

Remarks at a State Dinner Honoring Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore August 2, 2016

President Obama. Good evening, everybody. Nearly 50 years ago, President Lyndon Johnson welcomed to the White House the first Prime Minister of a newly independent Singapore, a man he hailed as “a patriot, a brilliant political leader, and a statesman of the New Asia,” Singapore’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew. A half century later, Michelle and I are honored to welcome his son: a patriot, a brilliant political leader, and a statesman of a rising, thriving Asia-Pacific. Prime Minister Lee and Mrs. Lee, welcome.

Now, we all know how seriously Singaporeans take their food. [*Laughter*] In Singapore, even the street vendors—the hawkers stalls—earn Michelin stars—[*laughter*]—which creates some pressure this evening. We have a lot to live up to. We were tempted to offer each of you a “Singapore Sling” or some chili crab. However, for those of you who know its unmistakable scent, which never seems to go away, you’ll understand why we are not serving a fruit known as durian here in the White House. [*Laughter*]

With this visit we’re celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations between our two nations. Yet, even as we mark this anniversary of our formal ties, we honor bonds that stretch back at least 180 years, when Singapore was still a colony and the United States was not far removed from being one ourselves. The first American representative to Singapore was a planter named Joseph Balestier, whose name lives on in one of Singapore’s neighborhoods. His wife Maria’s legacy lives on in a beautiful church bell that once signaled the evening curfew, and which now rests in Singapore’s National Museum, a bell cast in the foundry of Maria’s father, Paul Revere. You may have heard of him.

It’s a reminder that as we pursue a more peaceful and prosperous order in the Asia-Pacific, our partnership is rooted in more than strategic interests. We’re bound together by history, by family, and by friendship. It’s the

dedication of our men and women in uniform, flying F-15s together across the skies of Idaho. It’s the excitement of our students and entrepreneurs, who cross the ocean to learn and to work with each other. And it’s the leadership of a son of Singapore who is respected around the world and a trusted partner to the United States.

Prime Minister Lee, when you were sworn in again last year, you spoke of the shared purpose that animates the people of Singapore: “Each of us giving our best, united by our shared ideals, our faith in this nation, and our belief that here we can build something special together.” What is true of Singapore is true of the relationship between our two countries.

And so, as Singapore prepares to celebrate its National Day, and 50 years into a shared journey with the United States, I propose a toast.

[*At this point, the President was handed a glass of wine.*]

President Obama. Thank you, sir.

To Prime Minister and Mrs. Lee, and to the friendship and partnership between our peoples, let’s continue to build something special together. Onward, Singapore—*Majulah Singapura*. Onward, America. Cheers. *Yam seng*.

[*President Obama offered a toast.*]

Prime Minister Lee.

Prime Minister Lee. Mr. President, Mrs. Obama, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen: I’d like to thank President Obama for his very kind words. Ho Ching and I are delighted to be here. And we are touched by your warm welcome and gracious hospitality. We especially appreciate Mrs. Obama’s personal efforts to make our visit a successful one, and for personally overseeing the splendid arrangements for the State Dinner.

Mr. President, when you addressed the U.N. in 2014, you said that “when nations find common ground, not simply based on power, but on principle, then we can make enormous progress.” And I’m glad to say that tonight, on the 50th anniversary of our diplomatic relations, our two countries share much common ground and have made great progress together based on shared principles, convergent interests, and mutual respect.

I remember my first meeting with you at the Senate. It was May 2007. You were in the midst of a hard-fought Presidential campaign and not yet the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination. [Laughter] But I was struck by your focus, your informed interest in Asia, and your desire to cement America’s role in it.

Your years growing up in Indonesia gave you direct experience of Southeast Asia’s cultures and challenges. As President, your personal leadership and decision to rebalance to Asia has won America new friends and strengthened old partnerships, including with Singapore. Over half a century working together on multiple issues, Singaporeans and Americans have made many enduring and close personal friendships. So I’m happy to see many of Singapore’s old friends here tonight, such as Ambassador Steve Green, who you may not know played a crucial role in teeing up a certain midnight golf game between a lame duck President, Bill Clinton, and our Prime Minister, Mr. Goh Chok Tong, on a rainy night in Brunei during an APEC meeting—[laughter]—which led to the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement. [Laughter] Which shows what can be done even during lame duck periods. [Laughter]

Singapore admires America’s dynamism, vibrancy, and capacity for self-renewal. These qualities attract the best and brightest from around the world. Thousands of Singaporeans study in the U.S., attracted not just by the excellent academic education, but also the unique dynamism of your campuses and the ethos of your society.

This is something that Singapore hopes to emulate as we seek to tap into this spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship. The National University of Singapore has set up overseas

colleges in Silicon Valley and New York so that our students from Singapore can intern with high-tech startups. And we are also launching a U.S-Singapore 50th anniversary scholarship to promote greater exchanges and understanding between our young people.

America excels not just through sheer individual talent, but by working together with others. At this year’s International Mathematics Olympiad, the U.S. team came in top, beating Singapore. [Laughter] And you did so in a remarkable, open, and collaborative manner. You invited students from other competing countries to the U.S. to train with you, including two Singaporeans who benefited from the exposure. It’s what globalization means: You compete, but you also cooperate and learn from one another.

In sport, too, some of Singapore’s Olympic hopefuls have come to train with America’s best athletes. One of our swimmers, Joseph Schooling, is a member of the University of Texas swim team and was a 2016 NCAA champion in the 100 meters and 200 meters butterfly. And we hope he will do well in Rio.

Our armed forces personnel have taken part together in international operations in Afghanistan and in the Middle East. They also train alongside each other on professional courses and joint exercises. I, myself, as a soldier, attending U.S. courses, have personally experienced the dedication, the competence, and the warmth of our hosts. I made good friends, and we still keep in touch after many decades. And they include Frank and Mary McGurk, who were my military sponsors at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas nearly 40 years ago. And they are here tonight.

America is a great nation, not just because of your power and your wealth, but because of your high ideals, openness, and generosity of spirit. You seek to build a world where countries can prosper together. You make common cause with others to fight the problems which plague mankind, be it extremist terrorism, poverty, Ebola, or climate change. That is why 70 years after the Second World War, America is still a welcome power in Asia. We hope these

strengths and qualities will be emulated by others and will enable you to remain engaged in our region for many more years.

To mark the 50th anniversary of our relations, Singapore has named an orchid hybrid in honor of President and Mrs. Obama. And this is a hybrid of breeds native to Singapore and Hawaii, where the President was born—most of us believe. [Laughter] We think it's a fitting tribute to America's first Pacific President and a beautiful symbol of the flourishing ties between our countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in a toast to the health and success of the President of the United States.

To the President.

[Prime Minister Lee offered a toast.]

Prime Minister Lee. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:10 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ho Ching, wife of Prime Minister Lee. Prime Minister Lee referred to former U.S. Ambassador to Singapore Steven J. Green; and Col. Frank W. McGurk, USA (Ret.), and his wife Mary. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the audio was incomplete.

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders Town Hall Meeting August 3, 2016

The President. Thank you so much! Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Everybody, please sit down, sit down. Everybody, sit down.

Audience members. Yes, we can! Yes, we can! Yes, we can!

The President. Thank you so much! Thank you, everybody. Thank you. Thank you.

Well, it is so good to see all of you. Okay, everybody, settle down, settle down.

[At this point, audience members sang "Happy Birthday."]

The President. Yay! Thank you! Well, you know, I—let me first of all just say that—let me first of all say I'm a little disappointed with the lack of enthusiasm. [Laughter] Everybody is so shy and quiet. So—[laughter].

I—first of all, I want to thank Emmanuel for the great introduction and the outstanding work on behalf of the people of Uganda. Please give Emmanuel a big round of applause. I don't know whether they chose Emmanuel because he's such a great speaker, which he is—[laughter]—or because they thought he and I were cousins. [Laughter] Because Odama, Obama—[laughter]—there must be some connection.

Now, I know that you've been in this fellowship for a few weeks. I know that for many of you, this is your first visit to the United States. So let me start by saying, on behalf of the American people, welcome to the United States.

I don't want to give a long speech, because I'm really here to hear from you and answer your questions and to get your comments and ideas. But I do want to just take a moment to step back and talk about why you being here is so important, not just to me, but to all of our countries and to people around the world.

I stand here as the President of the United States and the son of an African. Michelle and I have always tried to instill in our girls, our daughters, a sense of their heritage—which is American and African and European—with all the strengths and all the struggles of that heritage. We took them to Africa. We wanted to open their eyes to the amazing tapestry of history and culture and music. We looked out from those Doors of No Return. We stood in the cell where Mandela refused to break.

And as President, I've now visited sub-Saharan Africa four times, which is more than any other U.S. President. And even as Africa continues to face enormous challenges: poverty