

POLITICS

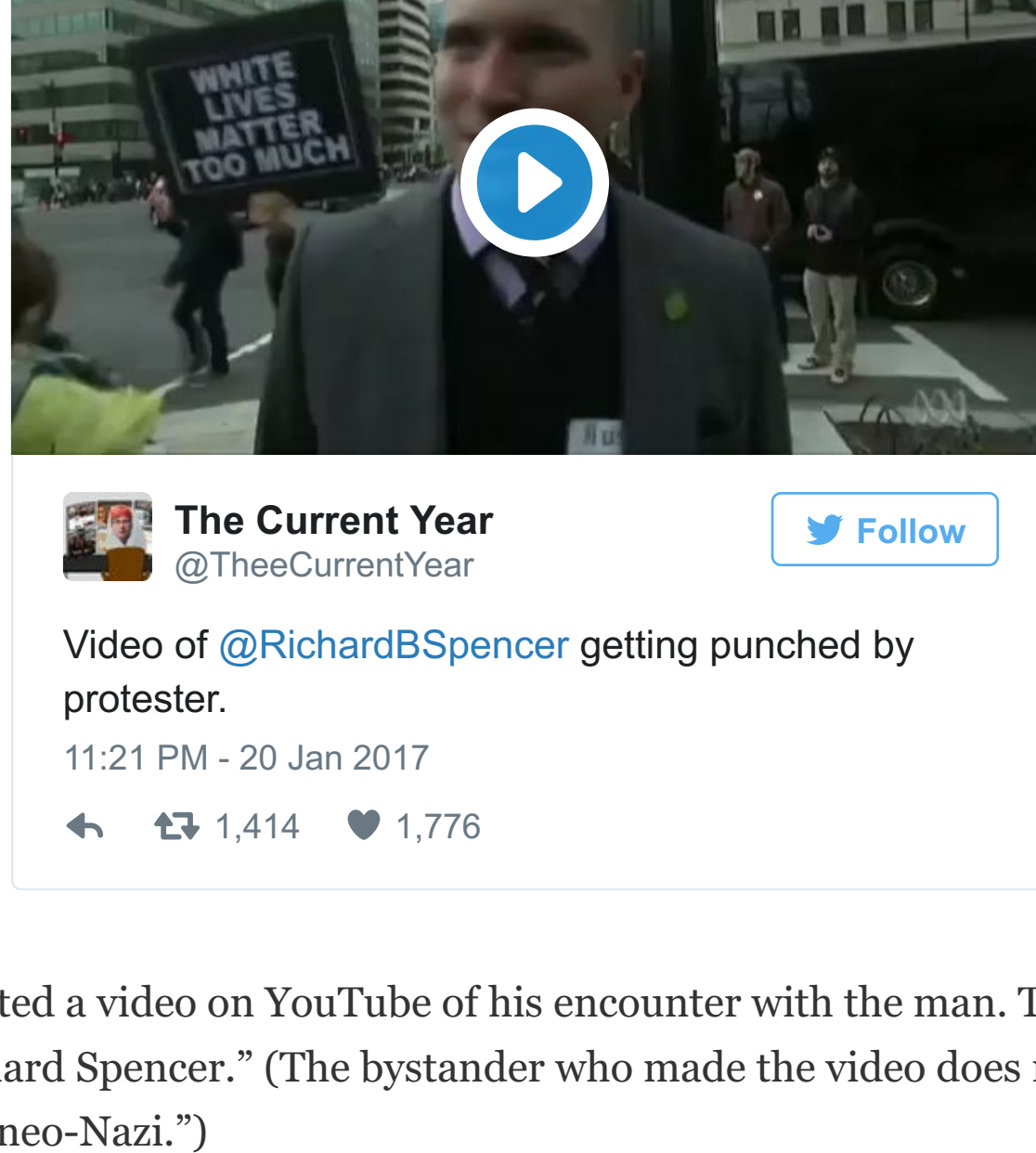
Attack on Alt-Right Leader Has Internet Asking: Is It O.K. to Punch a Nazi?

By LIAM STACK JAN. 21, 2017

Is it O.K. to punch a Nazi?

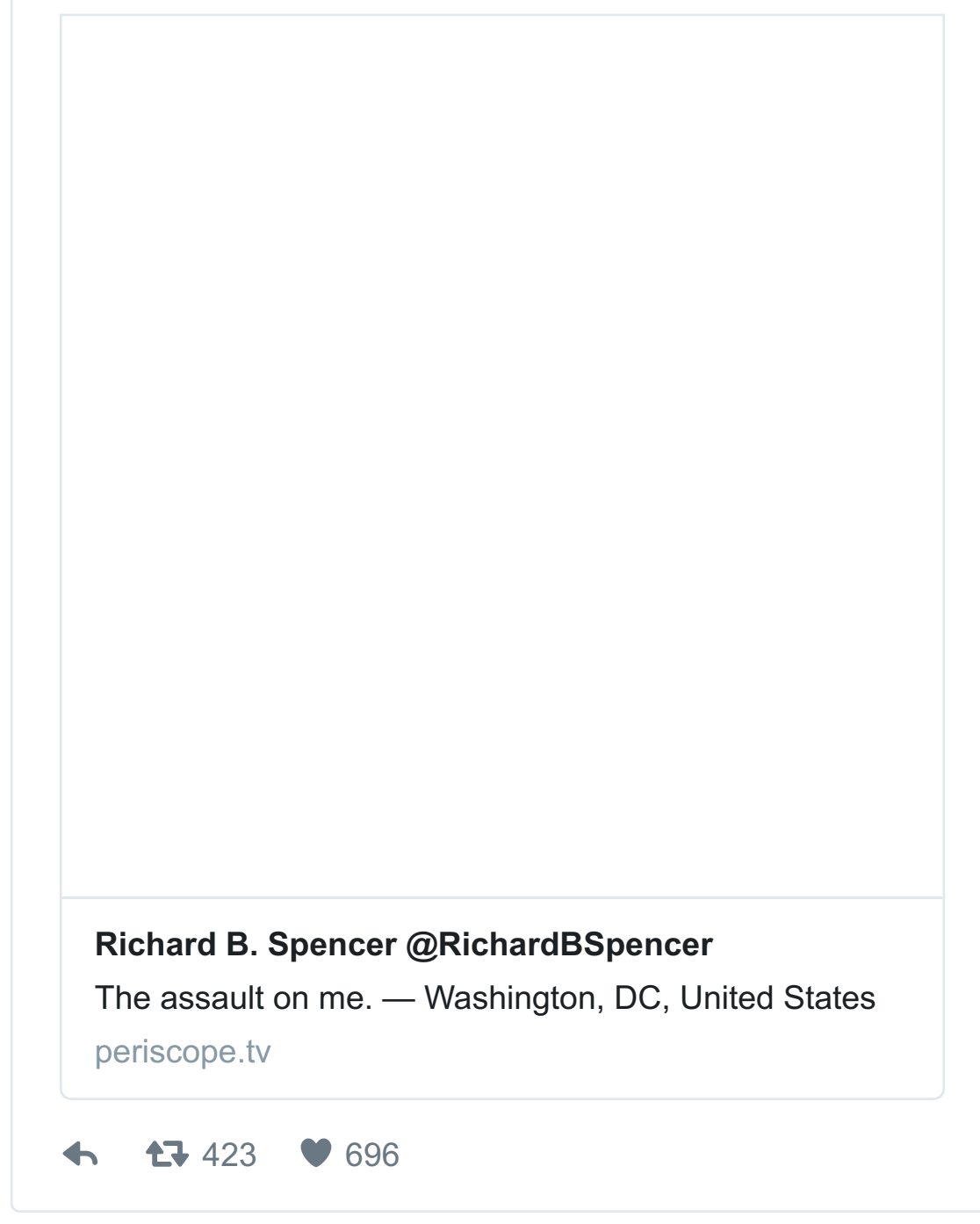
That is not a brainteaser or a hypothetical question posed by a magazine on Twitter. It is an actual question bouncing around the internet after an attack on a well-known far-right activist, Richard B. Spencer, in Washington after the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as president on Friday.

Mr. Spencer, who is credited with coining the term alt-right and describes himself as an “identitarian,” was punched in the head on Inauguration Day by a person clad in black as he was being interviewed by a journalist. At the time of the attack, Mr. Spencer was explaining the meaning of Pepe the Frog, a cartoon figure adopted as a mascot by the alt-right, a racist, far-right fringe movement that is anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic and anti-feminist. Video of the attack shows Mr. Spencer reeling to one side under the force of the blow and his attacker darting through a crowd after landing the punch.



A bystander who chased the attacker later posted a video on YouTube of his encounter with the man. The assailant can be heard telling a friend that the man filming them is “mad at me because I hit Richard Spencer.” (The bystander who made the video does not appear to be a supporter of Mr. Spencer and disparagingly refers to the activist in the clip as “a neo-Nazi.”)

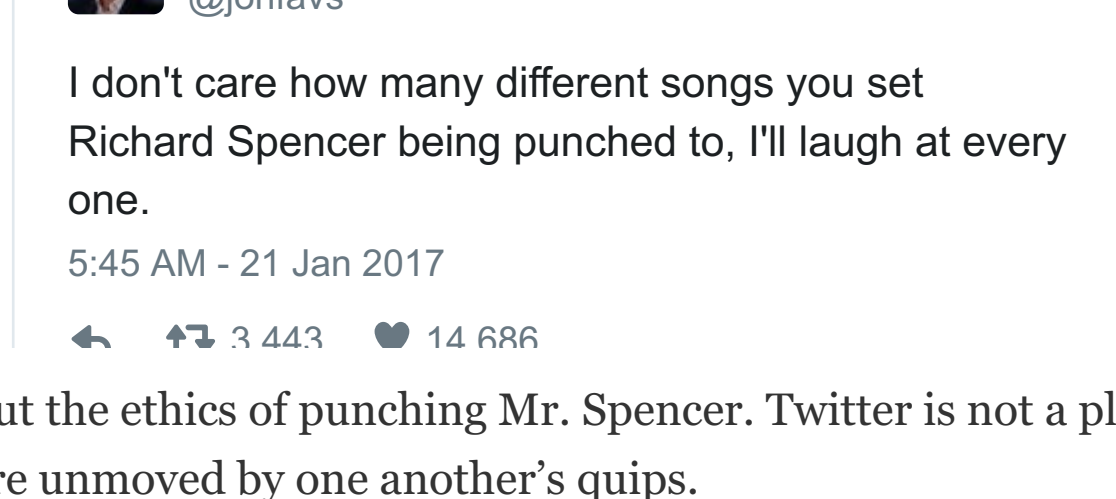
Mr. Spencer described the incident in a Periscope video he posted on Twitter on Friday. Shortly after the attack, he said, he was spat on by another person. On Saturday, he said he had a black eye.



Mr. Spencer’s video was recorded from what he described as “a safe space.” He said he thought the attack happened, in part, because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

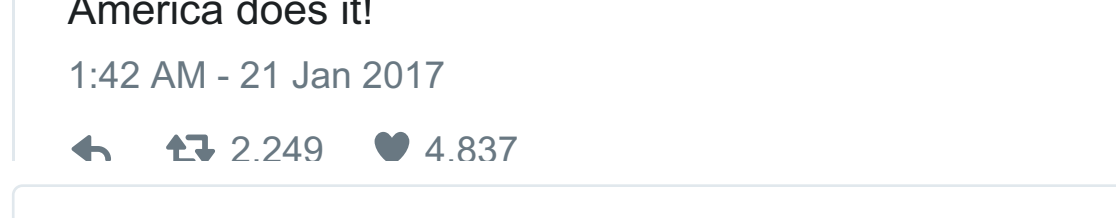
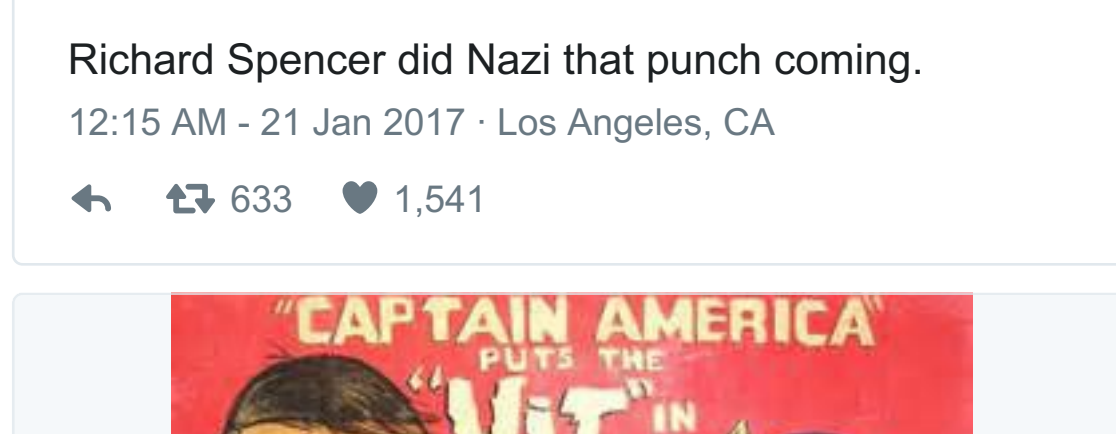
“There was an actual anti-fascist rally going on, and I walked into it,” he said. Margarita Mikhaylova, a spokeswoman for the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department, said on Friday afternoon that Mr. Spencer had not filed a police report.

Video of the attack quickly inspired a flood of jokes and memes online, some of which set the punch to songs like “Born in the U.S.A.” Jon Favreau, a former speechwriter for Barack Obama, was one of many who posted a comment.



There was little substantive debate online about the ethics of punching Mr. Spencer. Twitter is not a place where minds are often changed, and the supporters and opponents of the sucker punch were unmoved by one another’s quips.

Opponents of the punch tended to say that violence had no place in political debate. Supporters tended to say the punch was funny, and more than a few compared Mr. Spencer’s attacker to famous Nazi punchers from pop culture, like Indiana Jones and Captain America.



One person who disapproved of the attack? A longtime writer for the comic book hero Captain America, Nick Spencer. (He said he was not related to Richard Spencer.)



For the record, Richard Spencer says he is not a Nazi. In an interview on Saturday, he said he was a member of the alt-right, which he calls “identity politics for white Americans and for Europeans around the world.”

How is that different from Nazism? Nazism is “a historical term” that “is not going to resonate today,” he said.

“German National Socialism is a historic movement of the past,” Mr. Spencer said. “It arose at a very particular time and had particular motives and ideas and policies and styles, and those aren’t mine.”

Mr. Spencer said he was worried about being attacked again.

“I don’t think I could go out to an inauguration event without bodyguards or a protest or a conference,” he said. “I am more worried about going out to dinner on an average Tuesday because these kind of people are roaming around.”

On Periscope, Mr. Spencer also expressed concern about the spread of the footage of the attack online.

“I’m afraid this is going to become the meme to end all memes,” he said. “That I’m going to hate watching this.”