

# White House: First family to attend shuttle launch

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FILE - In this Monday, Feb. 28, 2011 file picture, the space shuttle Endeavour is transported from the Orbital Processing Facility to the Vehicle Assembly Building where the orbiter will be connected to the external fuel tank and twin solid rocket boosters at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Spaceflight managers gathered Tuesday, April 19, 2011 at the Kennedy Space Center and set April 29, 2011 as the launch date for Endeavour's final voyage. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama and his family will attend next week's launch of Endeavour, NASA's next-to-last space shuttle flight commanded by the husband of critically wounded Rep. Gabrielle Giffords.

A White House official said Wednesday that the president would be at the April 29 liftoff, along with wife Michelle and daughters Malia and

Sasha.

Commander Mark Kelly will lead the six-man shuttle crew to the [International Space Station](#). He has said he hopes his wife will be there when he blasts off, and is awaiting her doctors' final approval.

Giffords, a Democrat from Arizona, was shot in the head during a meeting with constituents in Tucson on Jan. 8. Kelly took a month's leave to be at her hospital bedside, then returned to Houston to resume flight training. She's now at a Houston hospital undergoing extensive rehab.

NASA already has been working on security and other issues surrounding Giffords' possible attendance at Kennedy Space Center. She will be in a restricted area, well out of the public eye. It was not immediately known whether the Obamas would be with the congresswoman for the 3:47 p.m. liftoff.

Obama had already planned to be in Florida later that day to give a commencement address at Miami Dade College.

Only two sitting presidents have witnessed a manned [rocket launch](#). President Richard Nixon was on hand for the Nov. 14, 1969, launch of Apollo 12 to the moon. President Bill Clinton and his wife saw Sen. John Glenn fly aboard [shuttle Discovery](#) on Oct. 29, 1998.

This will be the first time a first family has attended a launch.

Obama was at Kennedy Space Center a year ago to outline his new post-shuttle exploration plan of sending astronauts to an asteroid and ultimately Mars. He canceled his predecessor's moon-focused program named Constellation.

The president is calling for private companies to replace the shuttle's function of delivering crew and cargo to the space station, so NASA can focus on deep space.

Only one [shuttle launch](#) remains. Atlantis will close out NASA's 30-year shuttle program at the end of June.

Nearly 2,000 contractor workers will be laid off at Cape Canaveral following the last flight. More than 500 employees lost their jobs earlier this month.

The White House official confirming the Obamas' attendance at the launch asked not to be named to speak freely ahead of a formal announcement about Obama's plans.

Days after the shooting, Obama visited Giffords in the hospital, and later revealed to a packed auditorium that she had opened her eyes for the first time shortly after his visit. Six people were killed in the shooting, and 12 others were wounded. Jared Loughner, 22, has pleaded not guilty to 49 federal charges stemming from the attack.

Giffords' spokesman C.J. Karamargin said from Houston that the congresswoman will be "perfectly delighted" to learn the Obamas will be at her husband's launch.

Giffords, 40, served on the House Science and Technology Committee, and took on NASA affairs while heading the space subcommittee.

Karamargin said Giffords has previously asked Obama to attend launches to no avail. "This is a very cool development," he said.

Giffords was at her husband's launch in 2008. Kelly's identical twin, Scott, is also an astronaut and will be there. Neither brother has ever

missed the launch of the other.

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