

Trump Urges Unity, but Puerto Rico and Las Vegas Visits Could Test His Words

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By MARK LANDLER and MAGGIE HABERMAN

WASHINGTON — President Trump called on the nation to seek “unity and peace” on Monday, in the aftermath of one of the deadliest mass shootings in American history. Less than two hours later, he offered conciliatory words to the people of Puerto Rico, promising to visit the hurricane-ravaged island on Tuesday, the day before he travels to Las Vegas.

The week will pose the greatest test yet of whether a president who plays to America’s divisions can also appeal to its sense of national unity, whether it is binding the wounds left by a [rampaging gunman](#) or the wreckage left by a deadly hurricane.

Whether Mr. Trump can sustain his empathetic tone over what promise to be two emotional, exhausting days also is an open question — particularly as critics attack his position on gun laws, or if he faces further criticism from local officials in Puerto Rico over the slow-to-start relief effort there. On Monday afternoon, some of the president’s aides were urging him to put off the trip to Puerto Rico because they worried that he could be set off by protests.

Over the weekend, Mr. Trump launched an [acrid](#) attack on the mayor of San Juan after she criticized the federal response to Hurricane Maria. While subdued so far about the Las Vegas massacre, he was already facing critics who said his embrace of gun rights abets the kind of violence that targeted a concert crowd outside a casino late Sunday night.

Hours later, at the White House, a somber Mr. Trump quoted Scripture and talked about the search for “some kind of meaning in the chaos.” He said nothing about his own connection to Las Vegas: The mass shooting happened at the other end of the city’s Strip from his 64-story luxury hotel, which is wrapped in gold-mirror glass and stamped with the Trump name.

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“Our unity cannot be shattered by evil,” the president said, reading slowly from a teleprompter. “Our bonds cannot be broken by violence. And though we feel such great anger at the senseless murder of our fellow citizens, it is our love that defines us today – and always will, forever.”

It was a rigorously disciplined performance from a president who, as a candidate, regularly seized on mass shootings to warn of the threat posed by what he calls “radical Islamic terrorism,” and to justify banning immigrants and foreign visitors from mostly Muslim countries.

He was similarly restrained about Puerto Rico. After a weekend of restless tweeting about Hurricane Maria – during which Mr. Trump accused San Juan’s mayor, Carmen Yulín Cruz, of being “[nasty to Trump](#)” and claimed Puerto Ricans “[want everything to be done for them](#)” – the president on Monday tried to put the focus back on humanitarian relief.

“We’re going to be seeing the people of Puerto Rico,” he told reporters, before a meeting with the prime minister of Thailand. “There’s never been a piece of land that we’ve known that was so devastated.”

The White House sought to tamp down both brush fires. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the press secretary, said the administration had invited Ms. Cruz to take part in the president’s meetings on Tuesday. “We hope that she will join with us in those efforts,” Ms. Sanders said.

Echoing a line typically used by gun-rights advocates, Ms. Sanders said now was not the time to open a new debate over gun laws. But she noted that Mr. Trump campaigned as a staunch defender of the Second Amendment, and made clear the White House was not interested in restricting gun ownership.



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“If you look to Chicago, where you had over 4,000 victims of gun-related crimes last year, they have the strictest gun laws in the country,” she said. “That certainly hasn’t helped there.” She added, “When that time comes for those conversations to take place, then I think we need to look at things that may actually have that real impact.”

At the White House – where the chief of staff, John F. Kelly, was briefed on the shooting in its immediate aftermath, sometime around 3 a.m. in Washington, and told the president about it some time between 5:30 a.m. and 6:15 a.m. – the day unfolded with a mixture of solemn ceremony and urgent consultations.

Mr. Trump ordered flags lowered to half-staff. At 2:45 p.m., he and first lady Melania Trump walked out to the South Lawn, under a brilliant early-autumn sky, to take part in a moment of silence for the victims.

Mr. Trump spoke to the governor of Nevada, Brian Sandoval; the mayor of Las Vegas, Carolyn Goodman; and the sheriff of Clark County, Joseph Lombardo. At the same time,

the White House staff struggled with the logistics of a visit by the president and a half-dozen cabinet secretaries to the islands devastated by the hurricane. They also opted to have the governor of the United States Virgin Islands, Kenneth E. Mapp, fly to Puerto Rico rather than have Mr. Trump make several stops.

Mr. Trump's five-minute statement about the Las Vegas shootings was a group effort, officials said. Among the key contributors were Rob Porter, the staff secretary; Stephen Miller, Mr. Trump's main speechwriter; and Thomas P. Bossert, the homeland security adviser, a person familiar with the process said.

For Mr. Trump, the rhythms of grief after a national tragedy have never come naturally. After five police officers were [murdered](#) in Dallas in July 2016, Mr. Trump's aides coaxed the presumptive Republican nominee into delivering a pretaped statement in which he said the shootings had "shaken the soul of our nation."

That statement stood in contrast to some of the heated responses Mr. Trump has unleashed after other attacks. During the 2016 election, he frequently fired off tweets within hours of an extremist attack, often saying it vindicated his own view of terror threats.

"Appreciate the congrats," Mr. Trump [tweeted](#) the day of a [deadly shooting](#) in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Fla., by the [American-born son of Afghan immigrants](#), who had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State.

Mr. Trump's anger at incidents involving reports of radical Islamist assailants has nearly always been instantaneous, while his response to other violence, like the bombing of a mosque in Minnesota, has been more muted. After the Orlando shooting, Mr. Trump reiterated his call for a temporary ban on Muslims traveling into the United States – a proposal he first made [in December 2015](#), after the shootings in San Bernardino, Calif., that also were [linked](#) to the Islamic State.

Mr. Trump has been less vocal about the role of guns in attacks. The National Rifle Association flooded airwaves with ads in support of Mr. Trump during the 2016 race. He often talked about "[Second Amendment people](#)" as his base of support, even once suggesting at a rally that they could take matters into their own hands to prevent Hillary Clinton from winning the presidency.

On Monday, advisers were mostly pleased with Mr. Trump's response to the bloodshed. The president, who pledged to stop "[American carnage](#)" in his inaugural address, refrained from reactive tweets that could have undermined his morning statement.

Since taking office, one senior administration official noted, Mr. Trump has generally been more reserved about attacks that have taken place on American soil as opposed to violence abroad. He also tends to be more comfortable around law enforcement officials, almost guaranteeing he will be looser on Wednesday in Las Vegas than in Puerto Rico on Tuesday.

Christopher Ruddy, the chief executive of Newsmax Media and a friend of Mr. Trump, insisted the president had an impulse to unify people in his previous life as a real estate developer and entertainer. “I think politics brought out a side of him where he feels like he has to strike back every time,” he said.

Correction: October 2, 2017

An earlier version of this report suggested that the assailants in the attacks in San Bernardino, Calif., and Orlando, Fla., were immigrants. Two of the three of them were born in the United States.

Mark Landler reported from Washington and Maggie Haberman from New York. Eileen Sullivan contributed reporting from Washington.

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