



United States Mission to the OSCE

Love, Justice, and Equality in the United States of America

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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I want to speak today more personally than I normally would. The title of this item on today's agenda—love, justice, and equality in the United States of America—is purposefully broad. Since we've last gathered in this Council I have—like many Americans—wept tears of sorrow and tears of joy in response to events in my country. We have been reminded of how the promise of America is renewed through rule of law grounded in human dignity. We have also been reminded of the deep scar of our “original sin” of slavery. We have been reminded that patriotism demands not only our pride, but also our persistence and our honesty about the work we have not finished.

Two weeks ago, the enduring scourge of racism in the United States tore through the hearts of Americans as a young white man killed nine African-American men and women—aged 26 to 87—as they prayed together in Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina. It was an act evil and vile. Nausea mingled with grief in a wounded nation's response.

In a vivid juxtaposition, the killer had been welcomed by the prayer group into their midst—a stranger who did not look like them or dress like them who appeared at the church; he was extended a hand of greeting and offered a seat in their circle of prayer.

More remarkable than the kindness extended before his heinous crime was the forgiveness extended after. As the killer appeared in court, family members of the innocents whose lives he had extinguished, still awash in grief, looked at him and told him “we forgive you.”

With this sublime act of love—this powerful, gorgeous, generous reaffirmation of humanity and refutation of hate—those who had been most deeply affected by this crime bore the burden of beginning to cauterize the wounds inflicted by it for the millions of compatriots who mourned with them.

Those who most deserved comforting comforted a nation with an act of love.

In their act we should find inspiration. As President Obama said at the funeral for Clementa Pinckney “For too long, we've been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present.” And so Americans—all Americans—should look to the lives of those who died, and to their kin, and see their goodness, their grace, as a beacon to guide action to combat racial hatred, to be honest about our shortcomings, and to use policy, law, and a commitment to human rights to move toward a more perfect union.

This week we celebrate the Fourth of July. We commemorate America's Declaration of Independence: a text that gave voice to the aspiration to live in liberty, and declared with boldness and righteousness that human dignity was underpinned by "self-evident" truths. Two hundred and thirty nine years later, we—along with people the world over— still hold these truths to be self-evident. But they are not self-realizing. We have to build communities and societies that make real the promise of those truths— that ever-more-perfectly reflect the truth of human dignity.

There are lessons for a stronger America emanating from Charleston. Of course, these are not American lessons; they are human lessons: lessons about forgiveness, about justice, about embracing one another as equal in dignity.

Mr. Chair, our region is beset by conflict—beset by tragedy, beset by enmity anchored in memory and loss, beset by acts of violence that aim to punish the aspiration to live a life of liberty and dignity.

We all need the lessons of Charleston.

In his eulogy for Clementa Pinckney, who was both a state senator and the pastor of Mother Emmanuel church, President Obama said:

Clem understood that justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other; that my liberty depends on you being free, too. That—that history can't be a sword to justify injustice or a shield against progress. It must be a manual for how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, how to break the cycle, a roadway toward a better world. He knew that the path of grace involves an open mind. But more importantly, an open heart.

That's what I felt this week — an open heart. That, more than any particular policy or analysis is what's called upon right now, I think. It's what a friend of mine, the writer Marilyn Robinson, calls 'that reservoir of goodness, beyond and of another kind, that we are able to do each other in the ordinary cause of things.' That reservoir of goodness. If we can find that grace, anything is possible. If we can tap that grace, everything can change.

We all need to find that reservoir of goodness. It will help us mend societies and build a world governed by justice and grounded in the equal dignity of each person.

Mr. Chair, last week was also an important week for love, justice, and equality in the United States in another way. The Supreme Court of the United States handed down several decisions, including upholding the constitutionality of efforts to combat discrimination in housing and expand healthcare coverage. And last Friday, the Supreme Court ruled that individuals in same sex couples were entitled to the same rights to civil marriage as others.

Here, I will quote the closing passage from Justice Kennedy's opinion for the majority. He said:

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people

become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.

This decision was welcomed not just by millions of LGBT Americans, but by tens of millions more who recognized that America became more American on Friday, Americans who read the Supreme Court's decision with the pride of patriots because they saw in it the continuation of an arc of progress that started long before Stonewall or Laramie or Lawrence, and that has bent—with the sweat and courage of so many—toward justice. And that work continues—for LGBT people, for members of religious, racial and ethnic minorities, for people with disabilities, for all of us.

Mr. Chair, I am speaking about love, justice, and equality in my country today not to suggest that the satisfaction of progress is a balm for the pain of loss. Or to draw an equivalence in the significance of two events; they are each separately significant.

Millions of American families are and will be more secure because of last Friday's ruling. Nine families in Charleston have suffered a raw and brutal loss that is a reminder of racism and violence that affects millions of others. Both of these are our truths to own.

And all of these families are made up of persons endowed with human dignity. All of those persons are entitled to inalienable rights and to the justice that can only be achieved with equality before the law.

In our joy, and in our sorrow, Americans renew our understanding of why we continue to pursue a more perfect union. In our joy and in our sorrow, we find strength, and grace, for the road ahead.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.