

THIS LAND

Realizing It's a Small, Terrifying World After All

The Orlando massacre turned a sanctuary of fantasy and escape into a sobering scene all too familiar in America.

By Dan Barry

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ORLANDO, Fla. — The corner of Kaley Street and South Orange Avenue offers a tableau of American déjà vu, a sprawl of Subways and 7-Elevens so common in communities across the continent. This one just happens to include a gay nightclub popular with Latinos called Pulse, where gaping holes in the gray-painted exterior now reflect the infliction of a national traumatic injury.

It's easy to see Orlando as a place apart, our sanctuary of fantasy and escape, where fun trumps work and mouse ears are an accepted fashion accessory. But when a deeply aggrieved, heavily armed man burst into this unremarkable nightclub planted beside a carwash, the ensuing mayhem did not seem to occur in some distant, disconnected place. Instead, it became a sobering mash-up of so much that is contentious in American life.

Guns. Gay rights. Islamic extremism. Immigration. Latinos. Guns. Playing out just 20 miles from where George Zimmerman shot Trayvon Martin, in a state slowly receding into the rising seas, it felt like Disney Dystopia — just in time for Election 2016. Orlando is more than our preferred family vacation destination. Orlando is these fractured United States. Orlando is us.



A memorial to Yilmory Rodriguez Solivan near the Pulse nightclub. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Past tragedies tended to unify Americans, said Gary R. Mormino, a retired historian at the University of South Florida with a particular expertise in his state's experience. Here in Florida — “where roots are as shallow as Australian pines,” he wrote in an email — some people will recall how, after Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's calm but assertive radio talks bonded the country, elevating hopes. Many more will remember the feeling of shared grief as the television broadcaster Walter Cronkite wiped a tear while reporting the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

“But 2016 brings together the toxic elements of an election year, presidential candidates who polarize the electorate, voters who are afraid and angry, and a press eager to exploit the spectacle of division and disaster,” Mr. Mormino wrote.

“Alas,” he added, “we live in a balkanized state and nation.”

On some level, there's a chaotic, only-in-Florida quality to the calamity at Pulse. On the previous Friday night, a young singer named Christina Grimmie — famous for having appeared on “The Voice” — was shot dead by a stalker as she signed autographs. And on the following Tuesday, an alligator killed a toddler at a Disney resort.

But when Omar Seddique Mateen, 29, a security guard with thwarted law enforcement ambitions, entered the nightclub with a handgun and a military-style rifle — both legally and swiftly purchased — he was not coming from some foreign land. He was a first-generation American, born to Afghan Muslim parents in Queens and educated in the public schools of Florida.

And the community he was about to devastate was not some foreign place — not some stereotypical city of rednecks, snowbirds and Disney-besotted hordes. It was Tomorrowland today, a booming and diverse city of 250,000, in which the Hispanic share of the population has grown to 25 percent.

“I don't even know that I'd characterize it as a Southern city anymore,” said State Senator Darren M. Soto, a Democrat who was born to Italian-American and Puerto Rican parents in New Jersey. “It's much more of a transplant, Hispanic kind of vibe in the city.”

“We're an all-American town, but we're the new America,” he said. “We have people from all backgrounds and walks of life.”

That diversity includes gay men like Eric Rollings, 47, the chairman of the Orange County Soil and Water Conservation District. He recalled moving to Orlando from Michigan in 1989 and finding a small, sleepy-town L.G.B.T. community still reeling from the AIDS epidemic. At the city's first gay pride parade, a quarter-century ago, he said, Ku Klux Klan members gathered at the corner of Magnolia and Pine to “greet” the marchers.

Now, he said, the gay pride festival is a popular signature event in the city. And on the January day that same-sex marriage became legal in Florida last year, he noted, Mayor Buddy Dyer of Orlando officiated the marriages of dozens of same-sex couples on the steps of City Hall.

Mr. Rollings recalled much of this while decompressing in a local restaurant called Santiago's Bodega. He wore a T-shirt adorned with slogans of determination — #OneOrlando, #OneHeart, #OnePulse — and an expression that changed by the minute. Now grief, now exhaustion, now disbelief, now hope, now grief again.

The nightmare unleashed by Mr. Mateen is a continuation of the shared nightmare we keep reliving — from Virginia Tech to Newtown to Aurora to Charleston. The names of the victims may change, but the Greek Chorus reaction is all too familiar. Shock and grief, candlelight vigils and calls for unity, vows for change and legislative paralysis, finger-pointing and vitriol, and, in the end, nothing much different — other than, say, South Carolina's vote to remove the Confederate flag from State House grounds after the Charleston shooting.

It took a 15-hour filibuster by Senator Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut with searing memories of the slaughter of 26 schoolchildren and educators in Newtown, to get modest gun-control measures to the Senate floor. Yet it had no more success Monday than similar proposals did after Newtown, with the Senate, largely along party lines, failing to advance measures that called for an expansion of background checks for all gun sales and a delay in selling guns to suspected terrorists (consider that phrase, by the way).

Add to that the profound displays of support for the grieving L.G.B.T. community here, offset by flashes of intolerance — a pastor in Sacramento lamenting that more hadn't died — and statements by more than a few politicians that somehow managed not to mention that many of the victims were gay, or Latino, or both.

Finally, the Pulse massacre provided more rhetorical fodder for Donald J. Trump. He suggested that President Obama was to blame. He trumpeted the positive aspects of racial profiling and reiterated his call for a temporary ban on Muslims entering the United States.

Mr. Trump also said the massacre highlighted the need for more guns, not fewer, and imagined a scene in which some in the nightclub had been armed. "And this son of a bitch comes out and starts shooting, and one of the people in that room happened to have it, and goes boom, boom — you know what, that would have been a beautiful, beautiful sight, folks," said Mr. Trump, the presumptive Republican candidate for the presidency.

It was too much, all this death and grief and discord, as if the horrors unleashed at the club were just another excuse to display our grievances and divisions. So respite was sought at one of the many Orlando-area theme parks: Epcot. The \$121.41 cost of admission was paid, as well as the \$20 for parking.

Then began a slog in 90-degree heat through this permanent world's fair. Past the margarita stands of fake Mexico, the pastries of fake Norway, the orange chicken with rice of fake China, the bratwurst of fake Germany, the tiramisù of fake Italy. On to the air-conditioned comfort of a colonial building featuring the "American Adventure" attraction.

An a cappella group called the Voices of Liberty serenaded visitors with a song that gave a shout-out to every American state. Then guests were directed to some closed white doors and instructed to remain on the blue carpeting and off the gold — at least until these doors opened to the auditorium.

Soon, an animatronic Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain were leading a half-hour tour of American history, beginning with the Mayflower and ending with a montage of famous American faces and moments: Marilyn Monroe and Magic Johnson, Elvis Presley and Albert Einstein, Walt Disney and Sally Ride, the "I Have a Dream" speech of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the image of firefighters raising the American flag at ground zero.

The music swelled, a singer urged America to "spread your golden wings," and the lights came on. With the show over, the audience was directed to exit to the left, past white doors and into the hot glare of what seemed like another country entirely.