

Remarks by the President in a Statement to the Press in Orlando, Florida, June 16, 2016

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Four days ago, this community was shaken by an evil and hateful act. Today, we are reminded of what is good. That there is compassion, empathy and decency, and most of all, there is love. That's the Orlando that we've seen in recent days. And that is the America that we have seen.

This afternoon, the Vice President and I had the opportunity to meet with many of the families here. As you might imagine, their grief is beyond description. Through their pain and through their tears, they told us about the joy that their loved ones had brought to their lives. They talked about their sons or their daughters -- so many young people, in their 20s and 30s; so many students who were focused on the future. One young woman was just 18 years old. Another, said her father, was a happy girl with so many dreams.

There were siblings there, talking about their brothers and their sisters and how they were role models that they looked up to. There were husbands and wives who had taken a solemn vow; fathers and mothers who gave their full hearts to their children. These families could be our families. In fact, they are our family -- they're part of the American family. Today, the Vice President and I told them, on behalf of the American people, that our hearts are broken, too, but we stand with you and that we are here for you, and that we are remembering those who you loved so deeply.

As a nation, we've also been inspired by the courage of those who risked their lives and cared for others. Partners whose last moments were spent shielding each other. The mother who gave her life to save her son. The former Marine whose quick thinking saved dozens of lives. Joe and I had the chance to thank Mayor Dyer, Chief Mina, Sheriff Demings, all who responded in heroic ways; the outstanding police and first responders who were able to, through their professionalism and quick response, rescue so many people. We also owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to all the doctors, all the nurses who have worked day and night to treat the injured, save lives and prevent even more anguish. As one of the doctors here said, "after the worst of humanity reared its ugly head...the best of humanity came roaring back." Let me get that quote more precisely -- "after the worst of humanity reared its evil head...the best of humanity came roaring back."

Now, if we're honest with ourselves, if, in fact, we want to show the best of our humanity, then we're all going to have to work together at every level of government, across political lines, to do more to stop killers who want to terrorize us. We will continue to be relentless against terrorist groups like ISIL and al Qaeda. We are going to destroy them. We are going to disrupt their networks, and their financing, and the flow of fighters in and out of war theaters. We're going to disrupt their propaganda that poisons so many minds around the world.

We're going to do all that. Our resolve is clear. But given the fact that the last two terrorist attacks on our soil -- Orlando and San Bernardino -- were homegrown, carried out it appears not by external plotters, not by vast networks or sophisticated cells, but by deranged individuals

warped by the hateful propaganda that they had seen over the Internet, then we're going to have to do more to prevent these kinds of events from occurring. It's going to take more than just our military. It's going to require more than just our intelligence teams. As good as they are, as dedicated as they are, as focused as they are, if you have lone wolf attacks like this, hatched in the minds of a disturbed person, then we're going to have to take different kinds of steps in order to prevent something like this from happening.

Those who were killed and injured here were gunned down by a single killer with a powerful assault weapon. The motives of this killer may have been different than the mass shooters in Aurora or Newtown, but the instruments of death were so similar. And now, another 49 innocent people are dead. Another 53 are injured. Some are still fighting for their lives. Some will have wounds that will last a lifetime. We can't anticipate or catch every single deranged person that may wish to do harm to his neighbors, or his friends, or his coworkers, or strangers. But we can do something about the amount of damage that they do. Unfortunately, our politics have conspired to make it as easy as possible for a terrorist or just a disturbed individual like those in Aurora and Newtown to buy extraordinarily powerful weapons -- and they can do so legally.

Today, once again, as has been true too many times before, I held and hugged grieving family members and parents, and they asked, why does this keep happening? And they pleaded that we do more to stop the carnage. They don't care about the politics. Neither do I. Neither does Joe. And neither should any parent out there who's thinking about their kids being not in the wrong place, but in places where kids are supposed to be.

This debate needs to change. It's outgrown the old political stalemates. The notion that the answer to this tragedy would be to make sure that more people in a nightclub are similarly armed to the killer defies common sense. Those who defend the easy accessibility of assault weapons should meet these families and explain why that makes sense. They should meet with the Newtown families -- some of whom Joe saw yesterday -- whose children would now be finishing fifth grade -- on why it is that we think our liberty requires these repeated tragedies. That's not the meaning of liberty.

I'm pleased to hear that the Senate will hold votes on preventing individuals with possible terrorist ties from buying guns, including assault weapons. I truly hope that senators rise to the moment and do the right thing. I hope that senators who voted no on background checks after Newtown have a change of heart. And then I hope the House does the right thing, and helps end the plague of violence that these weapons of war inflict on so many young lives.

I've said this before -- we will not be able to stop every tragedy. We can't wipe away hatred and evil from every heart in this world. But we can stop some tragedies. We can save some lives. We can reduce the impact of a terrorist attack if we're smart. And if we don't act, we will keep seeing more massacres like this -- because we'll be choosing to allow them to happen. We will have said, we don't care enough to do something about it.

Here in Orlando, we are reminded not only of our obligations as a country to be resolute against terrorists, we are reminded not only of the need for us to implement smarter policies to prevent mass shootings, we're also reminded of what unites us as Americans, and that what unites us is far stronger than the hate and the terror of those who target us.

For so many people here who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, the Pulse Nightclub has always been a safe haven, a place to sing and dance, and most importantly, to be who you truly are -- including for so many people whose families are originally from Puerto Rico. Sunday morning, that sanctuary was violated in the worst way imaginable. So whatever the motivations of the killer, whatever influences led him down the path of violence and terror, whatever propaganda he was consuming from ISIL and al Qaeda, this was an act of terrorism but it was also an act of hate. This was an attack on the LGBT community. Americans were targeted because we're a country that has learned to welcome everyone, no matter who you are or who you love. And hatred towards people because of sexual orientation, regardless of where it comes from, is a betrayal of what's best in us.

Joe and I were talking on the way over here -- you can't make up the world into "us" and "them," and denigrate and express hatred towards groups because of the color of their skin, or their faith, or their sexual orientation, and not feed something very dangerous in this world.

So if there was ever a moment for all of us to reflect and reaffirm our most basic beliefs that everybody counts and everybody has dignity, now is the time. It's a good time for all of us to reflect on how we treat each other, and to insist on respect and equality for every human being. We have to end discrimination and violence against our brothers and sisters who are in the LGBT community -- here at home and around the world, especially in countries where they are routinely persecuted. We have to challenge the oppression of women, wherever it occurs -- here or overseas. There's only "us" -- Americans.

Here in Orlando, in the men and women taken from us, those who loved them, we see some of the true character of this country -- the best of humanity coming roaring back; the love and the compassion and the fierce resolve that will carry us through not just through this atrocity, but through whatever difficult times may confront us.

It's our pluralism and our respect for each other -- including a young man who said to a friend, he was "super proud" to be Latino. It's our love of country -- the patriotism of an Army reservist who was known as "an amazing officer." It's our unity -- the outpouring of love that so many across our country have shown to our fellow Americans who are LGBT, a display of solidarity that might have been unimaginable even a few years ago.

Out of this darkest of moments, that gives us hope -- seeing people reflect, seeing people's best instincts come out, maybe in some cases, minds and hearts change. It is our strength and our resilience -- the same determination of a man who died here who traveled the world, mindful of the risks as a gay man, but who spoke for us all when he said, "we cannot be afraid...we are not going to be afraid."

May we all find that same strength in our own lives. May we all find that same wisdom in how we treat one another. May God bless all who we lost here in Orlando. May He comfort their families. May He heal the wounded. May He bring some solace to those whose hearts have been broken. May He give us resolve to do what's necessary to reduce the hatred of this world, curb the violence. And may He watch over this country that we call home.

Thank you very much, everybody.