

So Help Me God
by Georganne Schultz

“We are not this story's author, who fills time and eternity with His purpose. Yet His purpose is achieved in our duty: and our duty is fulfilled in service to one another.”

-George W. Bush, First Inaugural Address

I tried to ignore the phone ringing at 1:20 in the morning. I had finally crashed around midnight, but my sleep had been fitful and cold. The last thing I wanted to do was talk to anyone about anything.

The square footage of my shared office had grown significantly smaller with the air mattress parked in the center of the room, but my coworker dozed away huddled next to the wall. Sleeping in your office is never a good thing, especially when you get a phone call in the dead of night. Groggy and irritable, I picked up the phone. Another coworker had a parking problem on the other side of the Potomac, in Virginia, but I was stuck in the district for at least the next 24 hours. We were separated by a river and a bride, but also by the crowds pouring into Washington, DC for the Presidential Inauguration. There was nothing I could do to help from my overcrowded office at the corner of 3rd and C Street. The parking issue would have to resolve itself, or at least that's what I told myself as I crawled back to my now-deflating air mattress and tried to freeze into sleep.

Four hours later and still devoid of any true rest, I got up and tried not to think about how long the day would be. January 20. We waited months for this day to come, but all I could anticipate after that long, dark night was the promise of a hot shower. The water heater, however, had other plans. After standing under what I was sure was freezing rain for three minutes, I gave up hope for warm water and dressed for the greatest change of command ceremony I would ever see.

The dark blue suit I had worn for more than five years was familiar, its three steel-colored buttons closing the heavy wool jacket, but it wasn't ever comfortable. The pants of the same deep navy color were designed to rest on a woman's natural waist, which felt anything but natural. But such is the nature of a military uniform designed by men. A rainbow of military ribbons hovered on my left side while a silver rectangle announcing my surname held the right. I

gave once last rub to the golden second lieutenant bars, remembering the day my sisters pinned them to my shoulders. That day, less than two years earlier, I said my oath of office and commissioned in the US Air Force. Today, a similar oath would be honored, but not by me. It was another's turn to say the words, "So help me God."

The first time the Oath of Office escaped my lips was September 11, 2003, and I didn't really know what I was getting into. I had turned 18 less than a month before and entered my college's ROTC program with uncertainty. But I loved the way the American flag reflected in the officer's US insignia on that clear blue afternoon and what it meant to be serving a nation. That was all I needed to carry me through four years of blending college life and military service, and when the spring of senior year came, I felt I was ready to uphold that sacred oath. I now hoped Barack Obama felt the same, ready to uphold his own Oath of Office.

In the early, dark hours of January 20, 2009, I fumbled through the streets of the District with the crowds who were just hoping to get a glimpse of history. Bright white tents marked security checkpoints, each like a northern star for spectators willing to brave the cold. But I was headed elsewhere – straight to the Capitol, the dome moon-like in its glow.

A brief exchange with the Capitol police allowed me to pass, but only after showing the golden ticket: an "All Access" US Secret Service credential. I entered the Capitol through the House side door and headed towards the area known as the Crypt. My shoes clicked and echoed down the hall, bouncing back to me from the magnificent arcs above me. The only souls on this level were security guards, but down the steps and into the chute it seemed like the dead had awoken. At 6:45 a.m. this hallway, called the chute, was teeming with more guards, escorts and guys on headsets running the show. This seen had been practiced before, but today was game day, and the carpet had literally been rolled for the occasion. I looked around for my closest ally and coordinator with Congress, Bill Sweeney, who turned to me and said, "Daschle is out."

That was the beginning of the breakdown of what I had worked countless hours on in the past two weeks: the script for the Presidential Swearing In Ceremony. My goal in the last fortnight was not to write the next president's Inaugural address – it was to account for every second of the ceremony on the steps of the Capitol. I was also responsible for anything the announcer said, from introducing the first choir to the president-elect. The script was constantly in review, and even though I had sent out a "final version" last night, I knew it wouldn't last.

Removing Tom Daschle from the announcer's remarks was just the start of many red marks on my hard copy. Timing was everything for this script, and I still wanted the program to be perfect. But more than anything, I wanted to hear the words "So help me God" said before noon, mostly because the Twentieth Amendment of the Constitution demanded it. Nobody wanted to go against the Constitution on Inauguration Day, least of all me. So I planned the script down to the second and hoped for the best.

The task of writing the script fell to me in early January because of a "Congressional oversight." Or at least that's what my leaders in the Armed Forces Inaugural Committee told me. The committee, AFIC, is formed every four years specifically to support the Presidential Inauguration. The military group includes people from each service, and it works directly with presidential staffers, Congress, Secret Service and Capitol police to plan and execute all of the Inaugural activities.

I had been working on the plans for the Inauguration since October, but it was mostly helping with the parade or training some new arrivals to our committee. I was excited to be in the city for such a momentous event, but my part was practically nonexistent. Until January 5, that is.

My boss, a Navy officer came to me that day with a unique opportunity that she said would completely throw me for a loop. She was right. Of course, barely thinking it through, I agreed to take on drafting the script, but I honestly had no idea what that meant at the time. I was offered the opportunity based on recommendations from my leaders and the fact that I had the most time available to dedicate to the document. I wasn't exactly "hand-picked" but it was good enough for me. A copy of the script from President Bush's 2005 Inauguration landed squarely on my desk and I was told to get to work.

The only other document I had to work with was an extremely detailed timeline from the Congressional Committee for the Inauguration. It had the movement of every celebrity, senator and VIP in the Capitol on the day of the swearing in – including the vice president and president elect. My meager two years as a military officer didn't prepare for this overwhelming amount of information or instant access to sensitive material. And yet, a public script needed to be produced with this jumble of names and times. I may have bit off more than I could chew, but it was too late now to admit it.

So help me, God.

I had to start somewhere. Second by second, I began mapping out the program: when the Marine band would play, the order of the former presidents and how long “Hail to the Chief” lasts. I lived in the details of that script.

The next two weeks before the Inauguration were a dizzying disarray of words and numbers. I knew that “Ladies and Gentlemen” would be said 32 times, that Aretha Franklin’s song would last 3 minutes and 50 seconds, and that the Inaugural address would last no more than 20 minutes. What I didn’t know was how to be present in such a historic moment.

When I got to the Capitol on the morning of the Inauguration, it felt like business as usual, in a chaotic way, of course. We had completed three lengthy practice runs over the past nine days. The only change now was that the blue carpet with red trim was ready for trampling. And there were a million people outside.

I helped take care of some more last minute changes for the script, and soon enough it was 9:50 a.m., our scheduled start time. The program began with the announcement of the San Francisco Boys and Girls Choir, but since I couldn’t see or hear the choir, (they were up on the terrace level) it still vaguely felt like a practice. It didn’t feel like history in the making, or whatever phrase you want to throw at it.

It wasn’t until 10:43 a.m. that I felt the weight of the event. The senators had been announced and were passing through the doors down to the platform. Unaware of my presence, they were chatting with one another, getting ready to face the cold and the cameras. I was standing to the right of the doors to the platform when I spotted Senator John Kerry and Senator John McCain. Seeing those two men reminded me not of defeat, but instead of what service is about: continuing to support your country even if it your plans to the boss were mangled along the way.

A moment later every senator had exited the doors and the script began to slide, second by second, into tardiness. We were three minutes behind, but the former presidents and vice presidents passing through caught my attention, as well they should. I had never met any previous or present Commander in Chief, but now the past thirty years of leadership were just strolling by me, the lowly second lieutenant. It was that moment I remembered some very important training that taught me lieutenants should neither be seen nor heard, so I watched these giants of history pass by in silence.

The digital clock behind me, with its looming red numbers, brought me back to work. I saw that somewhere between the entrance of the president-elect's Cabinet designees and Michelle Obama we lost 14 minutes. A slight panic started running through my mind that we might not make our noon deadline to swear in the next president.

In the midst of the frantic coming and going of people and orders shouted, someone caught my attention in the shadows of the hall. It was a man readying his goodbye to glory. President George Bush came down the chute with a quiet dignity, and I was reminded of the personal sacrifice it takes to lead our country. I knew that sacrifice was more than enduring economic fluctuation and bad press. It was what every American president does – gives up his own freedom to ensure ours. Barack Obama would be next.

I don't know exactly what time Mr. Obama came through the chute. By then I had stopped worrying about the deadline and writing down the lost minutes, which seemed trivial now. A flurry of photographers filled the chute, but the next leader of the free world stood calm – solemn, even – while the light flooded his face. He looked older now. There were no friendly handshakes, no last congratulations for the glorious burden he was accepting.

Just silence.

Resolute, he stood staring out into the sea of humanity waiting to greet him. It wasn't until the announcer began to say, "Barack H. Obama" that the president broke his bearing. He just smiled and took a step forward into the unknown.

At 12:05:51 Barack Obama asked for God's help in serving as our 44th president. I had missed my deadline, but in the end my script didn't really matter. Instead, I saw the true beauty of the moment in the thousands of American flags raised to the clear blue sky.