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Trump Shares Inflammatory Anti-Muslim Videos, and Britain's Leader Condemns Them

By Peter Baker and Eileen Sullivan

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WASHINGTON — President Trump touched off another racially charged furor on Wednesday by sharing videos from a fringe British ultranationalist group purportedly showing Muslims committing acts of violence, a move that was swiftly condemned by Britain's prime minister as well as politicians across the spectrum.

The videos Mr. Trump retweeted were titled: "Muslim migrant beats up Dutch boy on crutches!" "Muslim Destroys a Statue of Virgin Mary!" and "Islamist mob pushes teenage boy off roof and beats him to death!" But the assailant in one of them was not a "Muslim migrant" and the other two showed four-year-old events with no explanation.

No modern American president has promoted inflammatory content of this sort from an extremist organization. Mr. Trump's two most recent predecessors, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, both made a point of avoiding public messages that were likely to be seen as anti-Muslim and could exacerbate racial and religious animosities, arguing that the war against terrorism was not a war against Islam.

But Mr. Trump has shown little such restraint, targeting Muslims with a broad brush, including when he claimed on the campaign trail last year that "Islam hates us" and when he called for a "total and complete shutdown" of Muslims coming to the United States. Since taking office, he has sought to block visitors from select Muslim-majority nations and engaged in a long-distance feud with the Muslim mayor of London, whom he branded weak on terrorism.

The messages came at a time when Mr. Trump has been lashing out at an array of

perceived adversaries, including the National Football League, CNN, NBC and Democratic leaders. He referred to a senator as “Pocahontas” this week in front of Navajo veterans he was honoring. In a meandering speech in St. Charles, Mo., on Wednesday, Mr. Trump labeled North Korea’s leader a “sick puppy,” asserted that welfare recipients lived better than some people with jobs, noted that his wealthy friends “love their children” and insisted that he did not like some bankers even though he was making their job “easy for them.”

Mr. Trump’s unbridled talk of Muslim violence thrilled some conservative supporters who see him as a truth teller breaking from the shackles of political correctness, but it alarmed mainstream political leaders in the United States and Britain, who deemed it reckless and counterproductive.

Senator Jeff Flake, Republican of Arizona, who has broken with Mr. Trump, called the postings “highly inappropriate” and added, “I hope he takes them down and doesn’t do it again.”

Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, who lately has been an ally of the president, said Mr. Trump was “legitimizing religious bigotry” with the Twitter posts. “We need Muslim allies in the war on terror,” he said. “I can only imagine how some of our Muslim allies must feel when the president gives legitimacy to it.”

The reaction was sharp in London, where Prime Minister Theresa May, the leader of the Conservative Party, denounced the president for sharing material posted by Jayda Fransen, the deputy leader of Britain First, the ultranationalist group. “It is wrong for the president to have done this,” Mrs. May’s office said in a statement. “Britain First seeks to divide communities by their use of hateful narratives that peddle lies and stoke tensions. They cause anxiety to law-abiding people.”

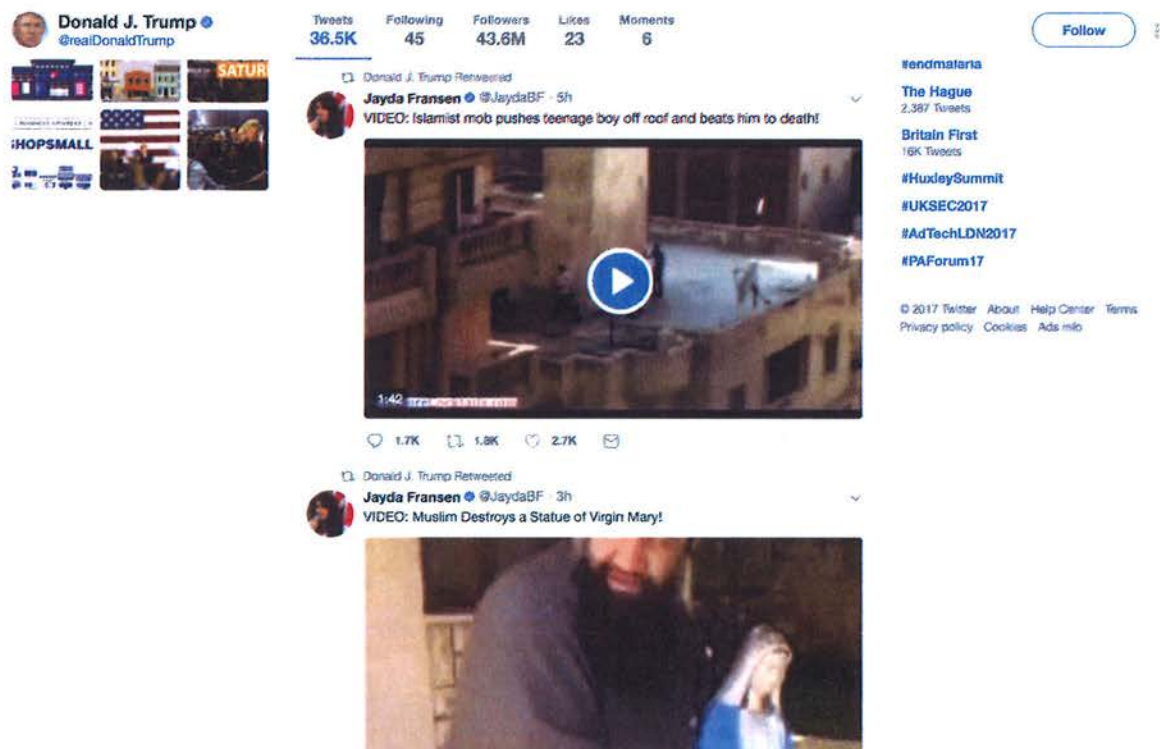
David Lammy, a Labour Party member of Parliament, echoed that on Twitter. “Trump sharing Britain First,” he wrote. “Let that sink in. The President of the United States is promoting a fascist, racist, extremist hate group whose leaders have been arrested and convicted. He is no ally or friend of ours.”

Late in the day, Mr. Trump pushed back against the prime minister. “Theresa,” he wrote

on Twitter, initially getting her handle wrong, “don’t focus on me, focus on the destructive Radical Islamic Terrorism that is taking place within the United Kingdom.”

Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, defended the president’s tweets, saying he was talking about the need for national security and military spending.

“The threat is real,” she told reporters. “The threat needs to be addressed. The threat has to be talked about, and that’s what the president is doing in bringing that up.”



Mr. Trump’s Twitter page on Wednesday morning.

Some activists on the right expressed appreciation for the blunt talk about the threat from Islamic extremists. “It’s a pretty major undercurrent for all of American politics since 2001, as it should be,” said Mark Krikorian, the executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates less immigration. “That’s not news. He just expresses that stuff in the most unfiltered, guy-ranting-in-the-bar” way.

The first video distributed by Mr. Trump to his nearly 44 million followers on Wednesday showed a teenage boy attacking another and was presented as footage of a “Muslim

migrant” beating a Dutch boy.

But according to local officials, both boys are Dutch. The clip was taken in Monnickendam, a small town in the North Holland province of the Netherlands, in May and shows a teenager punching and kicking another boy holding a crutch. Marleen van Fessem, a spokeswoman for the local public prosecutor’s office, confirmed the 16-year-old boy who was arrested after the video came to light was “born and raised in the Netherlands.”

The Embassy of the Netherlands in Washington then chided Mr. Trump. “Facts do matter,” it replied to the president on Twitter.

The two additional videos were taken in 2013, one in Syria, the other in Egypt, and are provided with no explanation of the political turmoil taking place in those countries at the time, and with no details on the extremist affiliations of one of the men in the video.

The president’s decision to share them was in keeping with his habit of disseminating information he has not verified even as he attacks news organizations for producing “fake news.” Two White House aides, who asked not to be identified because they were not authorized to speak publicly, said Mr. Trump found the videos himself. Aides said they believed he spotted one on the Twitter feed of Ann Coulter, the conservative commentator.

In an email later in the day, Ms. Coulter said that while she was still “annoyed” that Mr. Trump had not yet built the border wall he promised, “I LOVE the president’s tweets!” Responding to the British criticism, she said, “Maybe between blathering about the values of ‘tolerance and respect,’ poor Theresa May might want to ask herself whether the Muslims the U.K. is importing at breakneck speed share these ‘values of tolerance and respect.’”

Britain First was partly founded in 2011 by James Dowson, a far-right activist who left the group in 2014 and supported Mr. Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign. The organization calls itself a “patriotic” political party, but has been criticized by human rights activists as an extremist group that seeks to bait Muslims.

Ms. Fransen, who has previously been charged in Britain with “religious aggravated

harassment,” thanked Mr. Trump for promoting her message. “I’m facing prison for criticising Islam,” she wrote on Twitter. “Britain is now Sharia compliant. I need your help!”

In the United States, Mr. Trump’s tweets were welcomed by a former Ku Klux Klan leader, David Duke, who wrote on Twitter: “Thank God for Trump! That’s why we love him!”

But they undercut efforts by Mr. Trump’s own administration to dispel the impression that he is anti-Muslim. Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law and senior adviser, had expressed hope that his success at building alliances with leaders from Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations in recent months had put that perception behind them, according to White House officials.

James K. Glassman, who as under secretary of state under Mr. Bush was charged with promoting American ideals around the world, said Mr. Trump was “simply playing into the hands of terrorists.”

“New recruits are attracted not by some phony version of Islam,” he said, “but by adolescent fantasies of sado-masochism and power and by the idea of being part of a global conflict that’s transfixed and frightened the rest of the world. The president’s retweet just reinforces the narrative. Not good.”

Craig M. Considine, a lecturer at Rice University and the author of several books on Muslims in the West, called the tweets an effort to stir up intolerance of Muslims in Western countries and build a case for driving them out. “He’s playing on this fear, whipping up the fear,” Mr. Considine said. “It is completely reckless.”

Peter Baker and Eileen Sullivan reported from Washington. Reporting was contributed by Megan Specia, Maggie Haberman, Laurie Goodstein and Mike McIntire from New York; Dan Bilefsky from London; Jonathan Martin and Thomas Kaplan from Washington; and Jim Tankersley from St. Louis.

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