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The Memorial Service at Fort Hood

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The President's speech at the Fort Hood memorial service this afternoon was a difficult speech to give. Grief is a complicated emotion in any circumstance, but when it is combined with feelings of shock and anger, it is difficult to hit the right emotional balance. President Obama, known for keeping his emotions in check, struck exactly the right note by focusing his words on the lives of those who died in last week's mass murder, mentioning details about their life and work and, especially, their families. He personalized the loss of those who were killed in an impersonal act of murderous rage.

Most importantly, the President put the sordid act of last week in perspective. He called for justice, not vengeance, and made the important point that the accused will receive all the rights that his victims enlisted and died to protect. His entire speech was a tribute to the military and to their grief. And, he made a specifically theological claim when he said that the perpetrator of this murder would meet justice not only in this life but the next.

The ceremony at Fort Hood was emotional but not extravagant. It was surprisingly simple. The chaplain wore fatigues and a stole. There was one hymn, "Amazing Grace" which has replaced "God of Our Fathers" as our national hymn in fact if not in form. The most moving moment was one I had never seen before, when an officer led a roll call, and every other name was that of one of those killed, and the silence that followed the calling of their name gave exquisite, if painful, evidence of St. Augustine's observation that evil is an absence.

I confess that I believe no one was finer at such moments than President Ronald Reagan. He brought an actor's gifts to the role of national pater familias, he evoked emotions effortlessly and poignantly, in a way that President Obama does not. But, Obama's words, his naming the dead and speaking of their stories, filled that absence the evil created and reminded us that people who were so filled with life and

devotion as these brave men and women of the U.S. Army can not simply cease to exist.

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