

‘They’ Didn’t Kill Charlie Kirk

It insults his memory to blame political opponents for one man’s heinous act.

By Karl Rove, The Wall Street Journal Sept. 17, 2025

It has been a sad, sickening week for America.

Our country witnessed a terrible event. A young man was gunned down doing what he loved—debating all comers on a college campus on behalf of his passionately held beliefs. [...]

Charlie was a 31-year-old political advocate, organizer and entrepreneur. Rather than going to college, he started Turning Point USA. For he loved America—its story, promise and ideals—and wanted it to prosper and grow. Within a dozen years, he grew from an eager teenage politico to confidant of the president. Few people have had as big an influence at such a young age as Charlie Kirk.

Much has been said and written about his extraordinary life and horrific death. Utah Gov. Spencer Cox was one of the first voices to capture our attention. In anguish, he said, “We just need every single person in this country to think about where we are and where we want to be, to ask ourselves, ‘Is this it? Is this what 250 years has wrought on us?’ ” His answer was a challenge. “All of us,” he said, must “try to find a way to stop hating our fellow Americans.”

Despite this earnest plea, there has been a disturbing and growing undercurrent in our national conversation and on the internet, a pronounced emphasis on “they” and “them.” Charlie would be alive but for “them.” “They” killed him. “They” are responsible for his death. “They” must be made to pay.

No. Charlie Kirk wasn’t killed by “them.” “They” didn’t pull the trigger. One person did, apparently a young man driven by impulse and a terrible hate. If there were a “they” involved, law enforcement would find “them” and the justice system would hold “them” accountable. But “he” and “him” are the correct pronouns for this horrendous act.

Our culture is built on the principle that individuals are responsible for what they say and do. People can be influenced by words they hear and groups they’re part of. But we aren’t helpless automatons whose actions are dictated by others.

Using Charlie’s murder to justify retaliation against political rivals is wrong and dangerous. It will further divide and embitter our country. No good thing will come of it.

It is also an insult to his memory. Anyone who saw Charlie in action could see he had supreme confidence that logic, facts and appeals to history were the way to win arguments. Not thuggery, threats or silencing. He was in the business of persuasion. No one can have faith in the power of persuasion like he had without an inherent respect for people who might disagree. Earlier this year, Charlie appeared on California Gov. Gavin Newsom’s podcast. Though they disagreed on much, they spoke for more than an hour, free of vitriol and full of mutual regard. That’s the model to emulate.

Charlie will be honored at a memorial service Sunday at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Ariz. The president, vice president and secretary of state will be among the speakers. What they say there will reverberate. Our political system could become even more dominated by deep, dark obsessions. Or Sunday could be a moment when Americans see people of prominence remind us that our republic’s continuance depends on debating important ideas with both passion and mutual respect.

Above all, it needs to be repeated: Violence has no role in our country’s politics. Now or ever. Reasoned discourse is essential to our democracy. Charlie Kirk understood that. Let’s hope it’s a message his eulogists honor.

Mr. Rove was senior adviser and deputy chief of staff for President George W. Bush and is author of “The Triumph of William McKinley” (Simon & Schuster, 2015).