

Voices

VIEWPOINTS, ESSAYS, AND PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES
BY, FOR, AND ABOUT THE CITIZENS OF WINDHAM COUNTY

LETTER HOME

When the masses come to call

Seeing a new day in the streets at Barack Obama's inauguration

Bellows Falls
IT WAS A MOMENT we did not think we'd live to see: America, the most powerful nation in the world, elected an African-American as president, a mere 40-odd years after our people struggled just to get to voting booths unscathed or be able to drink from the same water fountains as other citizens. Riding the coattails of an apartheid that still exists, here was Barack Hussein Obama, an elegant family man whose little black girls were going to grow up in the White House playing dolls.

"Well, well. It's a new day," a measured, tearful voice pronounced as my mother, originally a Southerner from Suffolk, Va. and the daughter of a black Baptist preacher, called to tell me that Obama had won the Presidency.

It took a second for that to register, somewhere in the 11 o'clock hour on Nov. 4. Obama had won.

Then the other calls started pouring in: A college friend now stationed in the Army in Germany. A high school friend watching people pour out of their houses in Chicago. My elderly great-aunt, almost too dumbstruck to speak. My grandfather, singing spirituals from his favorite living room chair.

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As I watched the acceptance speech happening in my hometown of Chicago that night from a computer screen in Bellows Falls, I experienced an acute — an immediately warming — realization.

HERE WAS A campaign that had inspired such a diverse cross-section of the populace, a campaign about so much more than race. It had not been a symbolic run like that of Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton. Actually, race had not been a factor in the campaign at all, aside from last year's puerile jabs at Obama's church minister, Jeremiah Wright.

While Obama comes to the fore as a "rescuing" liberal force after severe conservative tumult, that role pales comparison to the intensity of his image as one who is closer to normal American citizens than any president in modern memory.

Obama comes from a modest



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immigrant family, breaking barriers through the sweat of his own brow and determined intelligence, initially by becoming the first black president of the Harvard Law Review in 1990 and now, of course, making history books again. His rise is the stuff of dreams, and American citizens see him as the man with a real ear to the ground who will look at the people's side of crises, as opposed to the side of capital, and act accordingly.

The ideal resonates with people, including unprecedented numbers of traditionally conservative voters who flocked to the polls. Imagine tried-and-true rural Vermonters (or Missourians or Montanans or Oregonians or others) who never thought they'd vote Democratic, let alone for a young black Democrat, enthusiastically declaring that "Obama is the obvious choice."

For a glimmer of time, race and ethnic disparity — the tumultuous foundations of this country — truly did not matter. A man with the middle name "Hussein" could become president despite the climate of hatred for anything



CLARA ROSE THORNTON/THE COMMONS

Arabic predicated by the Bush administration.

A man who had only served one term as senator could become president. A man who does not have both feet in trust-fund privilege could become president.

The prospect of the inauguration loomed large, and I decided to investigate.

WHEN ATTEMPTING to arrange passage to Washington in early January, I realized that nearly everyone else in the country who'd been shocked with similar sentimental realizations on victory night had already made plans to attend.

Amtrak trains from Vermont and surrounding areas were booked solid, three days before and two days after Jan. 20. Ten thousand charter buses from Chicago, California, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, and from origins all over the Northeast had filled.

Not a single hotel or hostel room was available anywhere near D.C., for miles into Virginia and Maryland. Even on Nov. 12, a mere eight days after the

election, the Miami Herald reported that most of the 90,000 hotel rooms in the Washington area had been booked for the event.

Upwards of 2 million people were to descend upon the capital that day; 400,000 showed up for Bush in 2005.

Greyhound remained an option, and I was off on a 12.5-hour trek to the capitol to celebrate alongside the faithful, not knowing what I'd encounter. I felt selfishly profound, congratulating myself for the personally enriching choice to participate in something defining my country.

This event distinctly outshined the two anti-Iraq-War marches on Washington I'd attended in 2002 and 2003, which drew 200,000 and 500,000 citizens respectively, and until recently had been the most amazing political experiences of my life.

Those events banded citizens together in protest, which is a very powerful force, though divisive. The inauguration of Barack Obama banded people together in common joy. To put it in perspective, no one paid \$20,000 for normally free tickets from black-

market brokers for the anti-Iraq War marches.

I heard similar sentiments from friends.

One 27-year-old white female remarked, "This is the first time I feel truly 'American,' in the archetypal sense." A 28-year-old black male joked that he wasn't going to the inauguration because it would be "the Trillion Man March," referring to the famed Million Man March for African-American quality of life in 1995, and he couldn't conceive of that many people in one space.

DURING THE RIDE from Vermont to New York City for a layover, I could hear people on their cell phones animatedly discussing the inauguration. Elderly men, each with a lone ancient suitcase and an Obama button, each looking as if this was the first road trip of his life, appeared both stoic and regal as they stared ahead with quiet determination. One man with a jheri curl hairstyle and 1980s Michael-Jackson-esque leather jacket, who looked like a reject from the "Bad" video, kept singing softly to himself, "Obama... Obama... I'm coming, Obama."

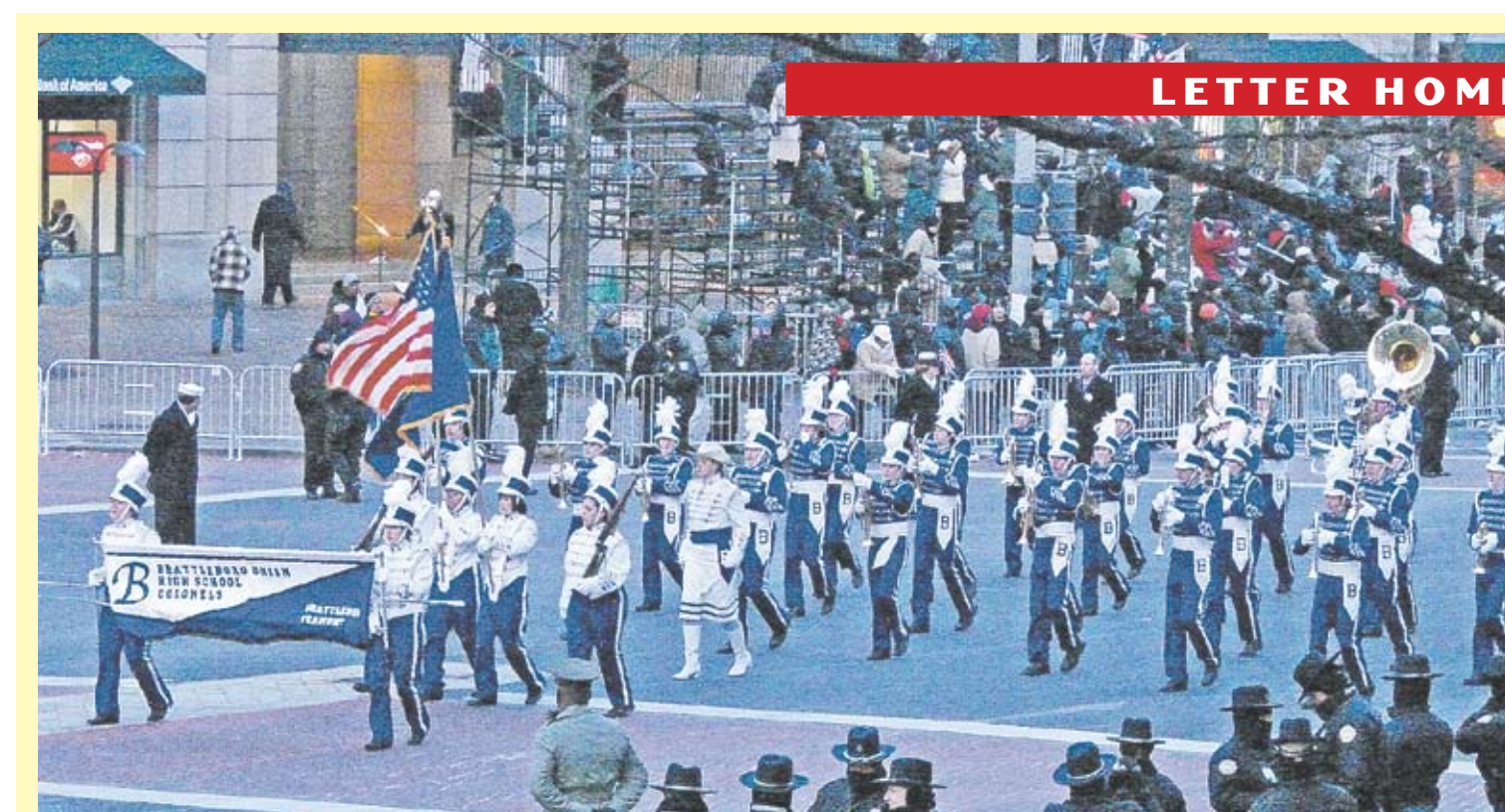
The energy hit a palpable buzz at Port Authority in New York City. The lines for D.C.-bound buses looked akin to bread lines in photos I've seen from the Great Depression, and bus companies had upped their D.C. schedules to every half hour. My smiling driver prefaced his departure rules-and-regulations speech with, "We're going to try to get in on time, people. But I can't predict the traffic. Everybody's heading in to see some guy, some character.... I don't know." This met with an uproar of laughter, and no one had to speak any names.

The next day, the 20th, hundreds of thousands of people waited in line at the National Mall at 4 a.m. in frigid temps (the high teens) prepared to wait eight hours for the noon ceremony. By 6 a.m., another mammoth wave of millions had assembled. By 10:30, the city of Washington had to close streets to pedestrians heading anywhere near the Capitol building, fearing uncontrollability of crowds.

In fact, security stopped letting even ticketholders in, and several thousand people were turned away. This formed a bit of a vanguard in the streets, with would-be urban revolutionaries plotting how to get closer to the Capitol, resulting in stories of hopefuls walking for hours in the cold and ultimately failing.

YET PEOPLE'S SPIRIT would not be diminished. As they lined the way to the street barricades, groups huddled around television sets and waved American flags. People gathered on building terraces and balconies, shouting encouragement to those on the street. Shoulder-to-shoulder late arrivals surged against the barricades, hoping to catch a glimpse of fanfare.

It seemed that every aspiring entrepreneur in the country had set up makeshift booths to sell Obama trinkets and memorabilia, spanning nail clippers to condoms ("the REAL stimulus package"). His face was plastered everywhere in D.C., which



LETTER HOME

The Brattleboro Union High School Colonels play at the presidential inauguration Jan. 20.

Tired, cold, and waiting — happily

A view of the inauguration from the Brattleboro band

Brattleboro
ANYONE who has asked those who are members of the Brattleboro Union High School band about our trip to play at Barack Obama's inaugural in Washington D.C. probably knows that it was cold and that we waited for hours and hours and that we went to bed tired every night.

And it's true. It was unbelievably cold; without the hills and mountains of Vermont to slow the wind, we were chilled through our coats and uniforms like nothing we'd ever expected.

We did wait for hours; everywhere we went there were lines of people: waiting to be served at restaurants, waiting to be admitted into museums, waiting to get through security.

And the days in D.C. did tire us completely; we dozed on the bus as we returned to the hotel every day. But although we spent long, freezing days in long, freezing lines, we

had become an Obama carnival. And there was not a single arrest that entire day.

Beyond the first audience area within security limits, not much was visible of the actual podium. Jumbotron screens were set up down the Mall, but for the millions huddling together, the real action during the ceremony took place all around them.

Women wept. Small children sat atop their fathers' shoulders, showing expressions of acute understanding of magic, as only children can. Entire families stood huddled hands and swaying. And though the action onstage may not have been consistently visible or audible, collective reactions certainly were.

When George W. Bush stepped to the podium to pass the proverbial torch, a thundering "Boo!" erupted from the crowd. People sang "Na na na, hey hey, goodbye!" for a solid minute. It was a surreal,

Shannon D. Ward, who plays saxophone, wrote this with the collaboration of Riley S. Goodemote, trombone player.

spent those days among people who had all come together for the same reason.

As a band and as a nation we'd gathered in the millions to celebrate a beautiful day in our collective history. And in that spirit, we dealt with the weather and other millions of people with the highest of spirits.

While we waited on Constitution Avenue for the parade to begin, we huddled together like emperor penguins to keep warm; when we waited in the line at Mount Vernon we joked and we sang; and in front of the thousands of spectators on the parade route, we played and marched the best we could even though we were bone-tired.

When people ask me what it felt like to be there, I always tell them about how my



JEFF POTTER/THE COMMONS

The band performs for their community in Brattleboro Jan. 24.

camera ran out of batteries on the day before the parade. I was upset, because no one had extras, and I knew that I would not get the chance to buy new ones. But then, a woman I had never met who was passing me on the sidewalk reached into her purse, pulled out two AA batteries, and handed them to me without thinking twice.

It was then that I really got the sense of the magic that was in D.C. that week. There were no strangers. We were all united.

The memories and experiences that we shared there are ones that I will never forget. I am so proud of our band, and honored to have been a part of a truly historic and unforgettable experience.

unifying experience — a collective outpouring of the country's sentiments, however much in bad form it may have been — and Bush actually looked embarrassed and teary from the Jumbotron.

I believe that was the essence of Obama's day: people no longer felt silenced.

AMID THE amiable chaos of D.C. streets between the swearing-in ceremony and the presidential parade, I spoke with several people about what Obama means to them.

A black man in his fifties from Jacksonville, Fla., remarked, "I can remember the times when things were not equal in any sense. I can remember the 'colored' drinking fountains. My kids can't even fathom something like that. And here we have the brightest, most wonderful symbol of that change right here — Obama."

As she stood with me on a planter to get a better view of the parade, a twentysomething Asian woman from New York City said, "Energy and environmental policy are the biggest points of concern to me. Obama is definitely on the right track with that." This woman later suggested that she and I scream, "We heart' you Barack," as he passed a few yards in front of us in the cavalcade.

In front of a café teeming with people escaping the weather for a few moments, a twentysomething white man from Philadelphia mused, "He's the best choice we've seen in a long time. He really does have that sense of being more connected to the common man. He's not a rich idiot. Some of the things he says are among the most intelligent I've heard from politicians."

Alongside more practical and grounded sentiments, there were, of course, the purely

emotional. A white Baltimore woman in her forties looked at me with an intense sincerity and responded to my question with, "He's going to save humanity."

A conversation with a forty-something black woman from Washington went as such: "Why is Obama important to you?"

"Because I love him."
"Why do you love him?"
"Because he's Obama."
"Why does that make a difference?"

"I am a very spiritual person, and I can feel that man's spirit." Perhaps the most poignant and representative response I received came from a young black father in his twenties with a baby carrier on his back.

When I asked him, "Why is Obama important to you?" he simply pointed to his son — and smiled.



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