

Danville News Column
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“Glaciers, Applause, and High-beams”
Word Count: 750

It is Monday. The Weather Channel predicts more snow arriving late tomorrow. I am ready. I purchased a better shovel, this time steel to replace my wrinkled aluminum one. I'm tired of stepping on them to straighten the edge. Plus, I'm very glad last week I was smart enough to trudge out in the morning and shovel off my driveway after we were hit by 5 inches. Now my driveway, basking in its sloping southern exposure, is pure macadam, unlike portions of my backyard still in shadow. Snow there is ice. The stacked plastic chairs are frozen together and will be until about May.

I've learnt it's smart to shovel quickly, because during one bad winter I discovered how the glaciers formed. I had neglected shoveling my driveway after a particularly annoying snowfall. It must have been a busy week. Instead of shoveling, I ploughed my car down as fast as I could and fishtailed my way to church.

Another snow fell the next day. No longer was the snow on the driveway light and fluffy, now the white was all ice, caked and cold. Snow shovels would need to be replaced by spades chipping away if I wanted to get my car back up the driveway and safe in garage.

Ignore the snow today, well, it's only worse when the next snow falls.

Time, then, for some serious shoveling.

Which illustrates why I'm looking forward to hearing next Tuesday's State of the Union address. How does President Obama intend to shovel? Will Congress will grab a scraper and get to work? How about all of us this year resolving simply to do our job?

You know what would be a great way to start? You know what would be really helpful? Bi-partisan seating is fine, but here's my suggestion: I'd really like to hear a speech. Sure, it fits my profession, but I appreciate intelligent rhetoric. We need it. Words matter. I have a confession to make: I am a State of the Union junkie. It started with my father and me listening to Eisenhower together. But, alas, my interest is waning, largely due to all the canned applause that goes on. What is this, the Oscars?

It really went awry with Reagan mugging to the crowd. Ronald had a hard time forgetting he wasn't acting. Then the others followed suit, replacing solid speechifying with vapid strings of clever slogans designed to trigger applause from their side of the chamber. Immediately, it became a competition between Democrats and Republicans: who could out applaud whom?

Meanwhile, we're getting buried by the chill of this winter of discontent. The snow of bad wars badly begun has fallen. No wonder we are broke, considering our nation has been waging war since 1941.

The snow falls. We're getting buried beneath competing budgets, indebtedness, confusion between austerity and investment.

We're getting buried, as someone lately said, by our addiction to politics displacing an appetite to govern.

We're getting buried by our confrontational clamor to prove ourselves right rather than to listen and discern what is true, what is best.

We can handle the work. We're big boys and girls. We can reject the empty values of materialism. We can step up and do the chores that need to be done.

So, Mr. President, you could telegraph a helpful message by insisting that all those assembled for this august moment and somber occasion refrain from clapping. We are tired of it. Please stop the applause. Save it for the Superbowl. Besides, it might be fun to see the pundits squirm, unable to tally the applause lines and form an opinion.

This isn't entertainment. This is government.

Today also is Monday, January 17. It's supposed to be the holiday commemorating the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. Recently I re-read a snippet from one of his sermons where he summed up his entire approach to life by talking about driving at night and dimming your high-beams. One night, he and his brother were driving a long stretch of back-roads in Georgia. His brother was getting angrier and angrier by how the cars coming toward him rudely kept their high-beams on. He got really mad. So he swore that when the next car comes at him with its high-beams glaring, he's going to flick on his at the last minute and get even. "Don't do that," Martin replied. "You'll cause a crash. Somebody on the road has got to show some sense."

Who will show sense first?