

## Memorial Day in the Nation's Capital

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It's campaign season and the country is abuzz with speculation about our next president. The air waves are humming, the blogosphere is awash with sound bites and pithy slogans alongside lengthy diatribes advocating this candidate or that candidate. It seems we are destined to make history no matter who we elect. Now before your blood-pressure starts racing let me assure you that this is *not* a political post. I only want to point out that during this cycle in our communal life as a nation we get pretty jaded. Our eyes glaze over at the latest political ad and we have long since stopped giving any politician the benefit of the doubt. Experience has taught us that the business of getting elected is a dirty one, and the dirt rubs off on everyone... or at least so I thought. Last week I was in DC, speaking and attending Webmaniacs at the Carnegie Center, and I had an experience that made me both proud of my country and ashamed of my cynicism.

I was at Reagan International Airport waiting for my plane to arrive. Now I have been in the airport when soldiers returning from Iraq deplane and I have seen applause break out in the terminal. But this was different. When my plane arrived I was gazing out the window at the ground crew. I noticed that they were carefully hoisting 14 or 15 wheelchairs from the belly of the plane.

A young woman from the airline began going through the terminal making a short speech to groups of passengers:

*There are 25 World War II veterans from Nebraska on the plane. None of them has ever seen the World War II memorial. They are all here to see it for the first (and probably the last) time. Could we give them a round of applause and thank them for their service?*

All of the other passengers deplaned first. Meanwhile the crowd around the gate swelled to around 250 or 300 people as word traveled from gate to gate. As the men began to emerge - most of them walking slowly - the crowd cheered and clapped enthusiastically. One by one they moved out of the tunnel. Each of them was wearing a cap with their original unit and insignia on it. They were all at least octogenarians. Some of them were vigorous, but most moved in that careful, trembling way of the elderly. They came with their wives, sons and daughters.

A ritual developed as each of them emerged. As it dawned on them that they were the object of applause they brightened and smiled. But as it also dawned on them that the applause was in thanks for their service each man could be seen to straighten up perceptibly. You could see the ram-rod posture long since buried by the decay of age, yet still visible as the bearing of a soldier. You could see their minds hearken back to that time of life where they found themselves and their comrades caught in the maelstrom of war. Some of them saluted. Most of them smiled and looked sheepish, sad and proud. As they moved toward the baggage claim they were approach by random strangers who wanted to shake their hand. These strangers would invariably say two simple words - "thank you".

The scene went on for 5 or 10 minutes until our hands were sore from clapping. Our throats were sore too both from cheering and from a constant effort to swallow that lump that rose each time a new, weathered face emerged from the tunnel. Looking around I saw more than a few tears (including my own).

So there I was the consummate realist, in the heart of the beltway where cynicism is like a religion. Yet I was cheering wildly along with 250 other people for a group of elderly men to honor sacrifices made on our behalf. There was no music - no Lee Greenwood or Star Spangled Banner - just a heartfelt outpouring of emotion. It was one of those moments that made me proud of my country and my fellow citizens.

This year, at Memorial Day, I have a new set of images to ponder - the image of 25 elderly men from Nebraska. I am thinking of the joy and sad pleasure of remembering that they must be sharing as they receive this honor near the end of life. I am also struck by the image of the younger versions of these men facing the horror of war. Most were eighteen years old, full of energy and a sense of invincibility, about to be thrown into a world of destruction that none of them had yet imagined. I live in a world largely shaped by the sacrifices of that generation. It seems like some cheering and applause is the least I can do.

So let me say to all the men and women of that generation and from the bottom my heart - thank you.