hung in town for contributing to the crimes.

So, shall we ban all public displays that could be labeled offensive, or speech designated as “divisive?”



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If so, then we'll have to appoint some person or some group of people to declare what is offensive or divisive, no? Given that the partisan partition of this country is about 50-50, what level of compromise would be required to impanel such a committee of censors? Would the vegans demand ads for meat and dairy products be removed from the public marketplace? Would homosexuals demand that ads must include same-sex couples if they feature heterosexual couples? Would there be an end to the division of the people into distinct and demanding interest groups each of which would insist on being afforded a seat among the censors?

This, of course, has been the road traveled by other formerly self-governing societies. As the eminent Samuel Pufendorf observed, "Being divided into factions, they are more concerned to ruin their rivals, than to follow the dictates of reason." Rival factions would continually sub-divide until there was nothing that could be said that someone wouldn't find offensive or divisive and thus, into a sterile utopia we would descend.

But the politicians and pundits know that. They know that reporting that Palmeto used "a rifle emblazoned with a swastika" is just safer shorthand for "he's a conservative," and they know that by focusing on such aspects of the story, they instantly divide the country in two.

Then, add in the anti-semitism and you've divided those groups again, and then the supposed "anti-LGBTQ" climate in Florida and you've divided them up even further. This is a handy way to make another person's mind your property: simply use (or misuse) words that you know are red meat to them.

Finally, people in power also know that despite the rhetoric, there is no law, regulation, or executive order that could ever dissuade someone from committing murder in cold blood.

The very premise is appalling. Atrocities such as those committed by Palmeto are the result of mental instability and are the product of a mind whose workings are inscrutable to most regular people.

Even the most enlightened minds in the fields of medicine and psychology are unable to understand the vortex of abnormalities that combine in one's mind to produce such anti-social behavior.

While the attempt to end crime is noble, the presumption that there are explanations to be found in this or that shooter's mad rantings or threatening social-media posts or a symbol painted on a rifle is naive at best and purposefully manipulative at worst.

Regardless of the wokeness and the pandering, there are soon to be four funerals (three for the victims and one, I assume, for the assailant who took his own life). There are four families whose lives are changed, and they weren't changed by "divisive rhetoric" or "attacks on wokeness." They were changed by one man's depraved act.



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