

The Trash Was Historic, Too

Workers Pull an All-Nighter to Clear Spectators' Detritus



Crews, seen through a roll of dismantled temporary fencing, remove the gloves, containers, newspapers and other items left on the Mall after Tuesday's inauguration of President Obama. (By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post)

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The day after America's biggest yard party was all about the cleanup. Washington trash trucks hauled away at least 130 tons of garbage after the inauguration of President Obama, with more to go. National Park Service workers picked up almost 100 tons on the Mall and near the White House.

Because most trash cans had been removed for security reasons and a record-breaking crowd gathered downtown, the mountain of rubbish left behind was of historic proportions.

"More than any Fourth of July, more than any event we've seen," Park Service spokesman William Line said.

The detritus included handwarmer packets, bottles, food, newspapers, blankets, gloves, coolers and a table or two, in addition to items bought from street vendors.

"They left behind Obama hats, Obama bags, Obama socks," said Mafara Hobson, spokeswoman for Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D). "People left behind a lot of trash. A lot of it was the vendors along the parade route, too."

About 110 city workers were assembled downtown at 6 p.m. Tuesday, ready to begin their all-night cleanup. But with crowds still thick in the streets, the hardest work had to wait, said Nancee Lyons, a Department of Public Works spokeswoman who watched some of the overnight cleanup.

"There was so much trash left behind. Piles and piles," Lyons said. "When all those people were there, you didn't realize how bad it was. But once they left, we saw the work ahead."

City workers on double and triple shifts tackled the peaks, determined to get the garbage out of downtown before the morning rush hour, Lyons said. "People left so many of their personal effects. Blankets, sleeping bags," Lyons said. "Then the places where the vendors were, some of them just left their tables behind."

Some of the mess was attributed to a dearth of trash cans, which some folks complained about.

Lyons agreed there were not enough. She said that because of "security issues," many receptacles had been removed, and the agency was not allowed to put extras out.

The city used 20 street sweepers to push aside the litter. Twelve leaf vacuums sucked up the garbage in giant tubes, and 12 compactors followed, making the debris more manageable, she said.

The rest -- papers, cups and blankets caught in metal barricades lining the streets and bleachers still on the sidewalks -- had to be picked up by hand, she said.

The trash generated at all other events ever held on the Mall paled compared with what was left Tuesday, Line said.

After the last firework has fizzled on an average Fourth of July, the Mall's major annual event, the Park Service deals with about 17 tons of garbage. On an average day, there are about three tons, he said.

On the Mall, the cleanup began at 8 p.m. Tuesday, when about 300 Park Service workers and 100 volunteers from the Presidential Inaugural Committee headed to the grassy expanse with garbage bags. They picked up trash throughout the night using spiked poles, Line said.

By yesterday morning, thousands of spent hand warmers were gone. Bottles, cans, wrappers, papers, gloves, hats, blankets, sleeping bags, American flags and folding chairs had been removed, and only flocks of birds were left to feast on high-protein snack crumbs.

As the skeletons of Jumbotrons and speakers were being dismantled and flatbed trucks hauled away 17 miles of metal barricades and chain-link fencing, workers maneuvered around the summer-size tour groups that stayed behind to take in the Mall's attractions in less-crowded circumstances.

Commuters returning to work downtown negotiated double-parked vans that were filling up with tables and chairs. On office building rooftops and in parks, workers dismantled white tents, which collapsed like so many ruined souffles.