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Inauguration Day just one more incremental step into the future

Tom Roberts | Jan. 23, 2013 NCR Today

I spent Inauguration Day with some of the family, including two grandchildren, at the Newseum, a grand building with lots of widows in the 500 block of Pennsylvania Avenue, a vantage point that allowed us into the mix of the day and some of its feelings while remaining out of the elements, which turned out to be rather mild.

It was hard to not sense that in this museum of news, news was occurring this day. Perhaps it is too much to say that this was a "black" inauguration, though the overwhelmingly black audience in one of the museum's main theaters where I watched the proceedings certainly gave the impression that its perceptions, at times, were those of an insider's. Who doesn't love the Obama daughters? But the buzz of familiarity and pride that went through the crowd when they appeared felt more like that of a family than spectators. When the camera settled on Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, a hero of the civil rights era, the auditorium exploded. This was a partisan crowd -- Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner was just as loudly booed.

Many in that auditorium and throughout the rest of the museum were of an age that they would have remembered the segregation of everyday life -- water fountains, schools, buses, bathrooms, lunch counters, colleges. As a child of the Northeast, I remember segregated pools and golf courses and other situations into which it would have been unthinkable that a black man or woman would have been invited or welcomed.

One need not romanticize the inaugural event or read too much into off-hand remarks, cheers and heads nodding approval to know that with Obama's second term, some things are being recalibrated in the culture. This is no longer Norman Rockwell's America, where the problems are merely bothersome, the truly unpleasant is hidden, and the tensions all resolve into a homogeneous America. The country is browning, as the term goes, and our politics are changing because of it.

The first Obama election was momentous on the face of it. One need not even have wondered at the time what the following four years might hold. America had taken one of those incremental steps in human progress that didn't need to be aged over decades to establish its significance. A person of color had been elected president. The second Obama election, it seems on the face of it, was affirmation of much more even in a very divided country. Given the economics of the last four years, the enormous money set loose to undo the Obama bid for a second term and the underlying racism inherent in some of that opposition, it is all the more remarkable that he took the oath of office Monday.

A column [1] by conservative John Podhoretz making the rounds argues that love of country today is being replaced, left and right, by "infatuation" with the individual elected. I don't think there's anything new to such infatuation, nor is it something peculiar to today. In my own lifetime, the vitriol heaped on Republican Richard Nixon over Watergate and other matters and on Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson for Vietnam and civil rights was far more vicious and consequential than that heaped on George W. Bush or Barack Obama.

The difference today, the sense that things are far more divided, I am convinced, can be traced to 24/7 opinion channels that elevate stories that once would have been relegated to two paragraphs on page 15 or eliminated from the evening newscast because of lack of time to long segments of empty chatter that turns increasingly

noxious.

It is hardly new that a boost in pride and love of country occurs when a preferred candidate wins. Those on the winning side can, however temporarily, feel as if things have been righted and that the country is headed again in the correct direction. It usually occurs in the smallest of increments and lasts only until the first setback or the next election. Mr. Podhoretz will undoubtedly get his chance to be infatuated again in the future.

Monday was one of those small increments. Where it ultimately takes us is unknown.

But here's a sign, in my estimation, of the real history in the making and of the longer-range effect of the day's events. Following the inaugural ceremonies, our 4-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, Anna, was on a singular mission. The most insistent request of this sandy-haired youngster from New Jersey, whose ancestry mixes Italian, Irish and Albanian, was for a Michelle Obama pin.

How about one of the more readily available pins showing the president *and* Mrs. Obama?

No, definitely not. Just Mrs. Obama.

It took us a few blocks to find one. It was her prized possession of the day.

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