

By A/Prof Paul Ananth Tambyah

Inauguration of President Obama

I was elected as International Councilor of the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology in America a couple of years back. While it sounds grand, my main task is to take part in eight conference calls and attend three two-day meetings in the United States, where we discuss the nuts and bolts of running an academic society of hospital epidemiologists functioning in a world where 99.9% of people and about 90% of doctors have no idea what a hospital epidemiologist is! The most onerous of these activities is the January Board Meeting which for some masochistic reason is always held in Washington DC, in the dead of winter. This year, the meeting was scheduled for 22-23 Jan and as I looked at the dates with increasing dread, I realised that I would be in the Capital City of the “Free World” the week of the inauguration of the new President. What an opportunity! I wrote immediately to our secretariat and the meeting hotel asking if I could get in a couple of days earlier to try and join in the festivities. Reality bit when they told me that the hotel was completely booked months in advance and in any case, rooms that normally went for \$250 a night were going for \$900 to \$1000 a night! Unwilling to be a part of such flagrant price-gouging, I went online and tried to look for a place to stay within 150 miles of the US Capitol. Unfortunately, there were no rooms available at all for love or money anywhere in the area. The next best bet was to try friends and family. Colin Goh, producer of the movie “*Singapore Dreaming*” and web master of the notorious satirical website www.talkingcock.com came to the rescue. He too was intrigued by the idea of being present when history was being made and came up with a couple of options – I could fly up to New York City, spend the night at his place and take an early morning bus down to Washington DC’s Chinatown and then walk to the Capitol. Alternatively, I could stay with a friend of a friend just outside the city. Eventually, we decided to stay with Singaporean Leow Wei Jen and his wife, who in the communitarian spirit that seemed to engulf Washington, offered to host two Singaporeans he barely knew in his home. Once I got there, I discovered that Wei Jen was not only a unique Singaporean who had given up

a career as an engineer for a postgraduate degree in development economics and now works for the World Bank, he was also someone distantly related to me! He was very excited about our plans to attend the inauguration and helped me meticulously plan out my scheme to be part of history. That turned out to be helpful as Colin could not make it at the last minute.

The morning of 20th Jan dawned bright but chilly with temperatures around -10°C. Wei Jen kindly loaned me his stored value Metro card, his wife’s SIM card and dropped me at the metro station. The train was packed even at 6.45 am with Americans – young and old, all races, shapes and sizes on foot and wheelchairs; the majority of whom were wearing some sort of Obama paraphernalia – caps, scarves, T-shirts and buttons. We discovered that there was a series of roads around the Capitol that were completely cordoned off by security. There were several gates through which one could enter and eventually I found the one that catered to optimists like me with no tickets. I decided to tag along behind a group of young people and joined one of the endless but good humoured queues.

All of a sudden, there was a buzz in the crowd and someone yelled, “Jesse Jackson is here!” We all turned around and the cameras all came up. I dutifully whipped out my old camera and captured my first and what eventually turned out to be my only celebrity sighting of the day.

It took about an hour till about 8am when we were finally approaching sight of the security checkpoint, and we began to see people walking back in the opposite direction to the security gate. We called out, “Where are you going? What’s happening?” and found out that the National Mall had been closed as it was full! Some people started walking towards a highway tunnel which had been turned into a giant walkway. Using my best Singaporean *kiasu* instincts, I returned to the original queue I had staked out earlier as it was the nearest entry point to the US Capitol. The queue had thinned considerably as many Americans had followed their entrepreneurial instincts instead and had left to check out the other entry points in hope of cajoling someone into letting them in with or without a ticket. The security was tight and there were rows of abandoned bottles and



A/Prof Paul Ananth Tambyah is currently an infectious diseases physician in academic practice. He is active in the Society for Infectious Disease (Singapore). All his comments are entirely his own personal opinions.



Celebrity sighting – the Rev Jesse Jackson Sr



The obligatory right wing demonstrators protected by the police



Someone brought a flag



even bags outside. The efficient security staff did a quick check and then I was through the gates! I took a walk down to the closest I could get to the US Capitol and found that I was rather decently placed on 3rd St and Constitution Ave (see map). Instead of the mass of people at the gates, the crowd control had ensured that we could walk relatively freely up and down Constitution Ave trying to pick the best vantage point to view the giant screens all along the Mall. I positioned myself at a corner near a young Hispanic couple with a few Caucasian graduate students nearby. Behind us, a group of older African Americans were keeping themselves warm on the benches.

Most of us in that small group at the corner realised quickly that we had at least two hours to kill before the ceremony began at 1130am, and began to make small talk while trying to prevent our fingers from falling off. Someone brought a flag along and people moved up to have their pictures taken with it, with the Capitol in the backdrop. My digital camera unfortunately froze and I had to resort to my cellphone camera. At the end of the street, there was a small crowd of right wing fundamentalist demonstrators well-protected by police, who were good humouredly greeted with shouts of “O-BA-MA” every now and again by the crowd behind the police cordon.

At about 1045am, there was another buzz as a convoy of cars sped along Constitution Ave towards the Capitol. Cameras were whipped out as people thought that this was the first family on their way to the Hill. Finally, at 1130am on the dot, Dianne Feinstein, the California Senator began the proceedings with the high-toned phrases that would characterise the event. Rick Warren took the stage for the invocation that was unapologetically evangelical Christian although he did mention Yeshua, Isa, Jesus (pronounced “He-sus”) and

Jesus as he led the Lord’s Prayer which all the older African Americans around me joined in reciting. The musical numbers followed and I joined the crowd outside the Canadian Embassy which had bilingual congratulatory messages in banners on its columns and a huge TV screen just inside the fence with a better view than the crowded Mall.

It finally arrived – the oaths and the speeches. There was a nervous twitter as people took in the Chief Justice’s gaffe in the swearing in. Then the entire mall and the surrounding streets fell silent. It was amazing just to see one and a half million people waiting expectantly for some great words such as “Ask not what your country can do for you” or “We have nothing to fear but fear itself”, but there were no such ringing phrases. Instead, it was a sober plea for an adult response to the tremendous crisis facing the United States and the world. The older African Americans around me cheered when President Obama talked about how his father would not have been able to sit at a lunch counter nearby. The graduate student-types huddling in one corner applauded his promise to let Science be Science, signaling an end to the Bush administration’s restrictions on stem-cell research and the teaching of biology. But by and large, the response was sober and measured. People seemed to realise that there was much to be done and that this man was asking them to do their part in making things happen. Or maybe, like me, they were too frozen in the -10°C weather to clap and cheer! When the speech was done, people started making a beeline to the security gates. Thinking of the million or so people bound for the DC Metro, I too began to make my way to the exit.

The Metro was surprisingly orderly and in a matter of minutes, I was out of the Capitol area and back thawing at my new friend’s home. Was it worth standing there in the freezing cold for



The President and the Chief Justice

The author



Americans of all shapes and sizes patiently lining up for security checks



Watching the jumbotron TV screen at the Canadian embassy just off the Washington National Mall

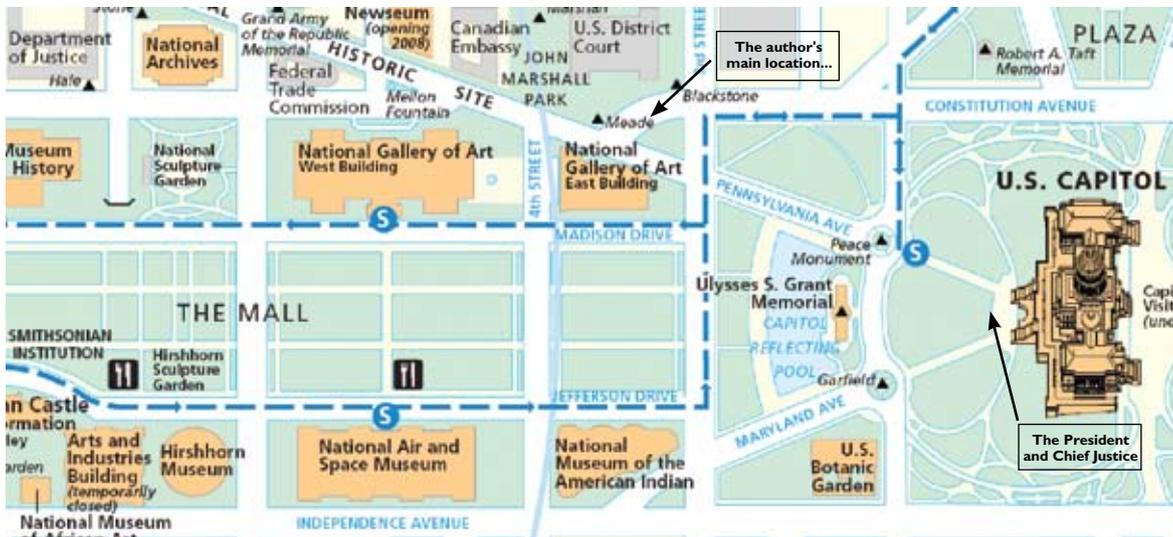


five hours? Was I being unpatriotic by getting so enthusiastic about a foreign ceremony? Having missed the chance to witness our own successful peaceful transitions, I do remember standing and watching both President Sheares and President Ong Teng Cheong’s funerals from either side of Bukit Timah Rd. I guess I am a historic event junkie! For a monumental event, to me, this was rather understated – a million and a half people quietly moving into an iconic venue in freezing cold weather to listen to a carefully crafted 20 minute speech. No fireworks, no riots, no flaming arrows, no gymnasts suspended in mid-air; just two short musical items, two prayers, two oaths and a sober speech. Maybe that was what was so amazing about the whole thing – less than 50 years after Dr Martin Luther King had declared his dream, this dream was becoming a reality in a most ordinary way.

It was tempting to draw local analogies from the hope I felt and saw, as well as the recent disasters that had defined the previous administration. Sure, we do not have our Iraq/Abu Ghraib, Hurricane Katrina

and subprime debacle but we did have the guideline on fees fiasco, organ trading hub plans and loss of self-regulation in the SMC DCs. Do we need an “Obama” to give us sober messages about rolling up our sleeves and getting above childish things to really make a difference in our own little world? Honestly, I have to admit that is stretching it a bit!

Perhaps the real lesson I brought home was similar to what made one and a half million people brave the freezing cold weather and long security lines, just to listen to this man take the historic oath of office. It was the sense that anything is possible; the young, dark brown-skinned boy – who won the *keropok* eating contest at the Sekolah Dasar Negeri Menteng in Jakarta around the time that I kept coming in second in *char kway teow* eating contests at St Andrew’s (first place went to the incomparable Patrick Chia) – was now the most powerful man in the world. Who is going to stop anyone of us from discovering the magic bullet to eliminate MRSA or perhaps developing a universal heterotypic influenza vaccine? Yes, we can! ■



Picture from <http://www.nps.gov/nama/planyourvisit/upload/Inaugural%20Map.pdf>