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John Agnew: Witnessing history is harder than you think

John Agnew

Those who follow the news closely are aware of the recent Porta-Potti brouhaha in our nation's capital.

They were anticipating a crowd of up to two million for the inauguration, so 10,000 Porta-Pottis were procured. I saw a picture of them, shoulder-to-shoulder (as it were) in a big field, ready to be trucked to the national mall. I also saw a picture of an interior, which seemed to be brand new and the latest iteration of mobile sanitary facilities. I mean, this was plush, with a mirror and sink and soap and towels and everything but a Sears catalog and telephone. (I once stayed in a hotel where the bathrooms had a telephone, and Alice says I have not been the same since. She refused to use the phone, because she feared the echo effect would reveal where she was calling from. Convent-school girls are like that.)

My model airplane club has had such a facility for many years, giving me a front-row seat from which to witness their evolution from barely-better-than-a-bush to a-whole-lot-better-than-a-bush (and way better than a tree). I have also observed that, absent frequent cleaning and respectful use by an often-uncaring public, they can be a whole-lot-worse-than-a-bush, as well. There's no free lunch, even for Porta-Pottis.

Despite my naturally acquired expertise, I had to yield to higher authority, a man in the upper tier of Porta-Potti management, who said that 10,000 would not be adequate, and that the accepted ratio was one for 100 people. I would rather not know how they arrived at that figure. Anyway, two million people would require... let's see, bring down the naught, carry the one... 20,000 "units" (as we Porta-Potti experts say) for optimum convenience and comfort. Despite the recommendation, authorities planned to add only another 2,500. Perhaps there was a disagreement over the math, and I admit that all those zeros are intimidating. If I am wrong, don't tell me.

Before we go any further, allow me to point out that "Porta-Potti" is a brand name, one among many (Port-a-San, Port-o-let, etc.), and I don't know which brand was chosen, or whether there was open bidding or a sweetheart deal done with the help of a venal congressman. We may ever know.

I began to wonder what they did at inaugurations before portable toilets were invented. Perhaps people were made of sterner stuff in those days, inured to hardships in general, and unlikely to complain. Let's hope so.

Forearmed with this information, I watched carefully when the big day came. I did not envy the people on the scene. I know that many spent long hours on a bus to reach D.C., all so they could freeze while seeing almost nothing, not even the Porta-Pottis.

You know how bad it is to have a window seat in an airplane, and then stumble and crawl over only two people to get to the aisle? I looked at the people in the middle of those herds, and questioned how many times they would say "Excuse me" as they stumbled and crawled and pushed their way to the edge and to the Porta-Pottis. While doing that, they would be desperately trying to "hold it," another technical term we experts use, and maybe they could do two things at once and maybe they couldn't - the ladies, especially. Say they actually completed this mission and then tried to return to their friends, somewhere in the middle of about 100,000 people dressed alike. This wasn't Disney

World, you know, so you couldn't plan on returning to the intersection of Goofy and Pluto. Realistically, you might expect to rejoin your friends at the bus, wherever that is.

What if, after all this trauma, you find there is no toilet paper? Do you stick your head out the door and ask if anyone has some? "You're talking to a desperate man, here," you might plead, but those people don't know you and might think you're a pervert. By this time you probably look like one, so you can't fault them for being wary.

I'm glad I could watch the inauguration on television. I carried a portable set into my bathroom, just in case. Alice, I assure you, never runs out of toilet paper.

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