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Dignity

Joe Ferullo | Jul. 8, 2009 NCR Today

At moments, it actually seemed like a church service. It had the tone of a memorial, the hush of a funeral, the respectful feeling of a true farewell. The Jackson Family pulled off something nearly impossible ? a larger-than-life ceremony for Michael Jackson that was truly more dignified and grounded than the media circus that surrounded the singer's life and death.

My wife -- a news anchor here in Los Angeles -- was inside the Staples Center to report on the event, and she came away impressed. She said the arena was silent as final preparations were made before the memorial began. People listened respectfully as letters of sympathy were read from international figures like Nelson Mandela.

And then the main stage lit up. Many reporters cringed a little inside, expecting an overblown, overbearing ceremony that was a lot more Vegas than Valhalla. But to the surprise of most, the tone of the program remained steady.

Which is not to say there weren't exaggerated moments, many of them delivered by the usual suspects from the world of oratorical exaggeration. (Al Sharpton's claim that Jackson paved the way for a color-blind society that would eventually accept and African-American president comes immediately to mind.) And certainly many speakers did verbal cartwheels in order to steer around the less heroic markers of the Jackson biography. (Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee proclamation that, in America, we are all "innocent till proven guilty" made the memorial feel momentarily more like a tribute to Mafia don John Gotti.)

But all in all, it had dignity. Interestingly enough, that was the theme of *New York Times*' writer David Brooks column Wednesday [1]. Brooks wrote about the way leaders once behaved in the public sphere: men like Washington and Jefferson demonstrated dignity and reticence in public ? unlike, he says, South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford, who poured his insides out after revealing his affair with an Argentine "soul mate." And who continues pouring at the slightest provocation. No reticence there.

But, Brooks writes, President Obama may point the way to a renewed era of public dignity ? he carries himself with personal poise in public. You get the sense, for example, that he would have declined to answer that infamous "boxers or briefs" question asked of Bill Clinton back in 1992.

The Jackson Family, too, may have pointed to this re-discovered sense of decorum. Much of Wednesday's memorial was played in a lower key. (At least inside the arena. Outside, in the media, is another story.) And the most memorable moment was a seemingly spontaneous utterance of love and grief [2] from Jackson's 11-year old daughter, Paris. For all the mystery and rumor surrounding Jackson's children, she came across as a regular child, speaking from the heart -- with dignity.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/opinion/07brooks.html
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