

A Room With a View, Service With

By Gabriel Escobar
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It was his job as the manager of the Hotel Washington that kept the very dapper Muneer Zainel Deen moving from one inaugural world to another, a daylong dance between those being catered to upstairs and those doing the catering downstairs.

In a way he was both guest and help, on a day when most people are exclusively one or the other. One moment he was picking lint off the carpet en route to the kitchen, where he consulted the *sous chef*, and the next he was upstairs, watching for familiar faces and being addressed, in the familiar, by the high and mighty.

And there were plenty of those, quadrennial regulars who know the hotel, at 15th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, is a prime perch for viewing the inaugural parade—something aptly proved when President Clinton ambled on foot past the two sets of lobby windows, which had become private boxes for a Texan and his friends and a Shell Oil entourage.

"We get Muneer to rent us a room every inauguration," said auto parts executive A. Wallace Moore Jr., president and general manager of Southern Distributors Inc., who with friends has viewed the event from the hotel's third floor since Eisenhower in '53, "regardless of who's coming or going."

A hotel on inauguration day, especially where there are rooms with *the view*, is like no other business in the city. Where most enterprises close for the day, hotel managers scramble to hire extra staff (Deen's normal work force of 250 grew by 75). The Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union Local 25 said every available member, and there are about 9,000 in the District alone, was employed.

This also is a quadrennial holiday under the union contract unique to Washington, and that means every worker gets paid time and a half. For the hotel, the transfer of presidential power means its 370 rooms are sellouts way in advance, including packages for suites that went for \$1,500 for four nights.

The hotel's roof-top bar, which offers one of the great vistas of the city, again went to a local plumbing magnate. Samuel

Adams beer took over a hallway and a room overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue, and Electronic Data Systems Corp., Ross Perot's old computer company, also rented first-floor viewing rooms.

But most guests were like the Moores, whose party in room 318 drew close friends with a long inaugural past. Betty Willson's grandmother, for example, went to Lincoln's inaugural ball, at the Old Pension Building. Carl Longley, who retired from a successful career as a caterer, "did" inaugurations professionally from 1950s until he sold the business in 1985. Elizabeth Moore, A. Wallace's wife, has attended these affairs since FDR, a good number of them at the Hotel Washington, the Bethesda family's inaugural *piè-à-terre*.

With the exception of Longley and his wife, most of the others were proud Republicans, Bush people who stood for the National Anthem and whose comments at times were predictably piquant.

"He's just going to say the same old stuff, isn't he," Willson announced just before Clinton put his hand on the Bible. Her comment set off a partisan thrust and parry that lasted the duration of the oath:

Sincerity at Hotel Washington

Willson: "Oh, I hate this."

Longley: "Oh, how I waited for this."

Willson: "Well, let's wait and see what happens over the next four years."

Longley: "Don't you feel sorry for those of us who waited 12 years?"

Willson: "No. You lived well."

Among the guests was Lt. Gen. Walter Boomer, the Marines' top general in the Persian Gulf War and A. Wallace Moore's cousin. The quiet exchange of power, from one administration to another, had a special resonance for a career military man like Boomer, who in effect saw one boss replaced by another.

"You know, it's going to be interesting," he said, reflecting on the next four years. "We make things work in this country. We make it work. There isn't a better way. Not a better system."

It was that system—for different reasons, reached at different times—that also drew people like Maria Duran, Gladys Sanchez and Dinora Vasquez to the Hotel Washington yesterday. They started at 4 a.m. in the kitchen, on a day so busy that each one had marching orders, written on yellow sheets of paper.

For the guests, they had cut castles out of cucumbers, made salmon canapes with capers, arranged countless fruit-and-cheese plates and constructed sandwich platters. Sanchez said she had become "emotional" Tuesday night when, from the seat of a bus stuck in traffic, she saw the city decked out for the inauguration.

Among these workers, there was genuine appreciation for the country's smooth transition. There was respect for Bush and admiration for Clinton. "I am very happy," Vasquez, a Guatemalan, said of Clinton. "He is a great person. Intelligent."

But the talk of politics and presidents also made them reflect on their own countries. Duran, a former elementary school teacher, left El Salvador almost 20 years ago, and in 1990 she became a U.S. citizen, the only one in the group.

"I voted for Clinton," she said. "I don't know why. It was instinct. I felt he could do something good."

"You do miss your country, but sometimes you have to search for a better life," said Duran, whose three children were born in the United States. "Circumstances sometimes require that you go somewhere else."