

## Inauguration 2009

by Ray Ortiz

Diversity and excitement were in abundant display throughout the inaugural weekend. The diversity was made manifest by many individuals I spoke with upon arrival as well as throughout the inaugural festivities. After a four-hour flight to Baltimore's Thurgood Marshall airport, I boarded the train to Washington's Union Station. As luck would have it, the only open seat was next to an elderly African American gentleman. A navy blue wool cap covered a portion of his long dreadlocks. I shortly found out that this was Bob, a 75-year-old PhD chemist originally from Jackson, Mississippi, now recently retired from his professorial duties in New York City and on his way to the inauguration. He told his story on the half hour ride to Washington DC. As hard as it was to achieve the position he attained, it was clearly apparent to him that it was monumentally more difficult for President Elect Obama. At the end of our conversation, Bob turned to me with a gaze hardened by memories of struggle and said, "It's been a long time coming."

Late in the evening, Union Station was crowded not only with travelers but with well over five hundred attorneys, judges and their guests attending the Hispanic National Bar Association Inauguration Gala. Later on, the streets of DC were livelier still, at well past the midnight hour on Sunday. Groups of people gathered, not just on street corners but also at mid-block, all engaged in lively discussion. At a standing room only French bistro near DuPont Circle, the owner was enthusiastic about the prospects of healed relations between the U.S. and France. His restaurant was decorated of course with French memorabilia and a large French flag. But alongside his flag was an even larger American flag, together with an oil painting of Obama and some civil rights leaders who came before him, a painting the owner had commissioned from an artist back in Paris.

The masses came out on Inauguration Day. People lined up at suburban metro stations at 4:00 a.m. waiting for downtown bound trains. The trains came in at four-minute intervals. When the doors opened on each extremely overcrowded car, pressure was relieved in such a way that riders were actually forced out of each car, even as others rushed to try and get in. Even so, about ten new people managed to get on each car, encouraged by enthusiastic occupants who beckoned more to join the "change train." While a picture on board might have been helpful in capturing the scene, my arms were so tightly pinned to my sides by the press of the crowd that it was impossible to lift my camera out of my coat pocket. It was all I could do to breathe normally. Closer in, the crowds rising on escalators from the depths of the metro stations joined with those who had come in by bus and train as well as those who had walked miles before dawn to beat the crowds. It was all to no avail. In the dawn hour near the Washington Mall, the lines of people awaiting admission were as wide as the streets, stretching ten or more blocks away from designated ticket holder entrances in a demonstration of unity that President Elect Obama would later embrace during his inaugural address.

With hours upon hours of waiting, there was of course ample time for conversation during the period that the lines bent around ambulances and reformed in their wakes as emergency personnel struggled to reach people who were overcome by claustrophobia or the bitter cold. The stories were as diverse as the crowd: the Hispanic family from California wanting to show their children that everything is possible; the Jewish family from New York whose experiences harkened back to civil rights rallies in the '60s, the March on Washington and Dr. King's speech at the Lincoln Memorial; the Middle Eastern businessman who longed for peace in his region; Native Americans concerned for the environment; elderly African

Americans from Arkansas who recalled segregated housing, schools, restaurants, drinking fountains and bathrooms; Asian immigrants from the Washington suburbs, there to support the son of a fellow immigrant; white couples also from the suburbs concerned about jobs for themselves and their children; the recent college graduate from Louisiana who had spent all her savings for her journey to personally support the President; Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton passing close by, each with their entourage, moving in opposite directions, trying to negotiate their ways through the fog of millions; the couple from Ireland coming in to express their solidarity with Americans; the World War II veteran, in full uniform, inching behind his walker trying to find his way to support a world without war.

At several entry points, crowds taking up several city blocks pressed in as the ceremony starting time loomed. Even with tickets from Senator Bingaman for an area fairly close to the Capitol steps, my estimated chances of entry diminished by the minute as I looked over the top of the crowd, comparing its depth with the narrowness of the gate in the distance. But with luck, I passed through the gates fifteen minutes before start time, somewhat behind a 100 plus year old wheelchair bound grandmother wrapped in a sleeping bag, wheeled along by her granddaughter.

Estimates of the crowd that poured onto the Mall proper during the Inauguration ceremony ranged upwards of two million (the previous record was 1.2 million for President Lyndon Johnson's inaugural). However, these estimates did not include hundreds of thousands who, for various reasons, were denied access to the Mall proper but who nonetheless pressed in towards the gates to get closer to the numerous jumbotron screens and speakers lining the Mall. Tens of thousands of those with tickets for preferred areas were turned away as they waved their tickets in frustration. Even in the face of such frustration, not a single arrest was made throughout the day.

The faces of those denied entry were telling: those with passes from their Senator or Representative who arrived too late (after the break of dawn, for a noon ceremony); college students with tickets from the Obama organization who had worked exclusively on the campaign for the past year; businessmen, large campaign donors, state cabinet secretaries and other politicians; several Obama cousins from Africa, denied access because the Obama name on Kenyan passports was deemed insufficient by Secret Service agents assisting with the very tight security that greeted those fortunate enough to make it through the initial set of gates.

Those making it onto the Mall were entertained not only by the looming spectacle of the inauguration but also by the Marine Corps Band. There were of course introductions aplenty with the sequence of those introduced clearly arranged in order of stature. The crowd response to those introduced varied from apparent disinterest, to tepid approval, to either pronounced approval or disapproval. Even so, the cheers and jeers were overcome by the rising jubilation of the crowd in anticipation of the oaths. At the noon hour the respectful silence of millions overcame the jubilation as the oaths were administered. After he completed his oath and was introduced, President Obama received a standing ovation, with most of the millions in attendance wildly waving their American flags in a demonstration of patriotic fervor the likes of which I had never witnessed on such a massive scale. The shouts and applause of the crowd close in were soon overcome by applause and cheer from the crowd miles away, rolling in like waves of thunder from a distant storm.

As he delivered his inaugural address, it struck me that President Obama commanded a view not only of the millions in attendance, but that part of the Washington Mall where slaves were actively traded in very large numbers before the Civil War, where Abraham Lincoln walked through field hospitals and among mustering troops during the same war that claimed as many American lives as the total of all other wars of our nation combined. President Obama's view reached out along Pennsylvania Avenue towards the White House, resting on a foundation partially built by slaves, a house later occupied by the President who freed them.

His view also encompassed the Memorial to Abraham Lincoln, among our greatest presidents. Having visited that Memorial many, many times, a clear picture of Lincoln's statue came readily to mind: seated as if presiding over the handiwork for which he gave his life, his Gettysburg and Second Inaugural addresses carved in the marble walls flanking him on each side. He sits there intently still, one fist clenched with resolve, the other hand open with understanding and compassion. His keen insight and fortitude in maintaining the unity of our nation while emancipating slaves directly lead to the passage of Constitutional Amendments 13 (abolishing slavery); 14 (providing for due process and equal protection, among other critical rights) and 15 (providing for the right to vote, unabridged by race). The latter two amendments of course served as the basis for key civil rights protections we all benefit from today.

I was looking out over the Mall during that portion of President Obama's inaugural address when he referenced the era where we tasted "the bitter swill of civil war and segregation." Instead of dwelling on this, he called upon us to lend our hands in the creation of a new chapter in our history: "What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world...with hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come; let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested, we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter." These words echoed those concluding Lincoln's Second Inaugural address, etched out there in the stone of his Memorial looming on the horizon: "With malice towards none, with charity for all...let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."