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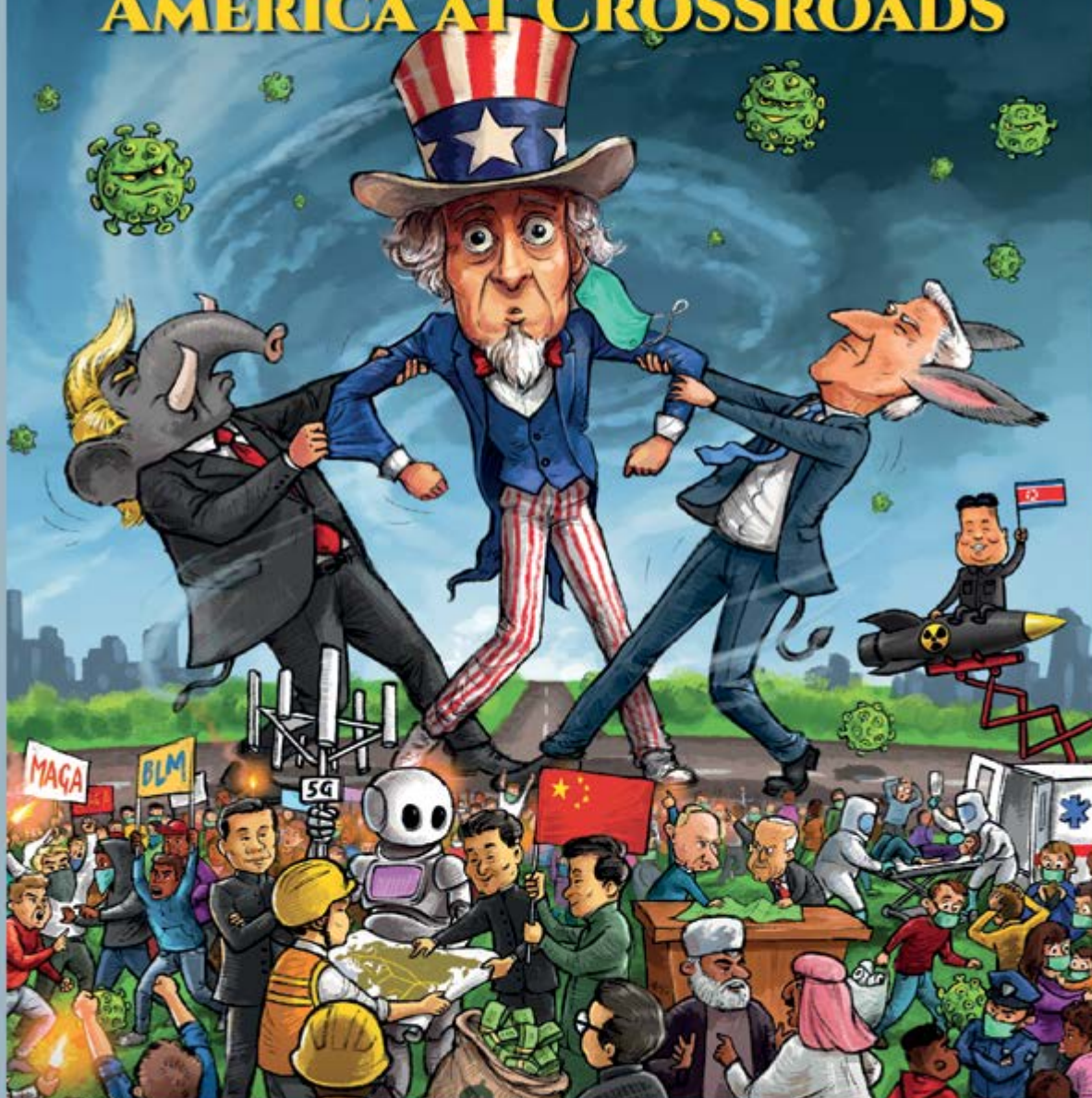
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# HORIZONS

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## AMERICA AT CROSSROADS



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# FIGHTING HATE IN THE ERA OF CORONAVIRUS

*Jonathan A. Greenblatt*

**T**HE THEME of this issue, “America at a Crossroads,” captures the essence of the current moment we are facing. This is more than just about another presidential election or politics as usual, more than just a need to address the rampant spread of hatred in society. It is about the fact that we are truly standing at a crucial juncture in American history.

The question is, which road will we go down? Will we follow the extreme voices that are being amplified across social media and entering our mainstream political discourse? Or, will we steer clear of the extreme voices and find a way to work together toward a more tolerant society that values democracy, pluralism, and decency over calls to stereotyping and hatred?

As Jews and as Americans, we know from our history in this country as well as from our past that this is a stark

choice with only one clear answer. The question to focus on is this: how do we move our society in the right direction and away from the gathering forces of hatred and extremism?

## **PRESSURE POINTS IN AMERICA**

**L**et’s briefly take stock of some of the pressure points America is facing in this moment. First, the coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on just about every aspect of society and our lives. Nearly eight million Americans have contracted the virus, and more than 200,000 people have died just in this country alone. It has shuttered businesses and schools. It is hurting nonprofit organizations that provide essential services. It has contributed to the highest level of unemployment since the Great Depression. And all of this has caused a great deal of anxiety, which has brought some side effects, including the spread of conspiracy theories

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*Jonathan Greenblatt in conversation with delegates at the United Nations*

Photo: ADL

and attempts to blame the spread of the virus on Jews, Asians, and other minorities.

Second, a series of police shootings and killings targeting unarmed black Americans has once again raised the specter of racism in the United States and given rise to questions about how far we have come in our society in overcoming the legacy of slavery, the Civil War, and the Jim Crow South. This national reckoning over race and society has started an important national debate and has already made some progress, but there’s much work to be done.

Third, white supremacists haven’t disappeared from the American scene. In fact, far from it. From the hateful rally in Charlottesville in 2017, where antisemitic and racist slogans were on full display, leading to the death of a protester, to synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh and Poway at the hands of extremists, and into the present moment where a sitting state governor became the target of an assassination plot, far-right extremists continue to pose a significant threat in this country. We need to recognize this threat, to document its effects, and to seek ways to counter it, while also keeping an eye on other extremists, such

as those on the far left who attempt to delegitimize and scapegoat the State of Israel, or those who spread antisemitic conspiracy theories about Jewish control of the U.S. government.

Fourth, we are in the midst of bitterly fought presidential and congressional races where the rhetoric is ugly and, at times, toxic. The internet and social media have fueled the spread of election misinformation and disinformation. And we are facing a logistical challenge of maintaining our democracy and getting voters to the polls on election day in the middle of a pandemic, which has raised questions about whether the United States will be able to ensure free and fair elections if it is an election held largely by mail-in-ballot. And all of this is happening during one of the most important elections of our lifetimes, with daunting challenges facing our country and when the stakes are higher than ever.

And finally, there's the problem of spreading hate on social media and the internet. Earlier this year, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) launched a campaign called "Stop Hate for Profit," when it became clear to us that Facebook—the largest and

most popular social media platform—wasn't doing enough to address the spread of hatred on its servers and to protect its users from exposure to hate speech and hateful content. We called on companies to stop advertising on Facebook and hundreds of big-name brands, that were just as

*The question to focus on is this: how do we move our society in the right direction and away from the gathering forces of hatred and extremism?*

concerned about the spread of hate speech and racism, joined our effort. Now the question remains: will social media companies get the message and take action to ensure that their platforms are hate-free zones? Right now, Facebook and other platforms continue to provide haters and bigots with a nearly unfettered space to spread hate. If they can't reign in hate speech and help prevent the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, what does that mean for civility and society? Social media is the next frontier in the battle against hate.

All of this gives you a sense of the issues we are grappling with every day here at ADL—one of the oldest and largest nonprofit organizations fighting antisemitism and hatred in all forms. Since our founding in 1913, ADL has been a leading organization speaking out against hate, and we take our mission as seriously now as we did over a hundred years ago.

We also recognize that this is no ordinary moment, but a true crossroads for America. So we are working hard to educate Americans; to fight for legislation, such as stronger hate crime laws, that can serve as a bulwark against hate-motivated violence; to advocate for greater civility in our political system; to press social media companies to address and change policies that enable hate to fester; and to find and build new alliances so that we are not fighting these battles alone.

What follows is a summary of how we are working on the issues presented by each of the challenges to society I've mentioned in this introduction to this essay.

**PUSHING BACK ON CORONAVIRUS CONSPIRACIES**

As the oldest anti-hate organization in the world, ADL has weathered our fair share of national tragedies and global events. But the fast-spreading coronavirus pandemic has posed new challenges, including the serious risk that the compounding public anxiety around the virus could lead to the scapegoating and blaming of Asian, Jewish, and other minorities for this public health crisis.

In fact, earlier this year we saw Asian Americans and Jewish Americans and

other minority communities being blamed for the pandemic. We saw some pundits pointing the finger at prominent Jews as if the virus was the product of some conspiracy. We saw internet chatter from white supremacists suggesting the disease is spreading in America because of an influx of foreigners. And

*We know from history that at times of real crisis in society, the voices of reason and logic can be drowned out by those who wish to spread hatred or sow discord.*

Donald Trump himself has repeatedly referred to the virus as the "Chinese virus," only reinforcing stereotypical and false notions about the causes and origin of the virus.

While, fortunately, none of this has entered the mainstream in a significant way, there's always a serious risk that this kind of hateful rhetoric and outright scapegoating of minorities will take on a life of its own. We know from history that at times of real crisis in society, the voices of reason and logic can be drowned out by those who wish to spread hatred or sow discord.

Rarely has there been a more opportune moment to seize on fear and spread hate.

This is the kind of situation that we realize can spiral out of control quickly unless we all appeal directly to our leaders and the American people not to let it happen. Our response at ADL was three-fold: We started a list categorizing

acts of hate against Asian Americans, to ensure that we were fully documenting the problem; we tracked antisemitic COVID-19 conspiracy theories and their spread among far right extremists, and we joined with top political and civil rights leaders to denounce attempts to blame the spread of the virus on minorities.

To borrow from Abraham Lincoln: Americans need to summon the better angels of our natures. We need to stop the demonization of minorities, call out scapegoating for what it is, and come together as one nation indivisible so we can beat this together.

There's history here: both Chinese and Jewish immigrants experienced xenophobia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as large-scale immigration to the shores of America fueled Sinophobia and a range of antisemitic reactions.

Starting in the 1870s, anti-Chinese invective became politicized by elected officials and some labor leaders who blamed Chinese "coolies" for depressed wage levels. This led to a series of increasingly restrictive anti-Chinese laws nationwide. In the late nineteenth century, some intellectuals and writers promoted the notion of a "Yellow Peril," suggesting that Asians were in a contest of racial superiority with Americans. Such fears, and others, led to the passage

of laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) that prohibited the immigration of virtually all Chinese people to the United States.

Likewise, blaming Jews for the spread of diseases and other societal ills has remained a key feature of antisemitism for centuries. Throughout history, Jews have often been directly blamed for the spread of diseases, from the Black Plague in the fourteenth century, when Jewish people were accused of "poisoning the wells," to the present, when Orthodox Jewish communities have been demonized and attacked in relation to a recent measles outbreak.

And now we have COVID-19, where both Jewish Americans and Americans of Chinese descent are being blamed for spreading the virus, even when scientists are telling us emphatically that this disease is not being transmitted by any one religious or ethnic group but can be spread by anyone coming into contact with someone who already has been infected.

There have been posts on notoriously extremist-friendly platforms like Telegram, 4chan, and Gab linking the coronavirus to racist and antisemitic slurs and memes. Users across these channels regularly share racist messages or caricatures of Chinese people, mocking their eating habits, accents, and hygiene. Posters on Telegram and 4chan

appear to be cheering-on the virus, hoping it will spread to predominately non-white countries.

It has also started to enter the mainstream, as political leaders and those in positions of influence have picked up on these themes. Former Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, who has been tied to extremist groups, lamented that no major media outlet has asked about "George Soros's involvement in this FLU panic. He is SOMEWHERE involved in this." Here, we believe the former sheriff is invoking the antisemitic conspiracy theory of "Jewish power," insinuating that this Jewish philanthropist is somehow using his influence and wealth to create a global pandemic.

Similarly, people are using coronavirus news as an opportunity to disparage Jews on social media. After news broke that George Washington University had quarantined students who attended this year's American Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Conference, some students reported they were being harassed on Twitter—and even in person—with antisemitic messages. And we have seen hateful messages directed at Jewish communities in New York in the wake of the onset of a COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020.

*Social media is the next frontier in the battle against hate.*

Beyond the antisemitic incidents, we have seen attempts by some elected officials and others in positions of authority to eschew generic medical terms for the epidemic, such as "coronavirus" or the World Health Organization's name for it "COVID-19." Instead, some are opting to refer to it as the "Wuhan virus," seemingly to emphasize its origins in China. Others have referred to COVID-19 as a "Chinese coronavirus" or the "Kung Flu." While some might think it reasonable to describe the disease in this manner, such descriptions have real consequences, because they can contribute to scapegoating and xenophobia.

In just one example, a 59-year-old Asian man was kicked in the back and told to go back to his country. There's also been a rise in racist, anti-Chinese incidents overseas, and a troubling protest outside the Sacramento International Airport. And we know that hate crimes historically are underreported, so this likely represents just the tip of the iceberg for incidents of harassment and violence.

While we deal with this national emergency, civic leaders and people in positions of authority should refer to this virus by its clinical and factual name. It is likewise important for all Americans to come together and

stand against the anti-Asian and anti-Jewish blame-game that's playing out in some corners of society.

Scapegoating is something we never should tolerate, especially not now. We can and will come through this crisis but only if we work together.

**A NATIONAL RECKONING ON RACISM**

The Black Lives Matter movement, and the massive Black-led civil rights protests that have swelled up across the nation in the aftermath of the lynching of George Floyd by police officers in May 2020, launched a long-overdue reckoning over systemic racism in our country. The protests have been multi-racial, multicultural, and multi-generational—in many ways a manifestation of what is best about America. And the clarion call of “Black Lives Matter” that has echoed from the streets to all corners of society is not just a phrase; it is also an assertion of a basic moral truth and a straightforward demand for racial justice in this country. It is a call that must be answered with solidarity and compassion over division and hate.

As an organization founded to fight hate, ADL stands in solidarity with this

racial justice movement. That is because Black lives matter. Period. There should be no disagreement or dispute over this simple proclamation of humanity. And yet the need to assert that Black lives matter arises from repeated instances of violence against Black people, often at the hands of law enforcement officers.

*The clarion call of “Black Lives Matter” that has echoed from the streets to all corners of society is not just a phrase; it is also an assertion of a basic moral truth and a straightforward demand for racial justice in this country.*

Trayvon Martin. Tamir Rice. Michael Brown. Rekia Boyd. Eric Garner. Philando Castile. Sandra Bland. Stephon Clark. Layleen Xtravaganza Cubilette-Polanco. Elijah McClain. Ahmaud Arbery. Rayshard Brooks. Breonna Taylor and

George Floyd. These and so many other names will be forever tied to this moment, now movement, of reckoning.

The Black Lives Matter movement has gained unprecedented momentum in recent months in part because it is not owned or controlled by a specific organization or leaders. It is Black-led and radiates through the grassroots across this country, engaging every age and demographic, and across political, racial, religious, and geographic divides. This may be the largest protest movement in American history; it will, we hope, be a lasting inflection point in the nation’s long fight for civil rights.

This decentralized, grassroots phenomenon has had broad reach. Countless churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples have mobilized under BLM banners. Black communities are leading this movement, including Black Jews who are active members of our diverse Jewish community.

As it was written more than 100 years ago, ADL remains committed to our historic mission to “stop the defamation of the Jewish people and secure justice and fair treatment to all.” This compels us to mobilize our resources and har-

*It’s just not just the words of those in positions of power that have influence and inspire hate. The systemic demonization of immigrants is also glaringly apparent in America’s political and national discourse.*

ness our capabilities in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. And so we are actively supporting it, whether advocating for legislation to combat police brutality and voter suppression, participating in litigation, working inside and outside our own organization to educate ourselves about institutional and structural racism, and monitoring and reporting on white supremacists and other extremists who seek to manipulate and undermine the Black Lives Matter movement.

At this pivotal moment we must recommit to dismantle the systemic racism that runs so deep in our society. When we engage in this struggle with

our full selves, we are true to ADL’s timeless mission. And we help make America a better country for all.

**BATTLING WHITE SUPREMACY**

More than a year ago, in August 2019, a white supremacist drove for 10 hours, walked across a

Walmart parking lot in El Paso, Texas armed with a semi-automatic rifle and opened fire, before entering the building and carrying out a rampage that would ultimately leave 23 people dead and 23 more injured. The attack was the deadliest white supremacist at-

tack in the United States in more than five decades.

The shooter told law enforcement he intended to kill as many Mexicans as possible. He called his attack a response to “the Hispanic invasion of Texas” and said that he was defending America from “cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion.”

President Trump has used the word “invasion” to describe the influx of immigrants coming into the United States in numerous tweets over the last four years. In June 2018, he wrote, “We cannot allow all of these people to invade our Country. When somebody

comes in, we must immediately, with no Judges or Court Cases, bring them back from where they came.”

These two statements are no mere coincidence; and they are not just two sentences put together to score political points and seek only to cast singular blame. Rather, they demonstrate that the language, rhetoric and tone of our nation’s leaders, most importantly the American president, can have consequences—deadly consequences.

It’s just not just the words of those in positions of power that have influence and inspire hate. The systemic demonization of immigrants is also glaringly apparent in America’s political and national discourse. Every day, scores of TV and internet pundits go on their non-stop tirades, consistently characterizing as “invaders” the men, women, and children fleeing dangerous conditions in their countries to seek asylum and safety in the United States. These words too, do not fall on deaf ears.

Unchecked hatred and normalization of the denigration of another race, ethnicity, religion, or culture ultimately leads to the events we witnessed in El Paso a year ago. We know this because, among other reasons, the perpetrators tell us so.

Many of the anti-immigrant views left behind in the Walmart shooter’s manifesto—rising non-white immigration, fear of race mixing, changing demographics—were also part of racist statements and posts made by other white supremacist murderers, including the convicted killer who claimed the lives of 51 Muslims in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Then,

*The bottom line: white supremacists in America are emboldened, increasingly violent, and still present a significant danger to society.*

there is the person who killed 11 Jews in a Pittsburgh synagogue. He told police the Jews were to blame for increased non-white immigration to America.

Investigators say these two attacks influenced the gunman who killed one woman and wounded many others in a Poway synagogue because he blamed Jews for the alleged “genocide” of the “European race.”

The bottom line: white supremacists in America are emboldened, increasingly violent, and still present a significant danger to society. The data bears this out. In 2019, right-wing extremists were responsible for the vast majority of extremist-related murders in the United States. ADL’s annual Murder and Extremism Report found that of the 42 extremist related murders committed in America in 2019, 38 were committed by individuals subscribing to various right-wing ideologies, including white supremacy.

As we seek to move forward while honoring the lives and memories of those innocent victims who were taken from us by hate, we must stand united against our common enemy, racism, hate, and white supremacy. And we must stand with our allies in courageously calling to account those who promote it, in whatever form they attempt to disguise it.

**EQUAL VOTING RIGHTS**

The right to vote remains fundamental to American democracy. But the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored and amplified

*Democracy depends on ensuring that every voter has an equal and fair opportunity to cast a ballot, free from restrictions that have a discriminatory impact.*

existing challenges in keeping elections safe, fair, and accessible. And it has created new challenges in doing so, highlighting the need for widespread access to alternatives to in-person voting.

The 2020 election comes at a time when the American electorate has rarely been more polarized. Views once considered extremist, that would have met with outright rejection in the past, are now being adopted and espoused by mainstream candidates.

Appeals to prejudice and bigotry in political campaigns remain a cause for concern. And ADL’s Center on Extremism is tracking efforts by extremists to gain influence in the 2020

elections, either by running for office themselves or by taking advantage of social media to spread disinformation and hateful messages.

Democracy depends on ensuring that every voter has an equal and fair opportunity to cast a ballot, free from restrictions that have a discriminatory impact. There is, perhaps, no more

fundamental right in a democracy than the vote.

ADL will be supporting and promoting nonpartisan efforts to encourage voting and make it more accessible for all U.S. citizens, so

that everyone is able to take part in this critical aspect of our democracy. This is especially important at this time, as we work to overcome obstacles that could negatively impact voter turnout.

In one example of how this will play out tangibly on the local level, ADL recently announced a partnership with the National Urban League, the storied African-American civil rights organization, to begin work on a pilot voting rights project in Philadelphia that we hope to model in other cities across the country. The project will use young leaders involved in both groups to help recruit poll workers and produce mailers and social media videos encouraging people to vote.

**SOCIAL MEDIA  
ACCOUNTABILITY**

In July 2020, thousands of businesses joined an advertising pause on Facebook in opposition to its continued refusal to seriously address hate, racism, antisemitism, and disinformation across its platform. This action was the culmination of months of concerns being raised with, but not adequately addressed by, Facebook’s leadership about the rampant hate on their platform. Over the past few years we have raised these issues consistently with Facebook and offered various opportunities for them to address hatred and make product modifications to prevent it from spreading, only to be met with denials and obfuscation.

We also had seen the consequences of inaction. In June 2020, a federal courthouse security officer was murdered by two individuals who, according to federal prosecutors, used a Facebook page to coordinate their plot in furtherance of the extremist “boogaloo” movement—a term that has become shorthand for preparations for a coming civil war. Since that incident, Facebook took some steps to remove “boogaloo” accounts from its platform; it shouldn’t have taken the loss of an innocent life to stir them to action. Facebook’s decisionmakers know this

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type of behavior is happening on the platform but inexplicably fail to intervene.

This type of inaction catalyzed the Stop Hate for Profit movement. A coalition of non-profit organizations—ADL, NAACP, Color of Change, Free Press, LULAC, Common Sense, Sleeping Giants, Mozilla Foundation, and National

Hispanic Media Coalition—came together due to shared concerns about Facebook’s failure to act decisively against extremist content and hate speech spreading on its platforms.

But Facebook’s policies have done more than simply surrender the

largest media platform in history over to disinformation and racist, xenophobic, and antisemitic content. Their algorithms actually promote this kind of content, recommend it to users, and allow product advertisements to appear alongside it.

Yet the decisionmakers at Facebook refuse to accept responsibility for the role they’ve played in fueling divisiveness, extremism, and hate—even though they know this to be true. Their own internal studies concluded that “our algorithms exploit the brain’s attraction to divisiveness.” But when Facebook learned that taking action against divisiveness on the platform could limit growth and reduce

profits, the company shelved its own internal recommendations for change. In fact, employees across Facebook have been in open revolt against the questionable decisions of Mark Zuckerberg and other executives. One employee who recently resigned in protest offered the assessment that “Facebook is hurting people at scale.”

At this point, anyone paying attention can see that Facebook is damaging our democracy and society. After years of can-kicking and foot-dragging, the inaction spurred Stop Hate for Profit to ask businesses to pause advertisement spending on Facebook for one month in order to motivate the company, once and for all, to address rampant hate and disinformation on its platforms.

Since late June 2020, thousands of companies have heeded the call. This has included some of America’s most prominent brands: Ford, Verizon, Walgreens, Pfizer, Starbucks, Microsoft, Hershey’s, Dunkin, Levi’s, and countless other prominent brand names have signed on. More than one hundred non-profits, labor groups, and religious organizations joined in solidarity with the movement. Tens of thousands of individual consumers from around the world also demonstrated solidarity.

Remarkably, though, it isn’t Facebook that has taken the most substantive actions since the start of this ad pause—it

has been other tech giants like Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube.

That’s why it’s so important that Facebook’s policies on hate content, perpetuation of racism, and spreading of disinformation continue being brought to light. The company controls four of the six social platforms with more than 1 billion users: Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and WhatsApp. As a platform that doesn’t just post content, but recommends and promotes specific posts and groups to optimize engagement, its policy decisions are massively influential to our civil society and democracy. And sole decision-making power over those issues comes down to one person—Facebook CEO and Chairman Mark Zuckerberg.

Moreover, Facebook presents a specific challenge to American government in the continued obfuscation, empty promises, and misinformation its representatives offer during Congressional hearings and in other fora. For example, Zuckerberg testified before the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018 that “we do not allow hate groups on Facebook overall. So if there’s a group whose primary purpose or a large part of what they do is spreading hate, we will ban them from the platform overall.” That statement was false then, and it’s false today.

So, who can effect change at Facebook? Ultimately the responsibility lies with Zuckerberg, who makes the

final decisions at the company based on its unique governance and ownership. But it likely will take everyone who has a stake in civil society and democracy to influence that change. Corporate advertisers, issue-based non-profit organizations, faith-based institutions, and countless individual consumers all have the potential to play a part.

But ADL has repeatedly advocated that the U.S. Congress should join that effort, too. Recognizing that the gears of regulation turn incredibly slowly, we nonetheless believe that America's elected officials could be doing more to speak out against Facebook's problematic impact on our society. We've outlined some of the simple steps that Facebook could take today to make meaningful change.

If Facebook won't listen to more than a thousand advertisers, hundreds of public interest organizations, and thousands of users, maybe greater governmental attention and action is needed. That effort can make serious inroads by holding Zuckerberg accountable and asking him why he continues to put profit over people.

At ADL, we continue to collaborate with Silicon Valley to stop cyberhate. ADL was among the first to identify the threat of Zoombombing as it became a tool of trolls, then extremists, to harass Jews and other minorities online. We

offered tips to the public but also worked directly with Zoom's management on a series of product improvements before Passover and Easter, when so many of us would be moving to virtual seders and services. It worked, and Zoom's chief product officer then participated in a highly-viewed ADL webinar. Today, our Center on Technology and Society continues to partner with other social media companies to ensure that their platforms are working to expunge hate.

### **PIVOTAL MOMENT**

**T**ruly, we stand at a pivotal moment in American history. By every measure, COVID-19 is a disaster, the kind of crisis that strikes once every one hundred years. Everyone is impacted, especially vulnerable communities. The human cost is stunning. Lives lost almost without warning. Loved ones left behind to mourn in isolation. And while the human toll is almost incalculable, the economic devastation is very calculable: trillions of dollars and climbing.

How it ultimately will affect us or any organization in the Jewish and civil rights worlds is yet to be seen. But there is truth in the statement that people and organizations can be forged in crisis. If you are clear on your principles and put them into action across what matters most to your organization, I believe that you will have the best shot at not only coming through this time, but coming through stronger. ●