

My Pilgrimage to Reagan

The Gipper's death brought a temporary truce to Americans waging war with one another. Hundreds of thousands paid their respects to a much-beloved president and a founding father of modern conservatism.

I was among them.

Images broadcast on TV and the Internet document every moment of the week that will never be forgotten. Those who witnessed firsthand any of the pomp and circumstance will treasure their memories.

Wednesday, June 9, 2004

Some commentators said the mood was somber during the caisson procession to the Capitol. From my vantage point on Constitution Avenue directly facing the Washington Monument, the crowd – some waiting for hours – was festive, as people shared stories and awaited the passing of the President.



<http://www.defenselink.mil/home/photoessays/2004-06/p20041004a8.html>

The appointed hour fast approached and one young woman, with a well-chosen spot on Constitution, left at the last moment due to the heat. Children huddled next to barriers for a closer look. Police officers refreshed themselves with bottled water while scanning the crowd. Some younger enterprising souls perched upon the mall wall.

The hour arrived. The cortege began its move, then stopped to transfer the casket. That ceremony was just beyond my line of sight, though the lead vehicles were right in front of me.

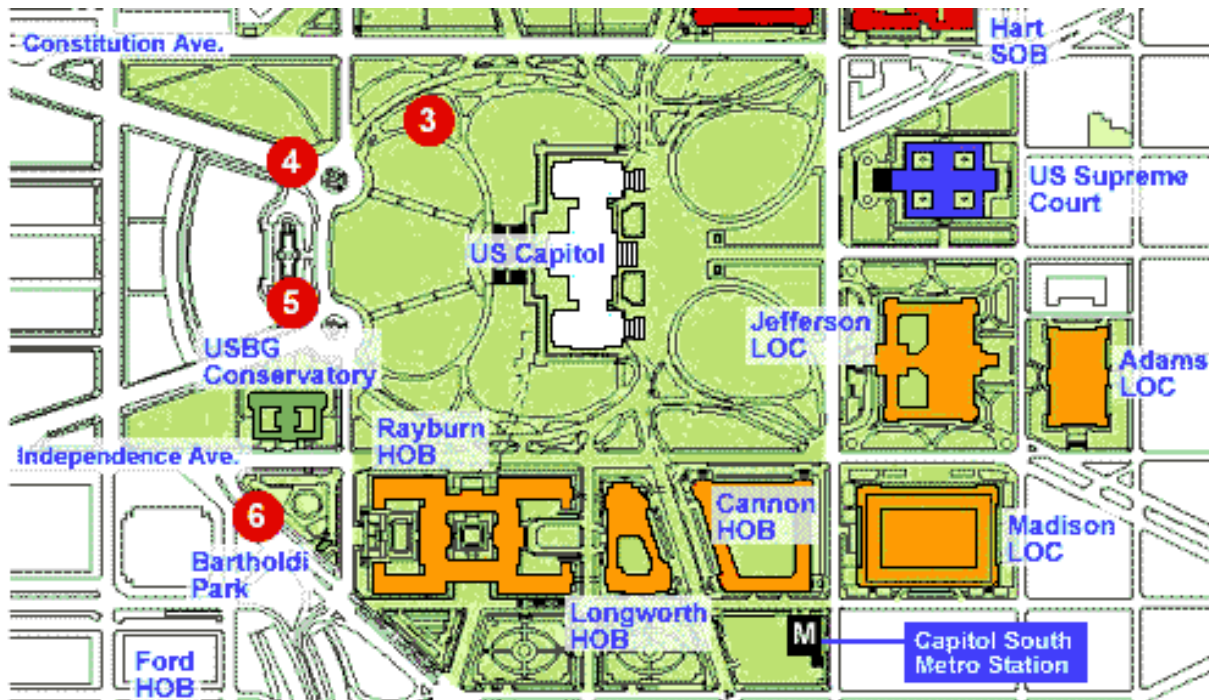
As the caisson and its entourage rolled past, I saw Mrs. Reagan gently waving and Nancy Davis looking out the opposite window.

Thursday, June 10, 2004

I was too smart for my own good. Shuttle service from RFK stadium to the Capitol was too tempting. That night, I arrived for the first set of buses leaving at 11:30 p.m., expecting a short two-hour line and a relatively quick return home. Others, avoiding the heat of the day, had the same idea. My “quick” trip became a 9 ½-hour odyssey.

10:38 pm. I drove from my home in Maryland and struggled to find a parking spot.

- 11:27 pm. Finally, parked in a stadium lot, I quickly walked to the shuttle departure point, accompanied by Michael, a young man from Philadelphia who had driven from work to honor his president.
- 11:34 pm. We entered the queue for the shuttle service to Capitol and embarked on the second of three buses.
- 11:40 pm. The shuttle left for the Capitol.
- 11:55 pm. Upon arrival, passengers disembarked only to be directed across the street *away from* the Capitol.



http://www.aoc.gov/cc/grounds/cc_map_grounds.htm

Friday, June 11, 2004

- 12:00 am. Michael and I reached the beginning of the line after a speed walk over the mall – 7th and Jefferson. The line moved slowly on the sidewalk alongside the Air and Space Museum, crossed the street back to the mall, meandered inside and finally ...
- 12:40 am. We reached the start of the official viewing line. At this entrance, park personnel provided water bottles to thirsty mourners. Entering a fenced in area, we went up and down aisles as if in a corral – walking back and forth – until ...
- 1:25 am. We reached the start of the *first* public viewing line – and entered another corral. People from all walks of life populated the mall: a father and son in boy scout uniforms, a mid-teen in a pink prom dress with her family, others in military uniforms and suits or casual attire and T-

shirts. Mothers carried infants, parents pushed strollers, teens and twenty-somethings mingled with older generations. One Vietnam veteran-turned investment banker brought his family.

- 2:00 am. We reached the start of the *second* public viewing line. By this time I had noticed a number of line cutters and rope jumpers. I was particularly irked by the line-jumpers who had no regard for the woman in a wheelchair with two children, the man and the woman on crutches, or the man with the pronounced limp – all of whom made it through to the end. Others gave up and left. I urged those around me to stay the course, to have faith and remain optimistic.
- 2:45 am. We left the second corral at 4th Street.
- 2:50 am. We entered the *third* public viewing line. As we walked we noticed several people reading with book lights. Some had lights illuminating pages from underneath; one man sported a headband with a light, like a spelunker's helmet or surgeon's headband, attached to the front.
- 4:05 am. Someone around me noticed that the corral behind us was empty. Officials had cut off the queue somewhere behind us because they wouldn't make it to the Capitol in time. As we walked, we avoided people sleeping under the dividing ropes or around trees. Piles of empty water bottles (Deer Park) were additional obstacles.
- 4:38 am. We left the third corral at 3rd Street.
- 4:45 am. We entered the Capitol pen. Dawn broke with a pinkish tinge. Then the sky turned purplish and the Capitol dome lit up against a fittingly royal sky.
- 5:35 am. We reached the final row and walked along the Capitol reflecting pool, turned and entered the first security checkpoint, which only checks bags and backpacks. While waiting for the line to move again, some stretched out on the concrete wall of the reflecting pool or sat on benches. Ducks swam, birds sang and serenity reigned.
- 5:48 am. We resumed our walk.



http://www.aoc.gov/cc/capitol/c_ef_1.htm

- 6:00 am. We entered the Capitol grounds. It was majestic in the sunshine as we walked along the west side, across from the Rayburn building.
- 6:20 am. Finally – we entered the Capitol! After going through security (metal detector), we promptly entered yet another line for a walk along the west wing balcony.
- 6:38 am. We walked up the steps into the Capitol Rotunda. A female security guard urged us to “Hurry up! Hurry up!” and keep the line moving.
- 6:40 am. Our 30 seconds of tribute. President Reagan’s flag-shrouded casket lay in stately grandeur. The ceremonial guards were motionless, like ancient statues guarding the Ark of the Covenant. The atmosphere of reverence and awe was befitting of a man who had restored dignity to the presidency. (I had worn a patriotic tie; Michael turned and saluted his president.)
- 6:41 am. While descending the stairs, I overheard one teen ask his pals, “Eight hours for 30 seconds?” Oh, but what a thirty seconds!
- 6:44 am. We left and received a memorial card.
- 6:48 am. Once outside, we entered yet another line to the condolence books.
- 6:55 am. Surviving that line, I signed one of many books.
- 7:16 am. Michael and I shared a taxi to RFK stadium and bid farewell.
- 7:57 am. I arrived home, tired yet alert to view the remainder of that day’s events from the comfort of my home.

For some, the pilgrimage was almost mystical. For others, curiosity – or simply being a part of history – was the impetus for the journey. The overwhelming majority endured the long trek to honor a good man with the love and respect which is his due.

Eight hours for 30 seconds is a small price to pay to laud a man who devoted his life to his family, to his country and to his fellow man. My pilgrimage gained a greater depth and deeper significance due to the added dimensions of personal sacrifice and a shared communal experience.

Due to Ronald Reagan’s vision, courage and kindness, Americans realized a new golden age. Reagan provided the intellectual rationale and the moral imperative for global freedom and underscored the inherent dignity and worth resident within every human being. Reagan democratized capitalism even as he liberated subjugated peoples from tyrannical regimes.

Moreover, his love for people transcended the demarcations of race, gender, class and political persuasion. Ronald Reagan was truly a man for all people.

Ronald Reagan’s legacy will endure even though memories may fail or hearts grow faint. New generations will recapture his vision and his spirit of conviction and compassion will long endure.



The Honorable
Ronald Wilson Reagan
February 6, 1911–June 5, 2004
Fortieth President
of the
United States of America

In Final Tribute from a Grateful Nation
The Lying in State of President Reagan
The Rotunda, United States Capitol
Washington, D. C.
June 9, 10, and 11, 2004