



# THE VIEW

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## WASHINGTON AND THE INAUGURATION: SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO BE THERE

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

In early 2003 the potential for a new war in the Middle East weighed heavily on almost everyone. By March some sort of military involvement between the United States and Iraq seemed almost inevitable. On March 18 the then popular CNN program Crossfire did a live broadcast from George Washington University campus. Just before the show began, 30 Mississippi State University students took their places as members of the audience. Sitting only a few feet from center stage these students were witness to the “real thing.”

The program began just two hours before the deadline set by President Bush for the commencement of hostilities if a set of conditions were not agreed to by the Saddam Hussein-led Iraqi government. As one might expect, the theme of the program was ominous. With former Clinton White House staffer Paul Bagala occupying the chair on the “left” and Tucker Carlson on the “right” a parade of military and Middle Eastern experts regaled the audience with predictions of what was about to happen punctuated by lively discussions of whether any military action at all was called for. The most notable of these guests was retired General Wesley Clark.

At the conclusion of Crossfire, the group made their way to dinner at Old Ebbett Grill, one of the more famous and historic eateries in Washington. Located near the eastern end of the White House this restaurant is always packed with a large crowd noisily discussing politics or other government related activities of the day. There are televisions scattered throughout the building, and they are usually tuned to one of the 24 hour news channels. At 8:00 sharp that evening a very unusual thing happened. When President Bush came on all stations to address the nation concerning the commencement of military activities an absolute hush fell over this crowd largely comprised of veterans of the nation’s government. Only an occasional tinkle of ice in a glass and the sound of the President’s voice interrupted the silence that smothered the loud racket of only a few moments before.

Being in Washington, D.C. at that moment of commitment was an experience that those students will never forget, nor will I for that matter. There is indeed something to be said for being there.

Other groups of students have been privy to similar, once in a lifetime experiences generated by affiliates of both of the nation's political parties. On one occasion a planned stop at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee offices was highlighted by the unplanned arrival of Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean, who spent the better part of an hour with the Mississippi State students. In another year, a session in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's conference room led by Mississippian Burns Strider was attended by a House delegation led by South Carolina Representative, and current House Majority Whip, James Clyburn. Notable about this meeting was the rancor expressed by these Democrats, many of them from the South, at having just been labeled as "secular" by some Republican leaning Evangelical ministers who were holding a meeting in the Capitol. Then there was the occasion of Speaker Denny Hastert calling the entire U. S. House of Representatives into session to make a long and fiery speech regarding the partisan wrangling over selection of a new House Chaplain. That year's group of Stennis-Montgomery students was just settling into their seats when the House chamber began to fill.

A highlight the Stennis-Montgomery Association's Washington Week each year is the luncheon in a Senate dining room for Mississippi's Congressional delegation. Not only do they and their staffs attend this gathering, but they are instrumental in helping with the week's agenda.

Election years offer the greatest theater that can be provided in the nation's capitol. I am, of course, referring to the Presidential Inauguration. No experience in Washington can match that of witnessing the orderly but celebratory transfer of power following the decision of the people at the ballot box. The Stennis-Montgomery Association was there in 2000 and 2004 at both Inaugurals for George W. Bush and now preparations are in the final stages for 28 students to attend the Inauguration of President-Elect Barack Obama.

Most have seen the news reports of the masses expected in Washington to witness the Inauguration of the first African-American President. Some have likened this event to the inauguration of Andrew Jackson in 1829, in that many who have not been closely identified with previous Presidential elections have laid claim to this one and have expressed their intent to be there. Just as Jackson came to town as the "Frontier President" – the first who was not a member of the nation's eastern elite – so Obama comes to be sworn in as the first of his race to attain the nation's highest office. Both elections are viewed at their respective times as triumphs of democracy. The inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States will be viewed as a singularly historic event for generations to come.

Thanks to the Mississippi Congressional delegation, The Stennis Center for Public Service, Entergy Corporation and others for partnering with the Stennis Institute, so



that these Mississippi State University students from throughout the state of Mississippi and beyond will have that front row seat to witness history.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

### **WILLIAM MARTIN WISEMAN, Ph.D**

William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Wiseman's e-mail is [marty@sig.msstate.edu](mailto:marty@sig.msstate.edu)

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:**

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

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