Stories from Inauguration and the Women’s March

This weekend, I, a moderately liberal white female law student raised between California and the Midwest who is admittedly privileged in many regards, went to both President Trump’s inauguration on Friday and the Women’s March the day after. Upfront, my experience came with implicit biases. I am not a Trump voter; I attempted to remain unbiased and objective at inauguration, but fully intended on protesting at the march. I consider myself a pragmatist with a love for dialogue; I wanted to talk to people, hear their stories and perspectives, and see for myself what the mood was like between the two very different groups that descended on Washington this weekend.

Official numbers have not been released of how many people attended the inauguration. As of 11am on Friday morning, WMATA had recorded over 193,000 rides for the day. Presumably, not all of those rides were individuals attending the Inauguration, and a portion of inaugural attendees would not have used the metro. My personal metrics say that the size of the crowd was somewhere between being sparse enough where I could have done a cartwheel in any direction without harming anyone, but condensed enough that I easily inhaled a pack of cigarettes via second-hand smoke. However, photos comparing the inaugural crowds during President Obama’s first inauguration in 2009, and President Trump’s inauguration went viral not long after the ceremony finished. If you have yet to see them, just know that they were less than favorable for President Trump.

My ticket entrance was on 3rd and Constitution, directly adjacent to Judiciary Square. This was the only location where I personally encountered large-scale protests. As we approached the entrance there were four or so young African-American women chained together and to the metal gates delineating the entrance. They – and the protestors wearing all black in front of them – chanted “This checkpoint is closed” along with a number of other refrains denouncing white supremacy and President Trump. A man from Takoma Park who attended with the protestors said he would have preferred the blockade to have been closer to the gate; further out it served as more of a “spectacle” than to stop Trump supporters from entering the inauguration.
In the middle of this protest we experienced an ethical dilemma. We arrived without knowledge of the protests, and – because of our goal of objectivity for the day – without desire to participate. We largely support the ideological stance of the protests, but were ticketed inauguration attendees. Both of our all-black ensembles (accidental) let us seamlessly blend in with the protestors. We were invited into the protest, but ultimately wanted to get through it and into the inauguration. It felt like we were abusing their trust, and betraying causes that we both actually do believe in. We moved past the protestors who did not blink an eye at us, but did to anyone wearing Trump gear, only to have the entrance closed down because of the protest.

Inside the ticketed area of the Inauguration, MAGA reigned. The red baseball caps were omnipresent, as were t-shirts, buttons and other memorabilia bearing the President’s name and likeness. Most of the individuals we spoke to came to the inauguration because it was a part of history- no different, I guess, than myself.

A woman from Michigan – in D.C. for her first time ever – said she had initial reservations voting for Trump, but believes that he will “bridge the divide.” She expressed sympathy for the protestors and those who oppose Trump, saying that she would have been frustrated too if Hilary Clinton had won the election. A woman who drove from Los Angeles attended the inauguration with her son who was a “die hard” Trump fan, but admitted that she was “on the fence.” She was interested in coming because it was an historic event, but said that her drive through the country, and experience on the day of inauguration inspired her. She claimed that those at the inauguration were representative of the nation and the struggles that they were going through.

It should be mentioned, however, in light of the fact that many of those we spoke to thought that the crowd was representative, that we were not able to find anyone to speak to who was not white. Racial diversity was prevalent outside of the inauguration, both in spectators and protesters, but not within the event itself. I wanted to ask those who cited the diversity and representative nature of the crowd about this lack of racial diversity, but could not muster the courage; it is one of my regrets of the day.

Everyone we spoke to was immensely polite and friendly. Just as with the other spectators, I expected to witness more personal confrontation. Aside from the first protest I witnessed, I would have characterized the overall mood before the inauguration began as “mellow,” as had many that I interviewed. Once the inauguration began, however, what was most surprising as a non-Trump supporter who came out of curiosity and to witness democracy, was the boos every time a Democratic politician was featured either on the stage or on the screens dotting the mall. During Sen. Chuck Schumer’s (D-NY) speech, the crowd yelled “Hurry it up” throughout and booed, particularly the following excerpt:

“Whatever our race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, whether we are immigrant or native born, whether we live with disabilities or do not. In wealth or in poverty, we are all exceptional in our commonly held yet fierce devotion to our country and in our willingness to sacrifice our time, energy, and even our lives to making it a more perfect union.”

Speakers continued, prayers were said, Vice President Pence and President Trump said their oaths, and then Trump
gave his inaugural address. The minute Trump finished his address, everyone bolted for the exit. The ceremony was not done; there were still prayers to be said and speakers to come up, but that did not keep anyone. It became clear to me that he was still a celebrity in a way that no President has been before; he was the reality show host and “billionaire,” heavy on personality, and light on policy. His inauguration changed in my eyes, from a democratic transition of power, to a celebrity sighting.

The Women’s March on Washington, the following morning was quite the opposite. With celebrity attendants and speakers abound, the day was much more focused on policy, unity, and love as opposed to any one personality, in line with the different natures of the events.

Official numbers have not been released, but it is being widely reported that the four biggest marches in the United States alone (in D.C., New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago) – putting aside all smaller marches and international events – brought in over a million marchers. Professors from the University of Connecticut and the University of Denver calculate that an estimated 3.3 million to 4.6 million turned out across the country. The estimated turnout here in Washington was more than 500,000 early Saturday morning. WMATA had logged more than 1 million individual entries to the rail system Saturday, which is the second-busiest day in history behind President Obama’s 2009 inauguration with 1.12 million entries. Independent scientists have calculated that there were at least three times as many marchers as there had been inaugural attendees.

The crowd in my immediate vicinity was electric and energetic, albeit very frustrated with the lack of restrooms. About two hours after the projected start time of 1:15 pm., after the speeches and performers, confusion about the march route, and general delay to be expected in getting hundreds of thousands of individuals to move in unison, we marched down Independence Ave. Young girls with megaphones riled up the crowd and melted our hearts yelling “Women’s rights are human rights.” The crowd was filled with women, men, children, and the elderly. We marched behind a band which provided a perfect cadence for chants such as “Love not hate, makes America great,” and “No hate, no fear, Muslims are welcome here.”
While the march largely achieved its objective of staying a “peaceful protest” there were a number of incidents that concerned the crowd, or at least did not seem to elicit much support. Madonna’s expletive-filled speech garnered large amounts of media criticism – and dropped the jaws of many of the women around me – as she admitted that she has thought about blowing up the White House. While most of the cheers and chants were positive and loving, or at least put forth specific policy positions, some did involve petty personal attacks on the size of the President’s hands. While most protestors laid their signs down on a makeshift barrier around the Ellipse at the end of the march, as I was leaving a sizeable group of protesters knocked down the barricade from various sides running through the Ellipse towards the White House, in what was clearly a breach of the security precautions of the day. Those who did not storm the barricade shouted at them to maintain the peaceful environment that had permeated the day, and expressed concern that the rest of the march’s success would be overshadowed by this action.

I cannot be objective on this event; it was beautiful. I felt loved and warm and safe from start to finish. I will fully acknowledge, however, that I in my own reflections discount the random incendiary and divisive cheers, the marchers who jumped the barricades at the White House, and Madonna’s incendiary, violent, and expletive-filled speech as minor occurrences on an otherwise positive day.

Kellyanne Conway, Special Adviser to the President, in an interview Sunday morning with George Stephanopoulos, stated “I frankly didn’t see the point... A day after [President Trump] is uplifting and unifying, you have folks here being on a diatribe where I think they could have requested a dialogue. Nobody called me and said ‘Hey, could we have a dialogue.’” It is my personal belief that any progress relies on two steps: re-framing a conversation, and having that conversation. It takes both a change in public opinion, and in the law. As Friday’s inauguration cemented, the laws will change, and have begun to do so in the four days since the inauguration. The Women’s March in D.C., and its “sister marches” around the country are integral parts of that first step of changing public opinion and re-framing the conversation about women’s rights, immigrant’s rights, LGBT rights, and an endless array of rights that the marchers believe are currently being threatened. To Ms. Conway’s point, a dialogue will be necessary. Trump supporters I spoke to at the inauguration showed a desire for a dialogue between ideologies. Saturday merely reinforced that when that dialogue happens, President Trump better show up.

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