As the leaves blow across the open avenues, with them go the scraps of the past that tell so much of the story of our nation. From a passing car south of the Ellipse, the imagination can pick out the unmistakable frame of Teddy Roosevelt, striding the South Lawn of the White House, the glint of morning light on his thick spectacles.

One can see as well the silhouette of the National Christmas Tree in 1941, darkened in time of war, a blackout in force against the possibility of an air attack that never came.

There is something about the holidays that summons these thoughts and the emotions they bring. Maybe it is the shortened daytime and the reliance on man-made light that so stirs the soul. Perhaps it is Christmas itself, with all the love and nostalgia it evokes, the tender remembrance of those with whom we have spent Christmases past and whom we long to see again soon. Likely it is also the quiet, with Congress away and tourism slow, so that for a brief time this national city seems like a town made for its inhabitants alone.

For me, the memories that return most powerfully during Christmas time in Washington are memories of leadership and courage. Leadership and courage are themselves most powerful when they embody moral leadership and courage of character.

Abraham Lincoln embodied both of these traits. A few weeks ago I had the privilege of gathering with more than a dozen members of Congress to listen to Allen Guelzo, an historian and dean at Eastern College in Pennsylvania, who spoke on the spiritual and intellectual life of our 16th President.

The event was held in one of the windowless basement rooms of the U.S. Capitol. It was a good meal and a great talk. But it was more than that. As I looked at the faces of the members of Congress around me, some old, some young, some new, some retiring, I realized how genuine their interest was in finding, and renewing, the character of our country through understanding the character of those who have led it.

How difficult that task will be, they surely know. The shadow of the last few decades has fallen heavily across their path. On all sides, they see the most dismal of interest group politics, the multiplication of pork barrels in Congress, the moral decay among leaders of both political parties, and the growing cynicism of the electorate.

Why, with so much at stake today, does so little of our public debate have *gravity*?

One of the leading advisers to a potential President of the United States is revealed to be the author of a sexually explicit book titled *Promiscuities*. Just what America needs in the post-Clinton era! (Would it be a career-killer in today's Washington to be the author of a book titled *Fidelities*?)

The former Speaker of the House, resigned from Congress, enters the news again with a report that he bought an ultra-expensive wine to share with his new girlfriend, a House staff member he reportedly began seeing while still married to his second wife. The media pundits report on the quality of the vintage he chose - the wine, not the potential new wife.

The same superficiality plagues our issue debates. Social Security is up for its biennial dose of national political manipulation. This is a program headed for a demographic train wreck (too few workers paying too much in taxes) that few elected leaders are ready to discuss. The advocates of partial-birth abortion run wild through the federal judiciary, getting bans on this gruesome trade struck down because they are "vague"- disregarding the fact that the law is based on the precise description of the procedure developed by the late-term abortionist who invented it.

No wonder so many good people shrink from all involvement in politics and public policy. By its fruits it has become known – and often despised.

Cynicism was not, however, the rule in the U.S. Capitol that night. The earnest search of these men and women for the renewal of our legacy would have moved you. They, too, see the history of this nation and know that our land has depended on the hand of divine Providence, and depends on it still. They, too, hear the voices of those freedmen singing, and they know Who it is, Whose truth it is that set them free and will set us all free.

I walked outside this morning, and the morning star was huge in the southeast. It is a small part of God's universe, but it is an everyday majesty. So, too, is Christmas. In the light of the Incarnation, this event that illuminates all of human history, we see more clearly than ever the shabbiness of our condition, and the glory of the Savior who chose to overlook that shabbiness and walk among us.

We glimpse inside our own hearts and see the barrenness of the walls and the coldness and the wind that whips through the cracks in us. Not here, we say, this is no place for the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Here among the animals – the lowing and the bleating, the breath of beasts, the plodding of aching hooves – is no place for Him, who is Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

And He answers: "Here in your heart is my habitation. Here I knock with an infant's hand. Here I say to you, 'Be not afraid.' Take me in."

The new millennium (at least by the definition of computers, which seems to settle the matter for most of us) will dawn in a few days. In a few days we will know whether the Y2K bug is the Monster that Ate Manhattan or just another killer tomato. Whatever happens, within short order we humans will go on to scare each other about the next bug, and there are plenty of candidates for the job. One of them may even be a *real* virus.