

The Washington Post *Democracy Dies in Darkness*

A Veterans Day snowstorm totally fooled forecasters 30 years ago

By [Jason Samenow](#)

November 10, 2017



On the eve of Veterans Day in 1987, forecasters said no more than an inch of wet snow would fall in the Washington area. Some predicted rain. Just two days before, it had been nearly 70 degrees. The air wasn't cold enough for much snow, forecasters said, and the ground was too warm for much to stick.

But early Veterans Day morning, a gentle snow began that quickly intensified. By midmorning, snow was pouring down at a crippling clip of up to three inches an hour. Thunder boomed. Lightning flashed. A freak thunder-snowstorm was underway.

When the storm finally relented late that afternoon, nearly a foot of snow had accumulated in Washington, a record for the month of November that stands today.

In most Washington winter storms, the heaviest snow falls west and north of the Beltway, but this time it concentrated along and just east of the Interstate 95 corridor. Parts of Prince George's County received as many as 18 inches.

The surprise snowstorm caught motorists off-guard all around the region. The snow fell so hard and so fast that the Beltway turned into a parking lot. Plows could not get through and some cars remained stranded for over 24 hours.

Suffice to say, meteorologists had egg in their face.

Veterans Day Snowstorm D.C.1987, Weather Su...





FOX5 meteorologist Sue Palka's report following the surprise 1987 Veterans Day snowstorm.

Thirty years later, it's entertaining to hear the storm stories of meteorologists and weather enthusiasts who witnessed this event. I reached out to some well-known meteorologists as well as Capital Weather Gang contributors to share their memories, and then conclude with my own. Some recollections were lightly edited for format and length.

We welcome you to share your memories of the storm in the comment area.

Louis Uccellini

Then: Snowstorm researcher at NASA

Now: Director of the National Weather Service

I was working at NASA's at Goddard Space Flight Center, leading an effort to better understand East Coast snowstorms

When I woke up on November 11, I knew from the day before, we had a chance of precipitation with a system expected to develop along a frontal zone off the East Coast. We were not sure it would be snow. ... So the first thing I looked at when I woke up was the thermometer which read in the low 30s. And it was snowing lightly shortly thereafter with some of the snow sticking on the grass. Not on the streets.

Then the snow stopped up in Columbia as the heavier snow continued in Pennsylvania. I thought we were finished.

Then sometime in the midmorning, I received two phone calls. Jeff Homan, a contractor working with us [at NASA] called up from the lab and said over the phone something like "there seems to be another area of snow developing right over us and it is not over." Then Paul Kocin [another NASA meteorologist, who now works at the National Weather Service and is considered a leading authority on East Coast snowstorms] called: "Louis ... it is snowing down here ... hard!" Paul lived in Greenbelt right near NASA. I got pretty excited and asked "How hard?" And all Paul said was "HARD!"

At the time I did not know this would be the second phase of what turned out to be a very complex storm. If I remember correctly, even the National Weather Service midmorning update gave no indication of what was to unfold right over D.C. and points east.

About 15 minutes later, the whole sky opened up over Columbia. We went from some light snow to very heavy snow and the world turned white right before my eyes. I kept checking the temperature as it fell below freezing into the upper 20s. Snow was sticking on grass covered surface, sidewalks, streets! Not having any responsibilities for the forecast, I must admit I was enjoying every minute of it.

Bob Ryan**Then: Chief meteorologist at NBC4****Now: Retired; chair of American Meteorological Society communications committee**

I remember thinking the day (maybe mentioned on air or radio) before, “Boy if this was January, we’d be looking at a lot of snow.” Of course the climatology side of forecasts weighs heavy at times and a record mid-November snow is a 3 Sigma event [or has about a 0.3 percent chance of happening]. I did say on air, “with the cold air coming in to the storm we may even see some snow toward the end of the storm.” Of course, the next day I did say, “That was SOME snow.”

Doug Hill**Then: TV meteorologist at WUSA9****Now: Recently retired chief meteorologist at ABC7**

The two days before the '87 storm, I was off work. I remember at that time my last forecast from November 8 for November 11 was cloudy with highs around 50 degrees and a chance of rain. I remember the night before the storm everyone I watched on TV was calling for rain and temps around 50 or higher.

The standout features that actually occurred were the thundersnow, snowfall rates and traffic reports of the impacts. Viewer reaction was intense ... snow crowds loved it but most were not kind. I would like to think if I was working on November 10 I would have seen what was coming, but truth is I wouldn't have. We didn't have tools and related skill sets in those days.

Wes Junker**Then: Forecaster at the National Weather Service****Now: Winter weather expert for the Capital Weather Gang**

I remember it was raining lightly [in northern Calvert County] when I got up. I went to get the mail and right as I opened the door, I heard a crack of thunder and within minutes the rain had changed to heavy snow. The heavy snow continued through most of the day and I measured 11 inches before leaving for work.

That day I was scheduled for a shift beginning at 3 p.m. in the afternoon. I heard on the radio that the Beltway was backed up but got on and found no traffic. But that was only because farther up the road, the Beltway was shut down. When I saw all the cars jammed up ahead of me I was lucky to be at an exit ramp.

I managed to get off the Beltway and travel side roads to get to work and ended up being two hours late. One relatively new employee made it to work after being on the road eight hours, essentially at the end of her shift.

Kevin Ambrose

Then: Engineer at TRW

Now: Account manager at Adobe, weather historian and photographer for the Capital Weather Gang

The night before the storm, Bob Ryan mentioned on-air that some areas might receive their first inch of snow so I was hopeful to see snow, but I was not expecting a major snowstorm.

The snow began just after sunrise in Fairfax and accumulated about five inches by lunchtime. For lunch, I went out to the Fair Oaks Mall with two other engineers. Our car had rear-wheel drive and we did doughnuts in the mall's parking lot for about 10 minutes after lunch.

When we returned to work, we were told TRW was closing for the day and we could go home. The roads were treacherous and I got stuck several times in my Honda Prelude during my afternoon commute, but I eventually made it home to Manassas. The snow was about 10 inches deep in Manassas when I arrived home.

Jason Samenow

Then: 6th grader, Sleepy Hollow Elementary, Falls Church, Va.

Now: Capital Weather Gang chief meteorologist

The evening before the storm, I remember seeing a snowfall map on the Weather Channel that predicted 3 to 6 inches of snow just outside the D.C. area. As a wishful young snow lover, I took the liberty of projecting that amount over the D.C. area even though the official forecast was for little accumulation. I told friends and family we would be having a big snowstorm the next day.

I was elated to wake up the next morning to see light snow falling and starting to accumulate. But then, I was outraged that Fairfax County schools were opening on time. Once in class, I could not stop looking out the window. The snow just got heavier and heavier. We were dismissed in raging thundersnow between 10 and 11 a.m.

On the ride home, the school bus got stuck and I had to walk a mile back to my house. It was awesome. The storm cemented my desire to become a meteorologist.

By [Jason Samenow](#)

Jason Samenow is The Washington Post's weather editor and Capital Weather Gang's chief meteorologist. He earned a master's degree in atmospheric science and spent 10 years as a climate change science analyst for the U.S. government. He holds the Digital Seal of Approval from the National Weather Association. [Twitter](#)

