

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Capitol Steps

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On March 12, 1990, disabled activists abandoned their wheelchairs and crawled up the 78 steps of the Capitol's West Front to demonstrate their passion and embarrass Congress into passing the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The gay rights community had the Stonewall Inn uprising, African-Americans had the Edmund Pettus Bridge and The Crawl, as it's become known, became the disability community's iconic mobilization moment.

The Capitol steps have hosted another iconic moment, one we will never forget. Raging, marauding, hate-filled attackers came up those steps, not to petition the government for redress - as the Constitution provides and even encourages - but to destroy the government that disability activists crawled up the steps to influence.

Speaking truth to power used to mean telling the powerful the truth, despite the difficulty posed by the chain of command. Now, speaking truth to power means educating powerful, uninformed, armed and dangerous people, who have been fed lies by the weak to gain advantage. Their rage is hard to comprehend if you don't believe the lies, but they are powerful.

The rioters do not respect government. Those who crawled up the Capitol steps obviously did. "Please listen to us; please acknowledge us; please take our needs and rights seriously," is what the crawlers meant. It was powerful. It was peaceful. It was eloquent.

Disability rights activists work hard to convince government, the public and other people with disabilities that America is a land of opportunity and that growth continues to create new opportunities. Accommodating people with disabilities, therefore, is worth it, because society, and of course, the economy grows by their contribution. The rioters, on the other hand, believe America is done growing: that they are losing every time someone else is gaining. They were on the Capitol steps not because they are seeking opportunity, but to maintain control over who gets what.

Disabled Americans, discriminated against for years, isolated, segregated, unemployed and ignored, had faith that government could solve their problems or, at least, mitigate them. Government, however, also created a collective consciousness about the rights of people with disabilities. Americans now believe that not accommodating people with disabilities is wrong. Government led them to that conclusion.

The rioters had no faith that those in the Capitol could make things better. Most of us believe differently. We expect more from government than we realize. Rarely, however, does government make the citizenry aware of Americans own moral failures, like the Congress and Pres. George H.W. Bush did in 1990, when together they enacted the ADA. Elected officials - Republicans and Democrats - aspired to make America a better place and, in fact, were out in front of society leading the way. Both *The NY Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* opposed the ADA, i.e., the left and the right, but Congress and the President did the right thing.

In 1978, I was so new to Washington that in order to meet Sen. Jacob Javits, I ran up the Senate steps to doors that do not open. I was directed by a guard to an entrance at ground level. I was ushered into a room, right off the Senate floor, to wait for the Senator, as Ted Kennedy and George McGovern walked right past me. I was awestruck.

For decades, however, I have expressed skepticism about politics and politicians, but whenever I get to the Capitol, the marble and the granite, the portraits, statues and flags remind me of how proud I am to be participating in the process of making America better.

The deadly, despicable, moronic attack on the Capitol reminds us all to cherish our rights and protect our nation from bigotry, ignorance and intolerance.