

WHY RACISM MATTERS

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Love Lives Here, which is affiliated with the Montana Human Rights Network, is to be congratulated for taking a strong stance against the poisonous views of the National Policy Institute, whose nondescript name camouflages its white supremacist agenda. This controversy has the potential to catalyze some healthy conversation about the scourge of racism and what we can do about it. But rather than address the issue directly, some commentators have misinterpreted the issue as a question of First Amendment rights. Nothing could be further from the truth.

First, no one questions the right of white supremacists to harbor or express their toxic views. But focusing on the constitutional rights of the NPI is a distraction from an examination of the underlying racist policies advanced by the NPI. The fact that the Constitution allows someone to express loathsome views does not mean that the community should hesitate to vigorously condemn them. And so we must.

Ideas are powerful. When bad ideas are left unchallenged, they have the power to destroy the fragile fabric of a society. Just ask the people of Germany, or the former Soviet Union, or the victims of the so-called Islamic State. These disasters, and many more as well, are all premised on the concept of “purity”—that the world would be better off if we just got rid of those who don’t measure up. Anyone is liable to be a target—Jews, Catholics, Sufis, Tutsis, Mexicans, homosexuals, Shiites, blacks, Native Americans, atheists, Croatians, Armenians. Unfortunately, the list is long. When the premise is racial or cultural purity, it begins with legal strictures (“a white European state”) and usually ends in genocide. There is a good reason why the white Europeans in Hungary banned Mr. Spencer from returning—they know what happened the last time they tolerated a well-spoken charlatan with grandiose visions of an Aryan state.

However imperfect its realization, this nation was founded on the idea that “all men are created equal.” Our history since the Civil War has been the

progressive implementation of that liberating standard—women’s rights, civil rights, voting rights, the rights of the LGBT community. The notion that men and women of good heart should simply sit down to explore common ground with white supremacists is dangerously naïve. There is no common ground. I have been a professional mediator for nearly forty years and have worked with environmentalists and polluters, with believers caught in inter-religious conflict, with national political leaders of the Right and Left, and even with street gangs. In all those cases, dialogue was useful and productive. But there are times when tolerance and dialogue legitimize an extremist and enable a vicious idea to spread like a virus. There are times when we must take a stand. That time has arrived for Whitefish.

Not here, Mr. Spencer. Not ever.