Like most Americans, I am nowhere near any violence right now. Nevertheless, I am hearing and seeing violence on a series of screens: television screens, smartphone screens, computer screens. Even in a room as quiet as mine—outside the window I can see grass and trees—the cacophony is almost unbearable. It’s as if different choruses are all singing at the same time, and not in harmony.

In Salt Lake City, police knocked down an elderly man who was walking with a cane. In New York City, two police SUVs drove into a crowd. In Houston, on the other hand, the police chief told a multiracial crowd, “If you’ve got hate in your heart for people of color, get over it.” In Camden, New Jersey, police officers marched together with protesters. On Sunday, rioters in Washington, D.C., burned shops and lit a fire in the refectory of St. John’s Episcopal Church, just across Lafayette Square from the
White House. On Monday, completely peaceful demonstrators in the square were teargassed so President Donald Trump could have himself photographed in front of that same church with a copy of the Bible in hand.

[Read: Trump does not speak for these Christians]

Many would like to simplify these events—to give them a single, clear interpretation. Some tell a harrowing story about police violence. Some tell a heartwarming story about police and communities pulling together. Some tell an insidious story about black looters. Some tell a murky story about white infiltration of peaceful black protest movements. A few weeks ago, The Atlantic’s Ed Yong described a “patchwork pandemic,” a coronavirus outbreak that is unfolding in different ways in different parts of the country. Now we have patchwork protests, mixed with patchwork riots. In each one of them, the police and the protesters have different motives, create different impacts, affect people in different ways.

Nevertheless, the internet is positively thrumming with people who want to fit these disparate stories into a single narrative. Yesterday, I reposted on Twitter a short video clip of what appears to be two white women, both dressed in black outfits with black face masks. Invoking the Black Lives Matter movement, they were spray-painting BLM and other graffiti on the outside wall of a Starbucks in an unidentified city. A black protester shouted at them to stop. “They are going to blame black people for this,” she said, “and black people didn’t do it.” The clip was less than two minutes long. I wrote one sentence on top: “This is an unbelievably complicated story.”

Many respondents did not agree. What was I talking about? This was not a complicated story! Because, obviously, the women were far-left “antifa” members seeking anarchy. Or because, obviously, the women were far-right white supremacists seeking a race war. Or because, obviously, the women were part of a larger plot to discredit the black protesters. One person wrote that “every single thing that has happened has been planned by Trump’s people to get Covid and unemployment and masks off the front pages.” Another person told me that antifa had been preparing this chaos for a long time. A third tweeted another video clip, this one—apparently—of a white store owner in South Carolina being beaten up by black rioters. I think it was meant to be a kind of counterargument: Here’s what black people are really like.

[Read: Don’t fall for the ‘chaos’ theory of the protests]

The point, for many, is to find justifications for what they already believe and reinforcement of the identity that they already have. From this vantage point, the unrest is the fault of black people (or white people), police (or protesters), the right (or the left). Emotions are so high that the ongoing effort to manipulate images coming out of
the protests is already an industry in and of itself, involving uncounted fake accounts, bots, and provocateurs. #DCblackout, a wildly popular hashtag started by a new Twitter account with only three followers, falsely claimed that D.C. police had imposed a communications blackout. Thousands of people believed it. A white-nationalist group called Identity Evropa turned out to be the true owner of an influential viral account called @ANTIFA_US. On Twitter and in private message groups it called for violence—and thousands of people believed that too.

The proliferation of false stories and fake narratives doesn’t mean that truth doesn’t exist, or that Americans will never find out what really happened. But it does mean that the full story has to be told in quite a complicated way, from different angles, by many people. That requires time and patience, as well as the sort of journalism that millions of Americans no longer trust. If nothing else, the dozens of physical attacks by police on journalists in recent days offer final proof that the president’s constant verbal attacks on journalists have been absorbed and believed by many, including a number of officers. False stories can be promulgated more easily when the people trying to tell true stories have been discredited—or when they are battered by rubber bullets.

In any case, quite a lot of people will not want to hear the truth. Quite a lot of people will want, instead, for everyone to shut up. They will want force, violence, whatever it takes to make the cacophony stop. The behavioral scientist Karen Stenner has written very eloquently about people who have what she calls an authoritarian predisposition, a personality type that is bothered by complexity and is especially enraged by disagreement. Trump has made himself into the spokesperson for precisely these American authoritarians. They were the audience for his decision to use tear gas to clear peaceful protesters from Lafayette Square. It’s for them that he uses the language of “domination,” for them that he calls for the army, for helicopters, for the cities to be treated as a “battle space,” in the astonishing words of America’s secretary of defense.

[Anne Applebaum: History will judge the complicit]

The church and the Bible were part of the message too. Trump did not even pretend that he was going to St. John’s to pray. He did not ask permission of the church or the diocese or even pay lip service to God; on the contrary, Episcopal clergy were cleared out of the area by the same tear gas that dispersed the protesters. Instead, he held up a Bible for the cameras, not as a religious gesture, but as a signal. Trump was sending a message to his Americans with an authoritarian predisposition: I share your identity. I am part of your tribe.

But force is not the only possible response to cacophony. Instead of imposing silence, you can produce harmony. You can create a different narrative—a larger narrative that
pulls people together. You can seek consensus; you can appeal to something that everyone can agree on. You can invoke patriotism, America, the founding documents, or just the belief that things can change for the better.

Historically, this is the tactic that America’s greatest and most beloved leaders have always used. Abraham Lincoln appealed to the “better angels” of our nature. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of “all God’s children” and their right to enjoy the freedoms guaranteed in our Constitution. The mayor of Atlanta, Keisha Lance Bottoms, tried a similar kind of appeal on Sunday. She appealed to the history of Atlanta, and to King’s legacy of nonviolence. “A protest has purpose,” she said, but violence has no purpose. “When you burn down this city,” Bottoms declared, “you’re burning down our community.” In this time-honored way, she encouraged Atlantans to make use of democratic institutions in order to make society better: “If you want change in America, go and register to vote! Show up at the polls on June 9! Do it in November!”

The question now is whether the old American mantras, the appeals to traditions of democracy and the rule of law, still work—or whether they have now become just another competing narrative in the information war. Certainly the president is assuming the latter. All of the calls for community, dialogue, good-faith discussions—these are just another set of arguments that he has to defeat. If Trump is to win in November, he has to undermine not just the press, and not just public trust, but faith in democracy itself.

He has to convince Americans that nothing will function, that all of the institutions have failed, that only violence remains. He has to convince all of the people who are sitting at home as I am, surrounded by trees and grass, that they are in such grave danger from the noise on their screens that they need brute force to shut it off. He has five months left to make that argument.

* Photo collage images courtesy of Yuki Iwamura / John Minchillo / Matt Rourke / Alex Brandon / Evan Vucci / John Locher / Ringo H.W. Chiu / AP; Agustin Paullier / Anadolu Agency / Roberto Schmidt / Elijah Nouvelage / Getty

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