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Trump, social media a lethal cocktail

EDITORIAL

ACCORDING TO Sarah Huckabee Sanders, U.S. President Donald Trump's current press secretary, it was ?outrageous? that some in the media were blaming her boss for the massacre at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue that took 11 lives.

Without naming any media, Ms. Sanders claimed that they had blamed Mr. Trump for both Saturday's massacre and the pipe bombs that had been mailed earlier in the week to Democratic politicians and CNN.

?The very first thing that the president did was condemn the attacks, both in Pittsburgh and in the pipe bombs,? she told a White House news briefing Monday. ?The very thing the media did was blame the president and make him responsible for these ridiculous attacks. That is outrageous that that would be the very first reaction of so many people across this country.?

She may have been referring to a statement by CNN President Jeff Zucker, who said last Wednesday that there was ?a total and complete lack of understanding at the White House about the seriousness of their continued attacks on the media.?

Ms. Sanders said it was ?outrageous that anybody other than the individual who carried out the crime would hold that responsibility.?

Although obviously the two perpetrators ultimately will be held responsible for both incidents, we certainly reject the press secretary's implication that the president bore no responsibility whatsoever for the two acts of domestic terrorism.

As we see it, there is no coincidence in the fact that no similar incidents occurred in the previous 16 years during the administrations of Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Barack Obama. Unlike the destruction of the World Trade Centre in 2001 and more recent terrorist incidents where the perpetrators were radicalized Muslims, last week's perpetrators, and before them the killers in Las Vegas and schools in Connecticut and Florida were all U.S. citizens who used automatic weaponry or home-made bombs.

Never before has the United States had a president whose many lies included a portrayal of publications like the New York Times and Washington Post as ?enemies of the people? and purveyors of ?fake news.?

Fifty years ago, such conduct probably wouldn't have led to the behaviour now being witnessed, one major reason being the absence of the Internet and websites preaching hate. It was surely no coincidence that both the bomb maker and the synagogue shooter were attracted to ?alt right? websites that targeted Democrats and/or Jews.

One thing we know for sure is that the bomb maker, Cesar Sayoc, was a Trump supporter whose van had a host of pro-Trump placards. The president's tweets portrayed him as ?insane a long time before? he sent the bombs to Mr. Obama, former Vice President Joe Biden, former Secretary of State and 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, Senators Kamala Harris and Cory Booker, former Attorney General Eric Holder, actor Robert De Niro and other Trump critics..

In the circumstances, is it much of a stretch to suggest that Mr. Trump's repeated attacks on the Democrats in rallies he is holding before next Thursday's mid-term elections could have had a role to play in the bomb mailings?

As for the Pittsburgh massacre, where one of the 11 victims was a native of Toronto, there is no doubt that the Internet had an important role. Robert Bowers spewed murderous hatred and bigotry online. For months before the shooting, he unleashed a torrent of anti-immigrant and anti-Jewish invective and conspiracy theories on Gab, a social media network embraced by white nationalists. Police say he had 21 guns registered in his name and carried out the massacre with an AR-15-style assault rifle and three handguns.

The main difference between the two men seems to be the killer's apparent lack of political involvement.