

The Mother of all Parades

Washington's Constitution Avenue will be the main drag of today's 'Victory Parade route, with Stormin' Norman marching at the head of more than 8000 troops. The last time anything comparable of this kind occurred here was more than a generation ago -- back in 1945 with General Eisenhower riding alongside that year's parade route in a military jeep; and before that General Pershing at the end of World War I in 1918 and General Ulysses Grant at the end of the Civil War last century.

AT 5:30 am last Sunday morning, as the sun was barely rising over this already sweltering American capital, trumpets blared and soldiers marched along one of the main Washington thoroughfares.

Constitution Avenue stretches from Memorial Bridge which connects the District of Columbia with Virginia and both Arlington National Cemetery and the Pentagon. It then proceeds alongside the grassy areas known as "The Mall" that adorn the imposing Washington Monument all the way up to Capitol Hill.

It's this Constitution Avenue that will be the main drag of today's "Victory Parade" route. And so it was here that last Sunday's early morning military rehearsal took place -- complete with General Norman Schwarzkopf stand-in -- startling early morning joggers.

Today's parade, with victorious "Stormin' Norman" marching at the head of more than 8,000 troops, has been a very long time in the making.

The last time anything comparable of this kind occurred here was more than a generation ago -- back in 1945 with General Eisenhower riding alongside that year's parade route in a military jeep.

The great majority of the million or so Americans who will line today's parade route, and nearly all of the soldiers who will be marching down Constitution Avenue, hadn't even been born back then.

And before that 1945 parade, which of course symbolised the Allied victory in World War II, you have to think back to General John J. Pershing in 1918 at the end of the World War I who like General Ulysses S. Grant at the end of the Civil War rode

their horses among the troops.

But today's festivities are not limited to just this "Victory Parade". That part of the day's events is only scheduled to take a few hours as the bands, troops, floats, and overhead air flotillas stretch out along the five-km parade route that begins near the Capitol and end at the Pentagon.

This Saturday is actually a day-long national celebration--memorial service, parade, concert, fireworks -- of a kind that really has never happened before for this will be the first time the whole country will be brought together by live television coverage of such a spectacular event.

And because at least the parade is going to be repeated in

New York City just two days later -- actually the New York parade is being touted to be about three times as large as Washington's -- these days of early June are taking on characteristics of a huge multi-day national party.

America's victory party will begin early this morning at Arlington National Cemetery where President Bush will attend a memorial service and wreath-laying, along with the Kuwaiti ambassador.

And then following the parade, in the early evening about 7 pm, a special concert is expected to draw at least 20,000 troops and their family members, along with many thousands of spectators. At the concert Secretary of Defence Dick

From



Mark A. Bruzonsky

Washington

General Norman Schwarzkopf



President Bush -- Victorious commander

Cheney will be presented with the first of the newly minted silver dollars commemorating the Coalition War victory.

Finally at 9 pm there will be a huge fireworks extravaganza rivalling what normally happens here only on Independence Day, the 4th of July.

Indeed, this whole victory celebration was originally supposed to be held on July 4. But then, for two major reasons, Washington organisers decided to push it up to June 8.

First of all, those planning the Washington celebration didn't want to be upstaged by New York City -- a place a lot of Americans don't really consider quite American. More problematic though was concern about Congress which by

July 4 is out of session and out of town.

Beyond the squabbling between New York and Washington parade organisers, there is one serious element of controversy -- how to deal with Syria.

Many Americans, most especially the minions of Jewish Americans who work tirelessly in support of Israel, continue to view Syria as an enemy state. And so protests are already being heard about the inclusion of the Syrian flag in the parade march down Constitution Avenue and the possible presence of the Syrian ambassador on the reviewing stand.

"War, like politics, makes the strangest bedfellows," *Washington Post* columnist

Richard Cohen reminds us all. "For the sake of building a coalition against Saddam Hussein, the United States embraced Syrian. But that war is over and it would be wonderful if we could hear an expression of American values from the Bush administration.... Now the Syrian flag will be carried down Constitution Avenue. No Marine should be chosen for such duty."

It's even possible that a delegation of American Jews, along with some family members of those who were killed on the PanAm 103 flight that was bombed out of the air over Scotland or of Marines killed in 1983 in Beirut, will be visible with signs and shouts challenging the Syrian involve-

ment in the day's festivities.

Furthermore, not everyone in America is going to be celebrating during the next few days. For the US remains polarised over the wisdom of the Mid-east war, and there's still a lot of uneasiness that what happened in recent months may not yet really be over.

But the dissenters had their day back in January when they brought their own troops to march through Washington's streets -- a few hundred thousand strong. Yet they know they lost. And today, as most of the world follows the celebration events on CNN, it's not like many of them will be remembered or even asked to comment.