In an Era of Deep Polarization, Unity Is Not Trump's Mission

President Trump does not subscribe to the traditional notion of being president for all Americans.

By **Peter Baker**

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The first few minutes of President Trump's Oval Office address after the assassination of Charlie Kirk last week followed the conventional presidential playbook. He praised the victim, asked God to watch over his family and talked mournfully of "a dark moment for America."

Then he tossed the playbook aside, angrily blaming the murder on the American left and vowing revenge.

That was stark even for some viewers who might normally be sympathetic. When Mr. Trump appeared later on Fox News, a host noted that there were "radicals on the right," just as there were "radicals on the left," and asked, "How do we come back together?" The president rejected the premise. Radicals on the right were justified by anger over crime, he said. "The radicals on the left are the problem," he added. "And they're vicious. And they're horrible."

Mr. Trump has long made clear that coming together is not the mission of his presidency. In an era of deep polarization in American society, he rarely talks about healing. While other presidents have typically tried to lower the temperature in moments of national crisis, Mr. Trump turns up the flames. He does not subscribe to the traditional notion of being president for all the people. He acts as president of red America and the people who agree with him, while those who do not are portrayed as enemies and traitors deserving payback.

"The left has declared war on America," Stephen K. Bannon, Mr. Trump's former chief strategist and a leading voice in the MAGA movement, said in a text message on Saturday. "Trump is a wartime president now focused on eradicating domestic terrorists like ANTIFA," Mr. Bannon added, referring to the antifascist movement.

The notion of Mr. Trump as a wartime president in a war against some of his own people speaks to just how different his presidency is. Campaigning last year to reclaim power four years after his re-election defeat, Mr. Trump dispensed with the usual bromides about national unity, and instead declared that the biggest threat to the United States was "the enemy from within."

He vowed "retribution" against those who in his view have betrayed him or the country, and he has spent the first eight months of his second term exacting it against Democrats, wayward

Republicans, estranged allies, law firms, universities, news outlets and anyone else he considers disloyal or excessively liberal.

He sees a country riven into two ideological and political camps: one that supports him and one that does not. He governs accordingly. In recent days, he has vowed to order troops into cities run by Democrats, while sending money in the form of disaster relief to states run by Republicans.

This viewpoint reflects Mr. Trump's own history and personality, born out of an us-against-them, winners-and-losers approach to life that carried him through decades in business, reality television and eventually politics. He is not comfortable as a comforter. He prefers a fight; he needs an enemy. And with Democrats fractured and leaderless, he is positioning himself as the scourge of an American left that has, he contends, grown radical beyond recognition.

"This has been consistent from the beginning," Jeff Shesol, a former speechwriter for President Bill Clinton, said of Mr. Trump's escalatory reaction to the assassination of Mr. Kirk. "It's not a tactic. It's not a stratagem. It's who he is and how he sees the world, in this Manichaean way. The left — the 'radical left' as he always wants to call it — is evil, and this is another opportunity to establish that, no matter what the facts are."

Plenty of left-wing voices online have fueled the divisions. Within hours of Mr. Kirk's death, Americans of all stripes began pointing fingers at each other, even before a suspect had been caught or any motivation had been firmly determined. Mr. Trump and other allies of Mr. Kirk's, who were distraught at the senseless killing of a 31-year-old rising star on the right they knew and liked, expressed roiling indignation at comments that gave the impression of cheering or rationalizing the murder of someone over political views.

Most national Democratic elected leaders joined Republicans in denouncing the killing and calling for an end to the political violence that has erupted across the ideological spectrum in recent years. But while Gov. Spencer Cox of Utah, a Republican, made a pained plea for Americans to come together, the president expressed anger, declaring that "we just have to beat the hell" out of "radical left lunatics," though he also made a point of urging "nonviolence."

"I'm afraid the ship has sailed, at least for now, over an era in which politicians could heal a nation with their words," said Ari Fleischer, who was White House press secretary on Sept. 11, 2001, when President George W. Bush faced his greatest crisis and pulled the nation together against a common foreign enemy.

Mr. Fleischer, who supports Mr. Trump, said the current president has been the target of so much hatred that no one would credit him for a calm response, were he to offer one. "The vitriol against President Trump from the left is so deep that there is not a syllable, word, sentence or paragraph Donald Trump could say that would mollify them," he said. "Trump's mantra is 'fight, fight, fight,' so no one should be surprised by his reaction."

Every other recent president has said that he saw his role as transcending partisanship at least some of the time, to serve as leader of all Americans — even those who disagreed with him. George H.W. Bush talked of ushering in a "kinder and gentler nation." Mr. Clinton vowed to be the "repairer of the breach." The younger Mr. Bush spoke of being "a uniter, not a divider." Barack Obama rejected the idea of a red America and blue America, saying there was only "the United States of America." Joseph R. Biden Jr. called for ending "this uncivil war."

None of them succeeded at achieving such lofty aspirations, and each of them to different degrees played the politics of division at times. Politics, after all, is about division — debating big ideas vigorously until one side wins an election or carries the vote in Congress. But none of them practiced the politics of division as ferociously and consistently as Mr. Trump, for whom it has been the defining characteristic of his time on the national stage.

It was Mr. Bannon, after all, who said after Mr. Trump's 2016 victory that unity was not the goal. "We didn't win an election to bring the country together," he said then.

And Mr. Trump, who has never had the support of a majority in any of the three campaigns he has run or in any approval rating by Gallup, has long focused on catering to his own core supporters. When he talks about his poll ratings, he often cites approval just among Republicans.

"If I take care of the base, everything else will take care of itself," he once told Anthony Scaramucci, a former ally who briefly served in Mr. Trump's first-term White House.

While he made few nods toward working across the aisle in his first term, Mr. Trump has all but abandoned any efforts at bipartisanship in his second. He does not invite Democratic leaders to the White House for talks, nor does he brief them on major national security events.

Russell T. Vought, his budget director, complained in July that "the appropriations process has to be less bipartisan."

Just last week, Mr. Trump posted four consecutive messages online announcing that he had granted disaster relief to states that had endured storms or flooding, each of them states that he won last year. He even cited his election victory in announcing $32 million in aid for North Carolina, "which I WON BIG all six times, including Primaries."

He used the same message announcing federal aid, ostensibly meant to be a nonpartisan action, to attack former Gov. Roy Cooper, the Democrat now running for Senate in the state.

To justify his decision to send troops into the streets of Washington and his threats to do the same to Chicago, Memphis and New Orleans, Mr. Trump also posted a video last week assailing Democratic mayors on crime, even as crime rates have fallen sharply in recent years. "For far too long, Americans have been forced to put up with Democrat-run cities that set loose savage, bloodthirsty criminals to prey on innocent people," he said in the video.

His critics fear that Mr. Trump will now use the Kirk assassination to go further on liberal organizations and institutions, a view encouraged in ominous social media posts by Stephen Miller, the president's deputy chief of staff and a leader of the Trump administration's immigration crackdown.

"In recent days we have learned just how many Americans in positions of authority — child services, law clerks, hospital nurses, teachers, gov't workers, even DOD employees — have been deeply and violently radicalized," Mr. Miller wrote on Saturday, suggesting that their responses to Mr. Kirk's killing were unacceptable. "The consequence of a vast, organized ecosystem of indoctrination."

Mr. Trump is certainly right that his opponents have called him a "fascist" and "Nazi." But his outrage at incendiary rhetoric is situational. In the same Fox News interview last week in which he complained about excesses by the left, he referred to Zohran Mamdani, the democratic socialist and front-runner for mayor of New York, as a "communist." Even more than in his first term, Mr. Trump lately has referred to political rivals and journalists as "evil."

Even his anger at being called a fascist depends on who says it and whether they take it back. His own vice president, JD Vance, once called him "America's Hitler," a remark that he later disavowed and managed to overcome to win his way onto Mr. Trump's ticket.

Likewise, the president's concern for security against political violence has depended on who was threatened. He pardoned some 1,500 supporters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, including those who assaulted police officers and called for the execution of his own vice president, Mike Pence. At one point, he declined to rule out pardoning the people convicted of a plot to kidnap Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, a Democrat.

He complained during last year's campaign that he needed more Secret Service protection, then took office and stripped government security for people he disliked, including Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, Gen. Mark A. Milley, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the former national security adviser John R. Bolton. Just last month, Mr. Trump rescinded extended Secret Service protection for former Vice President Kamala Harris.

But with so much menace in the air, even Mr. Trump at times in recent days tried to make a distinction between violence and retribution of another kind. With some of his supporters anxious for revenge after Mr. Kirk's death, Mr. Trump offered a caveat. "Well," he said, "you want revenge at the voter box."

Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent for The Times. He is covering his sixth presidency and sometimes writes analytical pieces that place presidents and their administrations in a larger context and historical framework.