

Rushing: Inauguration Day, up close

Contributed by Denise Rushing
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Editor's note: Supervisor Denise Rushing is in Washington, DC this week for the inauguration of President Barack Obama. This is her eyewitness account to history on Tuesday, Jan., 20, 2009.

WASHINGTON, DC – The estimates of two million people were low. Most could not get in: perhaps double that number were at the Capitol Mall today!

I am overcome by the sheer jubilation and numbers of people here. We woke up at 4:30 a.m., left Alexandria, Virginia at 5:30 a.m., saused ourselves on the Metro (stop and go, mostly stop) for two and a half hours, faced extraordinary crowds, and encountered NO volunteers to help with crowd control. Despite that, the crowd was remarkably well-behaved. Without volunteers and with some of the crowd management missteps in the setup, it could have easily been a disaster had the crowd not found a way to self-manage.

After the Metro, we waited another three hours in the Blue Ticket line to see the inauguration—though it was less a “line” and more like a river of humanity, pressed together so close that a dropped mitten became a major incident. We wondered how Wanda Harris, Tony Farrington and Cliff Swetnam were faring over at the Purple Ticket gate.

I was sure we all shared the bitter cold: even the warmth of the nearby bodies did not stop the inevitable numbness setting into fingers, toes and any exposed skin. We were all in SUCH a good mood, though ... singing in the crush of people. Today is OUR day, after all, we are taking our country back and adults are in charge again and the rule of law will be restored. Hope reigns.

Once inside the event venue, the festivities began without any waiting … this meant there were thousands upon thousands with tickets still outside, waiting to get in who would miss the event altogether. The fact that there wasn’t a riot at this point was amazing.

As the dignitaries were introduced, a strategically placed big screen treated the crowd to a preview of who would soon enter the venue. Later that evening, as I watched the pre-recorded inauguration on Tivo, I can tell there were moments that were either ignored by the media or not adequately appreciated.

First, there were few comments about who was cheered and who wasn’t. The crowd was surprisingly restrained when President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush were introduced. Most people did NOT boo — perhaps a few close to the ABC and MSNBC cameras did, it sounded a lot louder on TV than in real life.

And, even though this president was clearly unpopular among those attending this event, the comments around us were more relief than anger at the outgoing president. In fact, the most negative response of all was reserved for Joseph Lieberman — perhaps loyalty means more than disagreement over policy.

Lieberman scored a even more negative response from the crowd than Dick Cheney, who engendered a modest amount of restraint with his (convenient?) wheelchair: there were some side comments about how crass it might be to boo someone in a wheelchair. Here, democracy flirts with boorishness, those around commented on how allowing our country to torture might be worth a few boos even if the guy is in a wheelchair.

It was clear that most folks intended to celebrate the new administration, and the cheers that erupted at the first glimpse of Obama on screen proved this.

Next, no matter what the pundits say or don’t say, the inaugural address was spot on with the crowd and, in my opinion, with the international community watching around the world.

Here in the shadow of the Capitol, we were cheering and in tears. Obama seemed to strike the right balance between acknowledging the dire situation we are in and his reference to dark storm clouds gathering suggested that we have some particularly difficult times ahead, which we all appreciate and are experiencing back home.

Those around me were saying “Amen!” to key phrases like “putting away childish things” and “restore science” and “ready to lead once more” and Obama’s reference to the “values upon which our success depends: honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism.”

I, for one, greatly appreciated the reference to the restoration of the “rule of law” and his unwillingness to sacrifice our constitution for expediency, his acknowledgment that we are a member of a world community and our needs will not be met through the oppression of others.

Obama made known his priorities: peace, energy, economy, education and health care. His emphasis on giving all the opportunity to pursue their full measure of happiness was particularly refreshing: acknowledging that the concentration of wealth has created such huge injustice in recent years.

He focused on the concepts of personal responsibility, hard work and our task of growing abundance and prosperity for all, while acknowledging that the one thing we control is our willingness to serve, and the nobility of devoting oneself to service, to an effort greater than ourselves. This was a great blend of reality and hope.

Fortuitously, after the swearing in, we left the inauguration and walked around the US Capitol just in time to see the Obamas escorting the Bushes down the Capitol steps for George and Laura Bush’s sendoff in a helicopter.

The TV pundits did not comment on the song that erupted in the massive crowd: “Na na na na, na na na na, hey hey hey goodbye!” But in replays of the scene, you can clearly hear it on ABC’s coverage of the event and also at about 30 seconds into this Youtube clip: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFhIZtTn_0U.

This impromptu singing was much louder in person than on TV. I felt an odd mixture of delight and bit uneasy about the response (I am glad to see him go too). Was this democracy or a baseball game with the opposing pitcher being

removed from the mound? It seems the two have been merged together somehow. Yet, how else might a crowd celebrate their glee?

At this point, maybe 2 p.m., after no breakfast and being on our feet for nine hours: we were cold, we were tired, we needed to pee and we encountered a 30-person long line at a Starbucks on the corner of 5th and New Jersey. We decided that a warm coffee would be worth the wait. We would at least get inside for a respite.

In what I consider a miracle, Starbucks was also serving oatmeal with nuts, raisins and brown sugar that afternoon. I can honestly say that this is the second-best meal I have ever eaten (the first being the soggy hospital hamburger that I consumed after the birth of my son). This simple dish reminded me that food is sacred, and this food was a godsend: warm, hearty, filling and oh-so-delicious. Unfortunately, the bathroom was closed to the public, not even customers were allowed in.

A final thought on the overwhelming crowds: Barack Obama's concert was handled so well on Sunday ... it is too bad that the same folks were not apparently planning the crowd control and services for the inauguration!

We needed many volunteers to handle the record crowds on this inauguration day. The WORSE situation was this: nearly every bathroom and porta-pottie anywhere within walking distance of the capitol building was LOCKED – no, check that, PADLOCKED – virtually all of them at Union Station, a prime Metro stop suddenly closed due to crowds and another three hours of walking and lines to find a way home.

The lack of attention to basic human needs was absolutely appalling … hotels with their armies of employees out front to prevent crowds from using their bathrooms, even the elderly and disabled were turned away.

What happened? How could dozens of facilities lined up for use by the crowds all be locked, all except one which was in disgustingly dire condition? No matter where folks walked, they found the same situation, and the crowds were not allowed back into the standing areas where other portable facilities were located.

Hundreds of thousand of people there – all waiting since the early hours of the morning, all dressed up and literally nowhere to go. To make matters worse, Capitol police were giving misdirection to those in need of facilities, directing them to local restaurants or the Union Station – they were no help at all.

I couldn't help but feel that this is the last gesture by the Bush administration: the planning for basic needs was clearly abysmal. In addition, the lack of trash cans resulted in a Capitol area covered in litter after the event. I'm not sure who was in charge of this part, but it wasn't handled well.

All that said, people were remarkably upbeat. It was a jubilant day. For example, in the midst of all of the chaos, one of the street vendors gave Loretta a free Obama button. The gentleman's smile and act of kindness shone through like the sun.

There were thousands reaching out to each other: all were singing, celebrating and filled with a growing realization that we were all a part of history.

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