

BARACK OBAMA, “REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT AT A MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR THE VICTIMS OF THE SHOOTING IN TUCSON, ARIZONA” (12 JANUARY 2011)

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Abstract: This essay examines the speech President Barack Obama delivered on January 8, 2011 in Tucson, Arizona, after the attempted assassination of Representative Gabrielle Giffords. Obama mediated the speech of two victims of the attack: that of Giffords, who was in a medically-induced coma, and Christina-Taylor Green, the youngest victim of the shooting. Obama paid tribute to those and other victims in ways that helped diffuse the audience’s anger. He also performed an internal dialectic, where he posed questions about what we might learn from such tragedies—a performance which reinforced the need for more civil and productive ways to talk about gun violence in the wake of national tragedy.

Key Words: Barack Obama; Gabrielle Giffords; Tucson shooting; gun violence; eulogy

On January 8, 2011, Gabrielle Giffords, a Democrat who represented Arizona’s 8th congressional district, survived an assassination attempt at a political event in a Safeway parking lot in Tucson, Arizona. President Barack Obama delivered his speech in response to the shooting on January 12, a speech that was praised by a long list of politicians and political commentators that included figures often critical of Obama—among them Senator John McCain,¹ Glenn Beck,² Bill O’Reilly,³ and Pat Buchanan⁴—and brought national attention to Obama’s speechwriter, Cody Keenan.⁵ The speech was part eulogy for the six people who died in the spray of gunfire; part encouragement for Giffords, who remained in critical condition at a nearby hospital; and part exhortation for those in the audience to continue to participate in politics and the democratic process, despite the violent events that had just transpired.⁶

Obama bookended this speech with two figures: he began with Giffords and ended with Christina-Taylor Green, who, at nine years old, was the youngest victim of the shooting, and who had attended the “Congress On Your Corner” event with a neighbor.⁷ In the aftermath of the shooting, Giffords and Green were both unable to speak on their own behalf. Giffords was in a medically-induced coma,⁸ and she has suffered from speech aphasia since.⁹ Green, of course, could not speak because she had been murdered by the shooter, Jared Lee Loughner.¹⁰ Giffords’s and Green’s speech had to be mediated through other figures, most notably by Obama himself. Obama emphasized that all Americans had the right to participate in this “democracy of and by and for the people” (5),¹¹ calling Giffords’s Congress on Your Corner event an updated version of Lincoln’s vision of democracy in the Gettysburg Address, and he lamented how this “quintessentially American scene” had been “shattered by a gunman’s bullet” (6). This essay argues that the prominent placement in this speech of Giffords and Green functioned to diffuse the audience’s anger and reinforce his call for a renewal of rhetorical and civic engagement that might prevent this kind of violence in the future.

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Obama's speech fulfilled the fundamental requirements of national eulogies in that he addressed "the nation about the meaning of events that [had] shaken the citizenry,"¹² and he connected "the present to the future with a central line of argument: that those who died exemplify the best of a nation that will survive this moment because its ideals cannot be undermined by events such as those that took their lives."¹³ However, the Tucson speech is exceptional among national eulogies; Obama took advantage of the pedagogical opportunity provided by the occasion to model the sort of dialogue between individuals and governmental bodies that he believed was needed to prevent vengeful reactions and promote more positive change. He performed an "internal dialectic" to educate the audience about how to rhetorically forestall reactive violence and, ultimately, how to engage in more productive debate in the wake of national tragedy. Although the Tucson speech lacked concrete policy proposals,¹⁴ I maintain that it did provide useful guidance for both individual and governmental responses to such events. By modeling his own internal dialectic, Obama encouraged the audience—both those present for the speech at the University of Arizona and those watching the speech from afar—to engage in similar conversations internally and with one another. Obama instructed the audience to consider metacognitively their own responses to the shooting, encouraging them to eschew vengeful reactions and instead engage in thoughtful reflection and communication. His rhetorical performance in Tucson had three primary goals designed to discourage reactive violence and encourage productive rhetorical exchanges: first, Obama described the tragic event in a manner that did not promote or inspire vengeful action; second, he analyzed and critiqued the ineffective and dangerous models of communication that prevailed before the shooting; and third, he began the process of identifying more successful models of communication and demonstrating how they might work to forestall further violence. As Obama performed each of these functions in the speech, he provided an important lesson in the ethical use of rhetoric after instances of seemingly senseless violence.

Obama and the Gun Control Debate

During the 2008 election cycle, the National Rifle Association (NRA) spent 15 million dollars on an ad campaign against then-presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Obama.¹⁵ In a closed-door fundraiser in April 2008, Obama was quoted as having described small-town Pennsylvanians as "bitter,"¹⁶ and as people who "cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them."¹⁷ This did not mitigate his perceived elitism among both Democrats and Republicans,¹⁸ and in response to his comments, the NRA ran two ads. In the first, titled "Hunter," Karl Rusch of Virginia scoffed that Obama had "probably never been hunting a day in his life." He went on to explain that "you don't have to be bitter to know Barack Obama isn't the kind of change we need."¹⁹ In the ad "Way of Life," Scott Siefert of Michigan stood by a pickup truck and said to the camera, "Barack Obama says I'm bitter. Well I'm not bitter. I'm blessed."²⁰ After Obama was elected president in November 2008, the United States saw an increase in gun sales, as some gun owners feared stricter gun laws and new restrictions on gun ownership once Obama took office.²¹ However, this fear proved largely unfounded. During his first term, the only major pieces of gun legislation to be passed were two bills: one allowed Amtrak train passengers to carry unloaded guns in their luggage,²² and the other allowed loaded guns in national parks.²³

Hours after the shooting at the military base in Fort Hood, Texas on November 5, 2009, during which a U.S. Army major and psychiatrist murdered 13 people and wounded more than 30 others, Obama made a previously-scheduled appearance at the Tribal Nations Conference hosted by the Interior Department. Some considered his banter at the beginning of his remarks at that event tonally inappropriate, and his statement overall was criticized as brief and insensitive.²⁴ On November 10, 2009, he delivered a eulogy at a memorial service at Fort Hood, and while some hailed this speech as among his best,²⁵ others were unimpressed.²⁶ The speech was approximately 15 minutes long and was called a “small masterpiece” by John Dickerson, who felt the speech was compelling in part because Obama relied primarily on storytelling, his “best talent,” when he described the lives of each victim.²⁷ However, Elizabeth Williamson called Obama’s delivery of the speech “largely unemotional”—contrasting his performance with President George W. Bush’s “rallying cry” at Ground Zero, President Bill Clinton’s “shared grief and call for restraint” after the bombing in Oklahoma City, and President Ronald Reagan’s “wrenching tribute” after the Space Shuttle *Challenger* explosion—though she noted that the “most personal part” was Obama’s descriptions of the victims and their lives.²⁸

In 2010, Sarah Palin—who had served as governor of Alaska from 2006 to 2009, and had previously run as the Republican nominee for vice president, alongside Arizona Senator John McCain, in the 2008 presidential election—posted a map on her Political Action Committee (PAC) website that “marked seventeen winnable congressional districts held by Democrats with gun sights,” including Giffords’s district.²⁹ Criticized in the aftermath of the Tucson shooting for encouraging violence against her political opponents, Palin released a video statement to Facebook on January 12, 2011, anticipating the speech Obama was to deliver later that day.³⁰ In her statement, she called the accusations “reprehensible,” and argued that “especially within hours of a tragedy unfolding, journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn.”³¹ Thus, the stage was set for Obama’s speech in Tucson, a speech that was expected to be “a defining moment in his presidency” that was “sure to contribute to forming the discourse” of his 2012 reelection campaign.³² In a politically and emotionally charged climate, Obama faced the challenge of delivering a eulogy that appropriately commemorated the tragic events of the preceding days while also encouraging open dialogue among politicians and constituents about the difficult and divisive issue of gun ownership and use.

Obama’s Remarks in Tucson

“What is best in America”: Recounting Catastrophe

Representative Gabrielle Giffords’s “Congress on Your Corner” event on January 8 was supposed to be an opportunity for Giffords to meet her constituents face-to-face and listen to their concerns. At 8:58 that morning, she tweeted, “My 1st Congress on Your Corner starts now. Please stop by to let me know what is on your mind or tweet me later.”³³ Just over an hour later, Jared Lee Loughner, an Arizona resident, shot Giffords in the head and ultimately killed six other people. Although it is still unknown exactly why Loughner committed this crime, his intention was to murder Giffords, a woman with political power, while she was participating in one of the most fundamental and celebrated activities in our democratic system: a face-to-face meeting between an elected representative and her constituents.³⁴

Obama began his remarks by likening himself to those who were mourning, declaring that he had “come here tonight as an American who, like all Americans, kneels to pray with you today and will stand by you tomorrow” (2). The contrast of kneeling and standing emphasized the gravity of the speech: before the community could stand united, it must first pause as a group to reflect, and even the president himself participated in this custom. Obama admitted that words often failed in the wake of such violence, and he confessed that “There is nothing I can say that will fill the sudden hole torn in your hearts” (3). The shooting had rendered the arena of political communication—those public sites where people could engage openly in politics—unsafe. By admitting that words were not all-powerful nor even sufficient after such an event, Obama took the first step toward renewing the political dialogue after such a silencing event.

Obama further signaled his humility when he made reference to scripture by quoting Psalm 46:

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day. (4)

In the aftermath of the shooting in Tucson, Obama relied on both his speechwriters and spiritual advisors to help him find an appropriate biblical reference for this speech.³⁵ The opening of this psalm is often cited in funerary settings because it begins with a reminder that God offers refuge and strength in times of difficulty,³⁶ and Obama himself read Psalm 46 in full in honor of the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks.³⁷ In his speech in Tucson, Obama recited a middle section of the psalm, which highlighted the fact that there was hope for the future, not only for the salvation of the dead but for the protection of the living. Quoting scripture is a common convention of eulogy because it emphasizes the president’s position as the “national priest of our civil religion.”³⁸ Moreover, linking the notions of justice and God permits “presidents to tie their responses to terrorist attacks to the notion that justice will triumph,”³⁹ which serves to comfort those listening to the speech and defray their anger at the injustice of the preceding violent event.

After quoting scripture, Obama first considered the circumstances of the shooting and described how and why it took place. He began by setting the scene of the shooting:

On Saturday morning, Gabby, her staff, and many of her constituents gathered outside a supermarket to exercise their right to peaceful assembly and free speech. They were fulfilling a central tenet of the democracy envisioned by our founders—representatives of the people answering questions to their constituents, so as to carry their concerns back to our nation’s capital. Gabby called it “Congress on Your Corner”—just an updated version of government of and by and for the people (5).

Obama described the event as a decidedly democratic activity, and he positioned the victims and survivors of the shooting as exemplars of public engagement who were taking part in noble civic work. The president then called it a “quintessentially American scene” which was ultimately “shattered by a gunman’s bullets” (6). This succinct description of the shooting is one of the few mentions of the violence itself in the 34-minute speech. Obama did not name the shooter in the entirety of the speech, describing him only as “a gunman.” By recounting the shooting in this passive voice, Obama deemphasized Loughner’s identity and agency.

Rather than focus on the shooting itself, Obama concentrated his remarks on the six victims who were fatally wounded because, he said, they “represented what is best in us, what is best in America” (6). He began his eulogy of the individual victims with Judge John Roll, who had “served our legal system for nearly 40 years” (7), and whose “colleagues described him as the hardest-working judge within the Ninth circuit” (8). Roll was returning from Mass, which he attended “every day,” when he “decided to stop by and say hi to his representative” (8). Obama made no mention of the shooting here, only that Roll was “survived by his loving wife, Maureen, his three sons, and his five beautiful grandchildren” (8). When he honored Dorothy “Dot” Morris, the President described how she had been “traveling the open road” in an RV with her husband, George, and together they were “enjoying what their friends called a 50-year honeymoon” (9). Once again, his narration of the shooting is focused on the victims rather than the shooter: when the gunfire began, “George, a former Marine, instinctively tried to shield his wife. Both were shot. Dot passed away” (9). Although here Obama mentioned the violence that took place, it was only for the purpose of emphasizing the couple’s love for one another.

Obama’s descriptions of the four other victims were similar. Phyllis Schneck, originally from New Jersey, enjoyed spending time with her family during the summers when she returned to the east coast, and she had attended the event because “she took a liking to Gabby, and wanted to get to know her better” (10). Dorwan Stoddard attended with his wife, Mary, and together they could be found either “on the road in their motor home” or “helping folks in need at the Mountain Avenue Church of Christ” (12). According to Obama, Dorwan’s “final act of selflessness was to dive on top of his wife, sacrificing his life for hers” (12). Gabe Zimmerman, Giffords’s outreach director, was characterized as having “died doing what he loved—talking with people and seeing how he could help” (13). And, finally, Obama described Christina-Taylor Green, a precocious and compassionate nine-year-old, to whom he returned at the end of his speech. Obama focused on the achievements and admirable qualities of each of the victims and, when he did mention the shooting, it was only in the context of the victims’ heroism and “quintessential Americanness.” In this way, he acknowledged that “Our hearts are broken by their sudden passing” (16), but also that “Our hearts are full of hope and thanks for the 13 American who survived the shooting” (17), including Giffords. In his description of the shooting, his focus was not on the perpetrator but on admiration and respect for his victims.

Obama continued this tone of admiration as he eulogized Green. After describing her as an A student, a dancer, a gymnast, a swimmer, and the only girl on her Little League team, Obama recounted how “She’d remind her mother, ‘We are so blessed. We have the best life’” (15). Although Green’s words were necessarily mediated—first by her mother, and then by Obama himself—he offered her a platform to inspire gratitude in the audience, although she was not present. He then directed this gratitude toward Giffords, who “courageously fights to recover even as we speak” (18). The president described how, earlier that day, “a few minutes after we left her room and some of her colleagues in Congress were in the room, Gabby opened her eyes for the first time” since the shooting (18). This story of Giffords opening her eyes was also mediated by two people: her husband, Mark Kelly, and Obama himself. Kelly had granted Obama permission to transmit the occurrence.⁴⁰ Giffords, unable to

speak on her own behalf, had to have her communication translated and conveyed by others, and her message suggested optimism and gratitude rather than anger and revenge.

Obama next directed his appreciation toward a number of other people for their acts of heroism. He began with Daniel Hernandez, a volunteer in Giffords's office, who "ran through the chaos to minister to your boss, and tended to her wounds and helped keep her alive" (21). Obama also gave thanks to "the men who tackled the gunman as he stopped to reload," along with "petite Patricia Maisch, who had wrestled away the killer's ammunition and undoubtedly saved some lives" (22). He also acknowledged the first responders who came to the aid of those who had been injured. Obama emphasized that heroism does not require any special training, but rather lived "here, in the hearts of so many of our fellow citizens, all around us, just waiting to be summoned—as it was on Saturday morning" (23). Obama ended his retelling by encouraging his audience to stand in awe of the courage shown during the shooting by everyday Americans, both those who survived and those who did not. The narrative was not intended to invoke vengeance or inspire retaliatory action, but rather, to mitigate the audience's anger by inspiring admiration and gratitude for both the victims and those who came to their aid.

Healing the Wound: Analyzing Communication

After paying tribute to the victims, Obama turned to analyzing and dismantling preexisting models of communication that he believed impeded addressing the issue of gun violence in America. He did so in a way that did not lay blame on the victims or survivors of the shooting, nor on the larger community. Arguing that the tragedy "poses a challenge to each of us," he reflected on its larger significance: "It raises a question of what, beyond prayers and expressions of concern, is required of us going forward. How can we honor the fallen? How can we be true to their memory?" (23). These rhetorical questions marked a moment for public assessment and regrouping. The shooting in Tucson effectively silenced Giffords, Green, and the other victims, but it also threatened the sanctity of public discourse. When Obama asked how we might "be true to their memory," he rejected immediate retaliatory action in favor of communal processing and dialogue (23). He explained that, "when a tragedy like this strikes, it is part of our nature to demand explanations—to try and pose some order on the chaos and make sense out of that which seems senseless" (24). According to Obama, the debate surrounding "what might be done to prevent such tragedies in the future" was in fact "an essential ingredient in our exercise of self-government" (24). However, he cautioned that "at a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized—at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who happen to think differently than we do—it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds" (25). In short, he urged reflection rather than immediate reaction, and he encouraged his audience and the nation-at-large to consider what effect their own speech has on others.

Obama cautioned against looking for easy explanations for such tragic events. Although searching for the causes of the shooting might be tempting, he warned the audience, "Bad things happen, and we have to guard against simple explanations in the aftermath" (26). Because "none of us can know exactly what triggered this vicious attack," he continued, it was not possible to know "what might have stopped these shots from being fired, or what thoughts lurked in the inner recesses of a violent man's mind" (27). And though he acknowledged that

“we have to examine all the facts behind this tragedy” and not “be passive in the face of such violence,” he also warned that it might be necessary to “challenge old assumptions in order to lessen the prospects of such violence in the future” (27). In the process, he concluded, it was important that we not “use this tragedy as one more occasion to turn on each other” (27). “That we cannot do,” he repeated. “That we cannot do” (27).

Obama thus discouraged people from “pointing fingers or assigning blame” as they talked about the facts of the tragedy (28). Instead, he encouraged them to “use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves of all the ways that our hopes and dreams are bound together” (28). These hortatory statements lent themselves to an inherently pedagogical performance. Obama commanded but also performed the sort of discourse he called for, teaching the audience by example.

He continued with a list of questions that all Americans asked after such “sudden loss”—questions that caused us to “look backward” but also to “look forward; to reflect on the present and the future, on the manner in which we live our lives and nurture our relationships with those who are still with us” (30). His performance of this internal dialectic included asking whether “we’ve shown enough kindness and generosity and compassion to the people in our lives,” and “whether we’re doing right by our children, or our community, whether our priorities are in order” (31). According to Obama, “what matters is not wealth, or status, or power, or fame—but rather, how well we have loved—and what small part we have played in making the lives of other people better” (32). He maintained that this “process of reflection, of making sure we align our values with our actions,” was “what a tragedy like this requires” (33). By necessity, this reflection also involved questioning preexisting models of communication, because the “reflection and debate” such tragedies inspired needed to be “worthy of those we have lost” (37). Urging his listeners to avoid “the usual plane of politics and point-scoring and pettiness that drifts away in the next news cycle” (37), Obama called for a more civil yet substantive public debate over gun violence—a debate worthy of those who died in Tucson:

And if, as has been discussed in recent days, their death helps usher in more civility in our public discourse, let us remember it is not because a simple lack of civility caused this tragedy—it did not—but rather because only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation in a way that would make them proud (38).

Obviously, Obama did not blame the people of the United States for the shooting. But he did hope the shooting might inspire them to take a hard look at the quality of public discourse in America and work toward a more civil and productive debate over gun violence.

“We can be better”: Rebuilding Communication

Finally, after critiquing the prevailing norms of discourse, Obama returned to the figures he honored earlier, describing how Roll and Giffords “knew first and foremost that we are all Americans, and that we can question each other’s ideas without questioning each other’s love of country and that our task, working together, is to constantly widen the circle of our concern so that we bequeath the American Dream to future generations” (39). Once again channeling the voices of those he had eulogized, Obama stated that “They believed—they believed, and I believe that we can be better” (40). He then summarized what they—and he—thought might

bring about that better world: “We may not be able to stop all evil in the world, but I know that how we treat one another, that’s entirely up to us” (40).

This reflection on the need for civility and mutual respect in turn rested on Obama’s faith that, “for all our imperfections, we are full of decency and goodness, and that the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us” (41). Obama claimed to believe this “in part because that’s what a child like Christina-Taylor Green believed” (42). Again, mediating Green’s thoughts, he devoted the entire last section of his speech to the lessons to be learned from the life of the shooting’s youngest victim:

Imagine—imagine for a moment, here was a young girl who was just becoming aware of our democracy; just beginning to understand the obligations of citizenship; just starting to glimpse the fact that some day she, too, might play a part in shaping her nation’s future. She had been elected to her student council. She saw public service as something exciting and hopeful. She was off to meet her congresswoman, someone she was sure was good and important and might be a role model. She saw all this through the eyes of a child, undimmed by the cynicism or vitriol that we adults all too often just take for granted (43).

By encouraging his audience members to place themselves in Green’s shoes, Obama invited them to return to a time when rhetoric did not involve “cynicism or vitriol” (43). His voice rose as he declared, “I want to live up to her expectations,” working to make “our democracy” and “America to be as good as she imagined it” (44). He then invited the audience to participate in that effort, emphasizing that “All of us—we should do everything we can to make sure this country lives up to our children’s expectations” (44). The audience applauded for nearly a full minute before Obama continued by noting that “Christina was given to us on September 11, 2001, one of 50 babies born that day to be pictures in a book called *Faces of Hope*” (45). He described how, “On either side of her photo in that book were simple wishes for a child’s life,” including “I hope you help those in need” and “I hope you jump in rain puddles” (45). Obama then closed on a plaintive note: “If there are rain puddles in Heaven, Christina is jumping in them today” (46). Green, the “face of hope” born on one of the darkest days in American history, embodied Obama’s optimism that new modes of politics and communication might someday bring an end to such senseless violence.

Obama concluded his speech with a pledge to the youngest victim of the violence in Tucson: “And here on this Earth, here on this Earth, we place our hands over our hearts and we commit ourselves as Americans to forging a country that is forever worthy of her gentle, happy spirit (46).” And with a prayer: “May God bless and keep those we’ve lost in restful and eternal peace. May he love and watch over the survivors. And may he bless the United States of America (47). Placing his hand over his heart as he spoke, he invited the audience to share in his pledge and his prayer, encouraging them to devote themselves to creating a world that was worthy of generations of Americans to come.

Silenced Victims Speak

Gabrielle Giffords’s and Christina-Taylor Green’s involuntary silence after the shooting in Tucson offered an opportunity for Obama to speak on their behalf while emphasizing the horrific costs of gun violence. By unpacking, analyzing, and rebuilding communication after the

violent event, Obama hoped to inspire the audience to engage productively and peacefully in civic discourse. Bookending his speech with the stories of Giffords and Green highlighted the exigency of this process, and he used the voices of those who had been silenced to advocate action that might prevent the deaths of other innocent victims.

In the years following the shooting, Giffords suffered from the language impairment disorder aphasia. Initially, Giffords was unable to speak without the help of her husband, and more than six years after the shooting he still was sometimes called upon to translate her words and gestures. At the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, both Giffords and her husband delivered speeches in support of democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. Both speeches focused on Clinton's support for more stringent gun control measures, and Giffords's speech in particular marked a powerful moment of the DNC: she walked onstage unassisted and delivered a speech without the help of her husband. In halting but deliberate speech, Giffords stated:

I have a passion for helping people. I always have. So does Hillary Clinton. Hillary is tough. Hillary is courageous. She will fight to make our families safer. In the White House, she will stand up to the gun lobby. That's why I'm voting for Hillary! I know what hate and division can do to our communities. Let's stand up for responsibility. Together we can make sure that respect, hard work, and progress win in November. In Congress, I learned an important lesson: strong women get things done! Let's work together to make Hillary our president. I'm with her! And I know you are too. Speaking is difficult for me. But come January, I want to say these two words: "Madam President."⁴¹

The final words of Giffords's speech were heavy with significance: Giffords supported Clinton's candidacy and hoped that she would win, and she still had to struggle just to say that. Today, Giffords's condition continues to improve, but Clinton's loss in the presidential election to Donald Trump in effect silenced her again.

Obama's Tucson speech was an exercise in both memorializing and educating the audience about the ethical uses of rhetoric after violent events. He encouraged the audience "to sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves of all the ways that our hopes and dreams are bound together" after such a tragedy, and he resisted placing blame or encouraging immediate action in the speech itself. Obama posed a series of rhetorical questions, performing before the audience the "process of reflection" that ensures that we "align our values with our actions" (33). This performance was inherently pedagogical: Obama performed the introspective examination he believed was necessary after the shooting in order to inspire the audience to do the same, and that exercise functioned both to diffuse anger and to delay or prevent retaliation. Even as Obama mediated Giffords's and Green's thoughts and words, he did so in a way that was designed not to promote retribution, but to encourage more productive, honest conversations in the wake of such national tragedies.

Obama's Legacy

Over the course of his eight years as president, Obama delivered so many eulogies after instances of gun violence that, in a speech proposing new gun control measures on January 5, 2016, he could simply rattle off a list of locations associated with mass shootings during his tenure: "Fort Hood. Binghamton. Aurora. Oak Creek. Newtown. The Navy Yard. Santa Barbara.

Charleston. San Bernardino. Too many.”⁴² The day before that speech, the White House released a fact sheet on gun violence, along with information about the “commonsense executive actions” the Obama administration proposed to “keep guns out of the wrong hands” and “make our communities safer from gun violence.” These included more stringent background checks, increased “mental health treatment,” and measures to “shape the future of gun safety technology.”⁴³ During the speech itself, Obama teared up as he recalled the deaths of 20 first-graders during the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Later in the speech, he emphasized the seriousness of the problem generally in U.S.:

The United States of America is not the only country on Earth with violent or dangerous people. We are not inherently more prone to violence. But we are the only advanced country on Earth that sees this kind of mass violence erupt with this kind of frequency. It doesn't happen in other advanced countries. It's not even close. And as I've said before, somehow we've become numb to it and we start thinking that this is normal.⁴⁴

Obama's goals in this speech, as with his Tucson speech, were to “bring good people on both sides of this issue together for an open discussion” during which, instead of debating the last shooting, they could “do something to try to prevent the next one.”⁴⁵ Indeed, this emphasis on dialogue recalled his performance of internal dialectic in Tucson, and highlights the essential role of the individual in a democracy. Though, he said, “the vast majority of Americans” have voices that “aren't always the loudest or most extreme,” individuals can “come together and take common-sense steps to save lives and protect more of our children.”⁴⁶ Further, Obama stated that “if we love our kids and care about their prospects, and if we love this country and care about its future, then we can find the courage to vote. We can find the courage to get mobilized and organized. We can find the courage to cut through all the noise and do what a sensible country would do.”⁴⁷ Obama reminded average Americans that, rather than remaining numb in the face of escalating violence, they could work together using civil discourse to enact positive change on the local and national levels.

Although Obama's initiatives were relatively modest and had widespread support, newly elected President Donald Trump revoked some of these executive actions within months of taking office. He rescinded legislation that made it more difficult for people with certain mental illnesses to purchase guns, for example—a decision that was praised by the NRA.⁴⁸ He also became the first sitting president since President Ronald Reagan to address the organization itself.⁴⁹ In this address, Trump emphasized that the “eight-year assault on your Second Amendment freedoms has come to a crashing end,” and he pledged that the government would no longer be “trying to undermine your rights and your freedoms as Americans.”⁵⁰ After the shooting in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017, during which 58 people were murdered in just ten minutes during a country music festival,⁵¹ Trump promised that the United States would “be talking about gun laws as time goes by.”⁵² Yet he also declined to comment on a bill, then in the House of Representatives, that would have made it easier to purchase gun silencers.⁵³

Debates over gun laws in the United States are thus far from over. Obama's speech in Tucson marked a moment in his presidency when he was tasked with eulogizing victims of gun violence while avoiding accusations that he was somehow “politicizing” the tragedy. In

the process, he proved himself once again to be among the most articulate orators in American history. As the political waters continue to ebb and flow, and people in the United States struggle with how best to respond to and address gun violence, this sentiment from Obama's Tucson speech remains true: if the victims' deaths "usher in more civility in our public discourse, let us remember it is not because a simple lack of civility caused this tragedy... but rather because only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation in a way that would make them proud" (38).

Author's Note: Bess R. H. Myers is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon. She would like to thank J. Michael Hogan, James Crosswhite, and an anonymous reviewer for their constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.

Notes

¹ John McCain, "After the shootings, Obama reminds the nation of the Golden Rule," *Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/14/AR2011011403871.html>. Accessed on November 30, 2017.

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