

the corner

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Saying Goodbye [Abigail Thernstrom]

It's not that I don't wish the new president well. Of course I do. I'm an American patriot. But I also wish George W. Bush well as he starts his life as yesterday's news. And so, instead of listening to The Speech, watching pictures of the crowds, and listening to the tiresome chatter of commentators desperately searching for fresh insight, Steve and I headed out to Andrews Air Force Base to wave President Bush goodbye.

We arrived at 9:07 a.m., seven minutes after the gates to the base opened. Lots of people, tight security, of course. So there were long lines already from one checkpoint to a bus and then to another checkpoint and another bus, and finally we arrived at an airplane hangar, which was freezing cold. We were not permitted to bring any food, and by 9:30 I was starving.

The rope line was crowded by the time we got there, so we settled for the bleachers, which had the advantage of a view of the whole hangar and Air Force One perched just outside.

The president was not expected until after 1 P.M. We were in for a long, cold wait. But a big screen had Fox News on (of course it's Fox). Very comforting; familiar and trusted faces on the big screen.

There was a lot of time to eat up; I should have brought my beloved Kindle, but had stupidly rejected the idea. We had the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, though, and so I could entertain myself by reading the headline story in the *Post*: "Historians Say He Could Redefine the Presidency." Hmm . . . the paper is still campaigning for the man who will redefine and remake, top to bottom. Change we can (should) believe in and all that.

They turned off the sound for Fox News; a pretty pathetic band played instead, although perhaps any band would sound pathetic in an airline hangar. Back to the *Post*: "No president has begun his term with so broad a wave of public confidence—78 percent." Well, not to put a fine point on it: Total garbage. How long has such meaningless polling been done before the president even takes the oath of office? Do we have the figure for Ronald Reagan?

It was hard to keep reading garbage, and time was passing too slowly. But a solution to boredom was at hand: Join the line trying to get into the ladies' room. No line for the men, of course; a 45 minute wait for the women. That is the best argument for a female president; surely she would fix the problem—at airports, first and foremost.

Ah . . . they turned Fox News back on. The inauguration of Barack Obama began; this celebrating-Bush crowd quieted down. Of course, bringing us the inauguration was the right thing to do. He's our new president too.

Justice Stevens was swearing in vice-president Biden, and I had an unkind thought: If only, if only he had been forced to resign during 43's term.

Oh my, Yo Yo Ma (along with Itzhak Perlman, clarinetist Anthony McGill, and pianist Gabriella Montero) played a John Williams composition, written especially for the occasion. Steve and I used to sit in a small Harvard common room listening to Yo Yo, as an undergraduate, play for an audience of, say, 15. But why not classic American music—that is, jazz? One of America's great gifts to the world.

“The risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things . . . packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life,” the president said. Much ink will be spilled analyzing the inaugural address. I will add just a few words. He mentioned the sacrifice of European immigrants who chose to come to the new land. Not a word about captured Africans who did not choose their passage to a life of slavery. Thumbs up.

I mumbled something to Steve about the speech being “not bad,” and he growled, “It wasn’t Lincoln.” Did he expect Lincoln? To which his answer was, “well, the media has promised the man is the Great Emancipator.” Not Lincoln, nice references to “Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sahn.” Maybe—outside chance—such speeches will inspire kids to learn some history.

I was back to looking at the crowd. I suppose it should be mentioned: not very diverse. Four young women on the bench in front of me had identical blond hair. I was tempted to start counting blonds, but, no.

Fox News was turned off again, right after Brit Hume talked. No more listening to the panel. A very, very loud country music band played as we await President Bush.

And indeed, there he came. The helicopter landed; the crowd was on its feet, waving flags. The band played on. The glass side of the hangar opened up, providing a full view of Air Force One. An attempt was made to lay out a red carpet, but it was hopeless in the wind. The band played “America the Beautiful”—not very well, but the crowd lapped it up.

Dick Cheney in a wheelchair was the first to speak: a short call to public service, a nice salute to President Bush, a man who kept America safe, and the crowd went wild again. And then the 43rd president spoke.

It was folksy, upbeat. He was “inspired” by watching his successor sworn in, and felt free at last—free to be “citizen Bush.” A toast to Cheney and to Laura, who never dreamed of being a first lady (“It was not on her dance card as a young girl”), but brought her love and calm to their life in the White House. He was leaving Washington with his head held high, he said. We did not shirk our duty; we led with principle and conviction. He had not yet seen their Dallas house; Laura chose it. It was a “faith-based initiative.”

And then it was over. The president left—no red carpet for the departing leader of the free world. It was still too windy. But it was a fine departure, and I was thrilled to have been there, a little corner of the pageant of the peaceful transfer of power.

— *Abigail Thernstrom is the co-author of [America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible](#), and of [No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning](#). She is the vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.*

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