

9-year-old girl's death hits home for Obama

ARIZONA SHOOTINGS | A man often accused of being too cool reconnected with many Americans during his emotional tribute to the victims and heroes of Saturday's violence. Said one scholar: "The nation stopped. People stopped and listened and felt the tragedy."



First lady Michelle Obama watches as her husband concludes his speech Wednesday night at the 14,000-seat McKale Center in Tucson.

There are moments that define a presidency, and Barack Obama's speech Wednesday night to a memorial service for Arizona shooting victims may be one.

First in a moving eulogy to those who died, then in uplifting tales of those who acted heroically, finally in a call to the nation to live up to the ideals of a slain 9-year-old girl, Obama recaptured, at least temporarily, the appeal that first thrust him onto the national stage: the sense that the country is a family that yearns to be united.

"It reminded us of how he got to be president," said Wayne Fields, an English professor at Washington University in St. Louis and an expert on presidential rhetoric. "It wasn't because of something he was. It was something that we longed for. That was to be whole."

Obama wrote much of the speech himself. He continued to make changes after landing in Arizona on Wednesday afternoon, and inserted the most dramatic line backstage minutes before walking into the McKale Center on the University of Arizona campus.

That was his revelation that Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., critically injured in Saturday's attack that killed six and injured 13, spontaneously had opened her eyes for the first time earlier. Her husband shared the information on the short 11-minute ride from the hospital to the arena. People cheered and cried at the news.

"A powerful moment," Fields said. Obama started the speech with what amounted to a eulogy for the fallen, telling in simple words the stories of those who had been killed. He followed with stories of those who acted heroically, such as the intern who went to Giffords' aid, the man who tried to shield his wife from harm, the woman who wrestled with the gunman to take away his ammunition before he could shoot more.

Obama built to a crescendo when he turned to the story of Christina Taylor Green, the 9-year-old who was interested in public service and was while waiting to meet her congresswoman. The audience was on its feet. After challenging

the president paused for more than 50 seconds and appeared to gather himself. Christina's death was an emotional punch to the gut for so many people across the country. Among them, apparently, was the president, whose younger daughter, Sasha, was born three months before Christina. "I want our democracy to be as good as Christina imagined it," Obama had just said. "All of us — we should do everything we can to make sure this country lives up to our children's expectations."

Then he stopped. After 10 seconds, he looked to his right. At 20 seconds, he took a deep breath. At 30 seconds, he started blinking. A few seconds later, his jaw tightened. Finally, after 51 seconds of silence, he began to

speak again, describing a book published at Sept. 11, 2001 — the day Christina was born that included her picture and included simple wishes for a child's life, including one inscription that read "I hope you jump in rain puddles." It was a rare glimpse of the personal in a president whose cool demeanor — critics call it a connect — stands in contrast to the more emotional Presidents Clinton or George W. Bush. "He was more emotional than I've seen him," said Martha Joynt Kumar, a scholar of presidential communications from Towson University in Maryland. "He was very real, very genuine." Watching the speech on television at a Washington, D.C., restaurant — the major network interrupted entertainment programming to show Obama's remarks — Kumar said patrons had tears in their eyes. "The nation stopped," she said. "People stopped and listened and felt the tragedy." Obama at first appeared surprised by the cheers and applause in the arena. "I read the speech several times and thought that there wouldn't be a lot of applause, if anything," said Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary. While the bursts of applause and cheers surprised some observers, most watching on TV from somewhere else, as inappropiate for a memorial service, aides and analysts said it reflected the venue — a basketball arena rather than a church — and the yearning of Arizonans for good news in a terrible week. Gibbs said they needed to celebrate the lives of the victims.

For Obama, the speech offered a chance to turn to a theme he's talked about periodically: the need for a more civil and less partisan politics. That was the message he delivered as an Illinois state senator at the 2004 Democratic National Convention — the speech that made him a national star — and it drove much of his appeal in 2008. Even one of his most vocal critics, talk-show host Glenn Beck, lauded the speech. "This is probably the best speech he has ever given, and with all sincerity, thank you, Mr. President, for becoming the president of the UNITED States of America," Beck said Thursday