

US politics & policy

American right vows vengeance after killing of Charlie Kirk



Calls for retribution and a crackdown on the political left reinforce sense of polarisation in the country

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Any hopes that the [assassination](#) of conservative activist Charlie Kirk would usher in a mood of quiet reflection in US politics were quickly dispelled in the hours after his death, as the rightwing blogosphere seethed with demands for vengeance and retribution.

“Trump clearly has a light trigger finger when it comes to declaring emergencies and circumventing norms, laws and even the constitution,” said Steven Levitsky, professor of government at Harvard University and co-author of *How Democracies Die*. “This could be used as an accelerant for troops on the streets, [and] efforts to persecute the opposition.”

“For years, those on the radical left have compared wonderful Americans like Charlie to Nazis and the world’s worst mass murderers and criminals,” he said. “This kind of rhetoric is directly responsible for the terrorism that we’re seeing in our country today, and it must stop right now.”

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lunatics out there, just absolute lunatics, and we're going to get that problem solved."

Some of the president's allies on Capitol Hill went even further. "Democrats own what happened today," Nancy Mace, a South Carolina Republican, told reporters on Wednesday.

Donald Moynihan, a professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, said Trump could have used his speech from the Oval Office to condemn all forms of political violence and emphasise the importance of tolerance as a "cornerstone for democracy".

He didn't do that. "I worry that the White House has missed an opportunity by framing this in a one-sided way, presenting threats as only coming from the left," he said. "The worst-case scenario is . . . that the murder of Kirk is used to justify a government crackdown on protected speech."

Already, deputy secretary of state Christopher Landau has warned that the US would take action against foreigners "praising, rationalising, or making light" of Kirk's killing, saying they would not be "welcome visitors to our country".

Kirk's murder is just the latest in a long series of attacks on political figures on both sides of the ideological divide attesting to the extreme polarisation of a society that is becoming increasingly prone to political violence.





A makeshift memorial to Charlie Kirk at the headquarters of Turning Point USA, a rightwing student organisation that he helped form © Ross D Franklin/AP

Trump himself survived an assassination attempt at a political rally last year, while a Democratic state lawmaker in Minnesota and her husband were killed in their home in June. In April, the home of Pennsylvania's Democratic governor Josh Shapiro was set on fire while he and his family slept inside.

Such violence is not new in America — the country was roiled by a number of political murders in the 1960s, a decade which also saw widespread urban riots and racial unrest.

But the current attacks differ, experts say, as they have coincided with Trump tightening his grip on important US institutions and his vast expansion of the powers of the presidency.

"This is when an aggressive president moving in an aggressive direction can be a dangerous thing," said Julian Zelizer, a professor of political history at Princeton University. "There are literally federal troops on the streets of American cities, and Trump is flexing federal force whenever he wants to."

Such fears were exacerbated by rightwing influencers drawing parallels between Kirk's killing and the burning down of the German parliament building in 1933, which the Nazis used as a pretext to clamp down on the opposition and dismantle the country's constitutional freedoms.

"Charlie Kirk being assassinated is the American Reichstag fire," said Matt Forney, a rightwing writer and blogger. He said Democratic politicians should be arrested and the party banned. "It is time for a complete crackdown on the left."

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Mourners lay flowers at a memorial for Charlie Kirk in Arizona © Reuters

He was not alone. Katie Miller, the influencer and wife of Trump’s deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, said liberals were to blame for Kirk’s killing. “You called us Hitler,” she [wrote on X](#). “You called us Nazis. You called us Racists. You have blood on your hands.”

Even moderate politicians on the right laid blame for the uptick in political violence at the door of liberals. Warren Davidson, a Republican congressman from Ohio, accused them on CNN of using “dehumanising rhetoric”.

“Once they lose the debate . . . they can’t just engage in facts and reason,” he said. “It has to be . . . insults — like, well, this person must be a racist or a bigot or a misogynist or whatever. A Christian nationalist.”





Katie Miller hit out at liberals over the murder of Charlie Kirk © Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

Some experts agreed that both sides were to blame for the febrile atmosphere and it was incumbent on all politicians to try to cool passions rather than inflame them.

“Democratic leaders also need to restrain the joyful videos on X celebrating Charlie Kirk’s murder,” said Robert Pape, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago. “Both sets of leaders have work to do in restraining their constituents.”

So far, there is little evidence that this is happening. Instead, said Harvard’s Levitsky, the two main parties were more polarised than ever, viewing each other as “enemies not rivals” and regularly accusing each other of “disloyal and unpatriotic” behaviour — in a manner that was reminiscent of 1930s Spain shortly before its democratic system broke down.

“When two parties view each other as an existential threat, the temptation to engage in violent and illegal behaviour is very high,” he said. “And [the Kirk murder] could reinforce that.”

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