

#### **Opinions**

# Trump is not a racist. His voters aren't either.

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## By Gary Abernathy

HILLSBORO, Ohio — Almost immediately after the horrific mass shootings over the weekend in nearby Dayton, and El Paso, many leading Democrats and media analysts predictably laid much of the blame at the feet of President Trump.

The shootings came on the heels of pundits in recent weeks attempting to end any remaining debate and declare the question settled: Yes, they determined, Trump is an anti-immigrant racist, particularly after his tweets telling members of "the Squad" to go back to where they came from, and then criticizing Rep. Elijah E. Cummings (D-Md.) and his city of Baltimore.

Trump's tweets about the Squad were stupid, confusing and childish. The congresswomen in question are American citizens, and three of them were born in the United States. His follow-up attack on Cummings and Baltimore was somewhat less contemptuous, considering that evidence shows similar criticisms of the city over the years by others, including Cummings himself.

Coming from Trump, though, the double-barreled tweets were deemed not only insensitive, but, of course, racist — but only after the dots were connected for us by those who are self-anointed experts.

What prevents meaningful discussion about tragedies such as gun massacres is the employment of the broadest strokes to paint as enablers anyone who disagrees with the prescription of more gun laws, although even some Republicans, including Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, and even Trump, are this week expressing more openness to restrictions on some firearms sales.

Trump's flaws are many, but using race as a wedge issue is hardly exclusive to him or Republicans. Democrats have created divisions over race for decades, casually calling Republicans "racists" and deliberately generating as much fear and loathing as possible among minority constituents toward the GOP.

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Few in the media seem interested in being better. A growing number of reporters and editors, both print and broadcast, no longer adhere to the standard that once required them to reference others calling Trump's pronouncements "racist." Instead, they call him a racist themselves. They have appointed themselves the deciders.

At the risk of spoiling this united front, it is obvious, based on recent polls, that only about half of all Americans — while they might agree that Trump is insensitive — believe he is a racist. A similar portion of the country believes that the United States is more racially divided because of him. (In a Pew Research Center study from April, almost 2 in 3 Americans say it is more common to "express racist or racially insensitive" views than before Trump was elected.)

I am one of the few conservatives who acknowledges that we have yet to achieve racial equality. I believe we still need affirmative action programs, because the inequalities in economics, education and opportunity that existed here for centuries still endure. We have made admirable progress, but whites still enjoy institutional advantages. These days, overt racism is not the problem. Entrenched systemic inequality is to blame. But systemic inequality is not racist. It is simply unfair.

That is not to say Trump couldn't do more. After the 9/11 attacks, peace-loving Muslims condemned radical Islam, and President George W. Bush made sure to stress the distinction between the two. Likewise, Trump and white conservatives in general should readily condemn white supremacy groups, without worrying about the fact that many Democrats and media pundits will lump them together anyway.

The danger of making "racist" such an offhand accusation is that it ends up alienating millions of Americans who support Trump and are constantly lectured that they are racist for doing so. They don't buy it, because they know their own hearts. It is true that most white people — in rural regions in particular — spend little time reflecting on racial inequality or social injustice. It doesn't mean they don't care; it means such concerns are simply not part of their daily existence. Likewise, it is safe to say that most minorities lose little sleep worrying about hog futures, or whether the Midwest's Corn Belt will get enough rain, or whether a factory will reopen in West Virginia to restore local jobs.

We remain a people more in need of empathy and understanding for each other than tags and labels and nicknames. But falling short of perfection does not make us evil, heartless or deplorable. It especially does not make us racist, a previously significant term being made frivolous by its abuse.

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