

Memphians celebrate - 'We Must do' -- Civil rights veterans impressed with president's reverberating call to action

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) - January 21, 2009

- Author/Byline: Zack McMillin / zmcmillin@commercialappeal.com
- Edition: Final
- Section: News
- Page: A10

WASHINGTON - From the steps of the Capitol, where Barack Obama took the oath of office to become the 44th president of the United States, a classic American scene formed.

Past the celebrities up so close (Denzel and Beyonce and Oprah and Jay-Z), on past the American heroes (the Medal of Honor recipients and the now-elderly Tuskegee Airmen, bundled for the cold) and far beyond the statue of Ulysses S. Grant on horseback, a crowd on The National Mall ("the people's lawn") estimated at more than 1 million shimmered under the cold, winter sun.

Their roars would wash up the hill seconds after officials were introduced or words were spoken, responding to giant screens placed throughout the nation's capital. The crowd's handheld American flags would send a red wave flowing past the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial and back again.

"Magnificent," proclaimed Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles after it was over. The pastor of Monumental Baptist Church in South Memphis and a veteran of the civil rights movement, the 75-year-old Kyles chose not to risk the long lines and frigid weather.

But even from his hotel here - and that of Rev. Benjamin Hooks - the grandness of the moment hit with force.

"Watching the whole ceremony just brought tears to my eyes," said Hooks, the NAACP national director from 1977 to 1992. "Seeing the crowd - I've been to four or five inaugurations and all were big but I never saw any like I did today."

That it was for the the nation's first African-American president meant much to both men, but to see the outpouring of affection for Obama added another layer of significance.

"The speech," Kyles said, "was phenomenal. I couldn't keep the tears from flowing when he was talking. I can't explain it. It was quite moving."

To Hooks, 83 and a child of the Depression, the speech worked because it stayed rooted in calls for service, for sacrifice and for what Obama called a "return to these truths."

"There was no question it was a person-to-person speech designed for us to listen and do what we need to do to move this country forward," Hooks said.

One section in particular sounded much like the speeches that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave in the final year of his life: "We have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task."

As Obama took the oath of office from Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, a strong wind whipped the Capitol's enormous American flag hard to the left.

Yet, Hooks and Kyles noticed how strongly Obama resisted ideological indulgence.

"The time has come," Obama declared, referencing Scripture, "to set aside childish things."

That did not stop many in the crowd. When "George Walker Bush" was announced, an unmistakably large contingent chanted: "Hey hey hey ... goodbye!"

But Hooks and Kyles said they believe the day will be remembered for Obama's poise and the crowd's enthusiasm. They say they hope Obama's call for the necessary "work to be done" can rally a country they both believe needs renewal.

Indeed, on a bustling, noisy day, perhaps the most quiet came after the new president gave the nation a to-do list he said demanded "action, bold and swift."

"All this we can do," Obama declared.

And then, his voice rising: "All this we must do . "

Obama paused, and from out past the tower of cameras and the suddenly still crowd, the echoing words traveled back to him.

- Zack McMillin: 529-2564

• **Caption:** PhotosMatthew Craig/The Commercial Appeal and Elise Amendola/Associated Press and Susan Walsh/Associated Press
Seizing the moment: Linda Delaney (left) and her mother, Mollie Delaney of Gilmore, Ark., join hundreds of others at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis who gathered to watch the broadcast of Barack Obama's inauguration on Tuesday. It's done at last: President Barack Obama sits with his family after taking the oath of office at the Capitol. To be a part of it: A crowd of at least 1 million people braves the chill on the National Mall for a glimpse of history to listen to newly sworn President Obama's inaugural address Tuesday.

• *Index terms:* president us inauguration memphis trip reaction civil rights

• *Record:* 125DE4C74C2F6A50

• *Copyright:* Copyright (c) 2009 The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, TN