

Monday, September 18, 2006

I often compare notes with my congressional colleagues about the cultural peculiarities of our districts. Virtually every public event—school visits, town meetings, Rotary speeches—has its own veneer, depending on what part of the country you happen to be in.

I thought about this on Sunday, while participating in the Cow Harbor Day Parade in Northport. Cow Harbor Day has become a Fall highlight on Long Island, attracting well over 10,000 (or so I'm told).

At Cow Harbor Day, Rep. Israel stops to chat with Ric Bruckenthal, father of Nathan Bruckenthal, who was killed in action in Iraq in 2004.

Some of my southern colleagues tell me that when they march in parades, they are expected to toss candy to children on the sidewalks. My guess is that if I tried that, I'd get about a fifty-percent return; and would spend most of the parade trying to protect myself from 95-mile an hour Lifesavers threatening my life.

As a Member of the House Blue Dog Caucus, I spend a considerable amount of time with rural Members from the deepest parts of the Deep South. In those places, when they show-up for a small town parade, the high school marching band greets them, a red carpet is unfurled, and they make Page One of the local newspaper. In Long Island, I get to march behind the horse.

My favorite part of Cow Harbor, however, is the instant feedback I receive from my constituents:

- "Who's that?" "I dunno. Some politician I guess."

- "Is that Steve Israel or Steve Levy?"

On Sunday, however, all the festivities -- the school bands and bass drums, the fire engine sirens and crowds cheering -- were drowned-out by the voice of a solitary woman who left the comfort of the sidewalk to speak to me at the end of the parade.

She told me that her husband, a Vietnam Veteran, had Parkinson's disease, and my office had been helpful to him. As tears welled in her eyes, we hugged, and I asked if I could meet him.

I had spent this Cow Harbor Day in a convertible driven by two veterans. And I watched as other veterans marched proudly to the cheers of thousands. We should support them, not just at parades, but everyday. Not just by waving at them when they march by now, on a warm

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September Day, but by repaying them for the marches they took yesterday, to the most dangerous places on earth.

And it shouldn't matter what congressional district they happen to be in. Because supporting veterans is an American obligation—as American as apple pie and parades.

Posted by: SI