

As ex-Klan member, I know cost of political violence

I know what it feels like to be young, angry and convinced that violence is the answer. I have been there. Decades ago, I fell in with the most radical wing of the Ku Klux Klan. I believed their tirades, followed their orders and thought I was serving some greater cause. What I really did was throw away the one thing I cherished the most, my freedom.

I once associated with some of the most violent and radical Klansmen to have ever existed – men who would make leaders of Antifa, the Groyppers and the Proud Boys look like model citizens. My close associates included Sam Bowers and Byron De La Beckwith, names tied to some of the darkest chapters of America's history. You don't become a confidant of these men without being considered a violent extremist yourself. I was deep in it, and I paid the price.

I spent time in five federal prisons, including the maximum-security U.S. penitentiary in Atlanta, for conspiracy to invade a foreign country with intent to overthrow the government, known as the Bayou of Pigs. The punishment wasn't only the danger or the brutal conditions. It was the suffocating reality of losing my freedom.

That loss steps into your soul and never leaves. In prison you lose birthdays, graduations, simple human moments you can never reclaim. You lose your sense of worth as the world moves on without you. No cause, no leader, no ideology is worth that kind of emptiness.

Now I see others heading down the same dark road – the 22-year-old accused of killing conservative activist Charlie Kirk and the 29-year-old whom police said opened fire on an Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Dallas. And it's not confined to one ideology.

We've seen it in the Minnesota killings of state Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband, and in the shooting of state Sen. John Hoffman and his wife.

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Your Turn

George T. Malvaney Guest columnist

Violence

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You will not be a hero. You will not spark change.

I know exactly where it ends. What feels like a bold act in the moment will collapse into regret, iron bars and wasted years. Political violence tears at the fabric of this country and makes it harder for people to come together in peaceful debate. It fuels fear and division, and in the end, it silences the very voices that want real change. If you are listening to voices urging violence and "revenge" or trying to inspire copycat attacks, understand this: You will not be a hero. You will not spark change. You will end up in an 8-by-10 cell, surrounded by people you despise, and you will spend every hour wondering why you gave

everything up for nothing. I once thought I was proving myself by standing shoulder to shoulder with men whose names carried fear and hatred. In reality, I was shrinking my life into something small and hollow. There is another way. I became a writer, published an autobiography and used writing as a platform to express my views and engage with those of differing opinions. I came to see that strength has nothing to do with intimidation. It takes discipline to think, to argue, to persuade and to keep building, especially at times when it feels like the world is against you. I found purpose in science, business and community – work that adds to the world instead of tearing it apart. Change in this country comes through politics, law, organizing and persistence. It is slow and often frustrating, but it is real.

We are at a crossroads. Political violence is not just the ruin of the person who pulls the trigger, it weakens the very system that allows us to disagree and still live free. If my story shows anything, it is that there is no redemption in violence. The only way forward is through engagement, not destruction.

George T. Malvaney, managing partner of E3 Environmental Services, is known for his work following the 2010 BP oil spill and is the author of “Cups Up: How I Organized a Klavern, Plotted a Coup, Survived Prison, Graduated College, Fought Polluters, and Started a Business. “

George Malvaney, kneeling left, takes a photo with other prisoners at the Federal Correctional Institution in Englewood, Colorado, in 1982.

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