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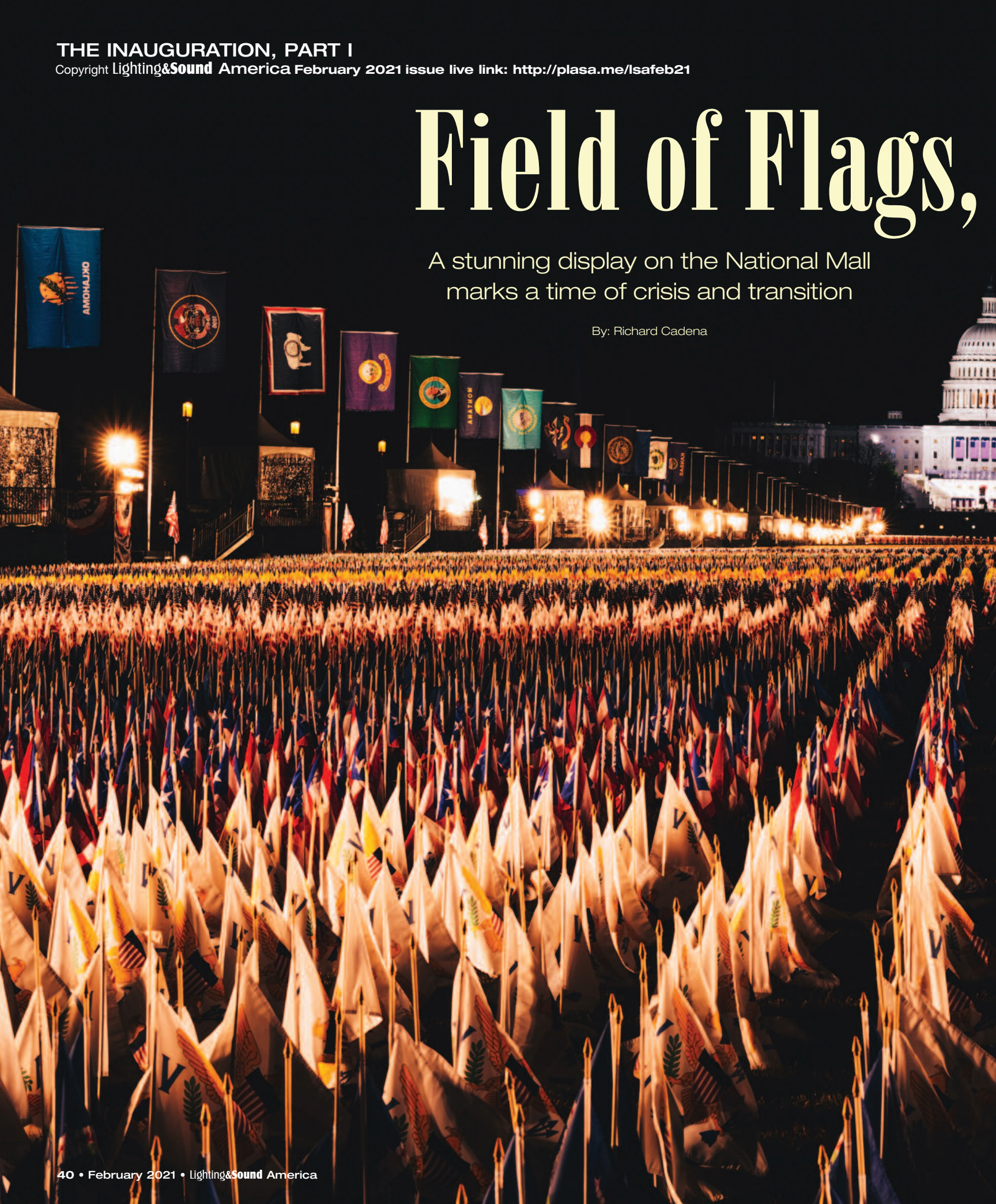
Field of Flags,

A stunning display on the National Mall marks a time of crisis and transition

By: Richard Cadena



Pillars of Light

Chris Lisle has lit some of the biggest artists of our time, including Peter Frampton, Jason Aldean, Sugarland, and many more, working on shows that were broadcast to millions of viewers. But this event, he said, "was probably one of the most high-pressure gigs I've ever done."

The event was lighting the Field of Flags, which was the backdrop to the 2021 Presidential Inauguration, and the Pillars of Light. C3 Concerts, in collaboration with the Presidential Inaugural Committee, brought Lisle into the project based on his history with the promoter.

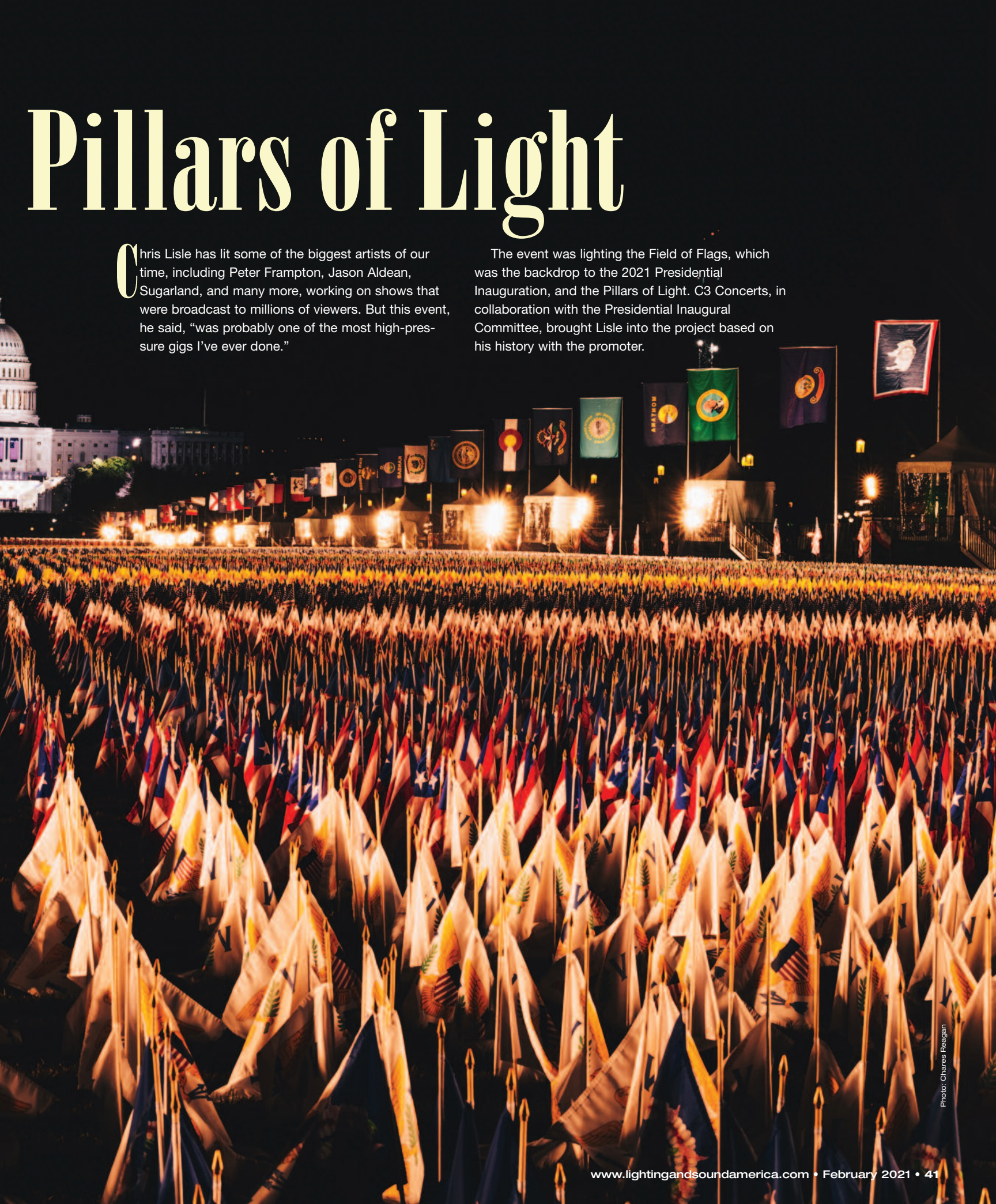


Photo: Chares Reagan

Previous spread: Elation SixPar 100 IP PARs lit the two-hundred-and-twenty-four 3' x 5' state flags lining the field. Above: Fifty-six 7,000W Syncrolite XLs (one for each state and territory), focused toward the sky, were supplied by Baltimore-based Image Engineering. Opposite: Lisle notes that the field is "literally a hundred feet or so short being a mile long" by about 250' wide.

"I've been working with C3 for the past several years on their festivals [including ACL Fest in Austin, Texas] and the NFL draft," Lisle says. "On the festivals, I do some stage lighting design, but also on a couple of them, we've done some site work, so they felt like it would be a good fit."

A mile of space

The Field of Flags was created by placing almost 200,000 American flags on the National Mall between the Washington Monument and the Capitol to represent those American who were "unable to attend the inauguration due to the ongoing pandemic." It was crowned by the Pillars of Light, an array of fifty-six 7,000W Syncrolite XLs, one for each state and territory, focused toward the sky. The Syncrolites were supplied by Baltimore-based Image Engineering and the rest of the gear was supplied by Bandit Lites and Cat Power.

The field is "literally a hundred feet or so short being a mile long" by about 250' wide.

"This is a large space," Lisle says.

The Federal Flag Code calls for US flags to be displayed from sunrise to sunset, and should they be displayed after dark, they should be lit. With such a large area to cover and a unique set of circumstances in which the event was taking place, Lisle needed a lot of lumens. But he says he couldn't, in good conscience, ask a vendor to buy new gear for this event, given the state of the industry during the pandemic, so he inquired of Bandit Lites about what was on the shelf. The answer, he said, was that the company had "a ton" of conventional lighting.

"I thought, I know that there are downsides to this," he says. "I know that we'll be chasing burned-out lamps. I know they draw more power, but I also have utmost faith that this is going to give me the horsepower I need."

A "decent challenge"

In the end, Lisle spec'd 768 PAR 64s and 112 eight-light Molefays to spray the field with light while the 56 Syncrolites created the light pillars. Along both sides of the field were 40 or 50 tented structures, about 10' by 10', that housed the media outlets, and it was critical that these structures had clear sightlines to the Capitol. So, the posi-

Left photo: Courtesy of the Presidential Inauguration Committee; Right photo: Charles Reagan

tioning of fixtures along the sidelines was a key issue.

Lisle came up with an idea of putting the Syncrolites on 8' by 8' by 8' platforms.

"My directive was to use those platforms as much as possible, not just for the Syncrolites, but also for the fixtures lighting the Field of Flags," he says. "That was a fairly decent challenge. But it worked out well because a good portion of the flags were low to the ground. They stood probably 24" off the ground, so even though my PAR cans were at 8.5' or 9', they were still able to get enough spread to cover them. There were a few instances where we had to bring in Genies to get the PARs up even higher."

The platforms had to be carefully placed to stay out of the line of sight for the media tents and to maintain uniformity. It fell to the C3 site ops team to create the layout so that the spacing between the Syncrolites was symmetrical, but Lisle used WYSIWYG to figure out how best to cover the fields with uniform light.

"It worked, but I definitely puckered up a little bit," Lisle says. "Bandit did a test, and I was like, man, I want to see this. I want to see a bank of these lights on and take some photometric readings. I felt this was probably one of the most high-pressure gigs I've ever done. I didn't want to let everybody down, knowing this is going to be seen across all the world."

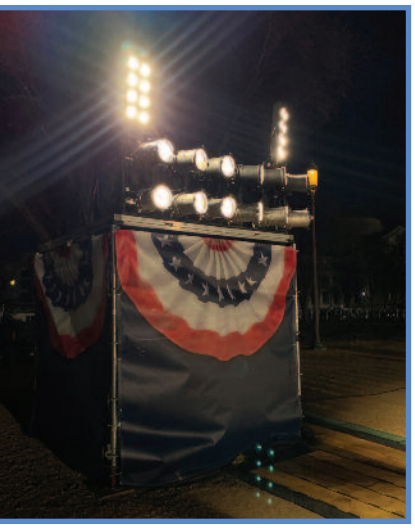
Like touring days

Between the media tents and the Syncrolites structures on both sides of the field were 112 flagpoles, each of which was approximately 25' tall, with state and territory flags. Below those were 224 smaller flags on 8' flagpoles, all of which had to be lit. For that task, Lisle chose to use Elation Professional Paladins, IP65-rated LED wash blinders with motorized zoom and manual tilt.

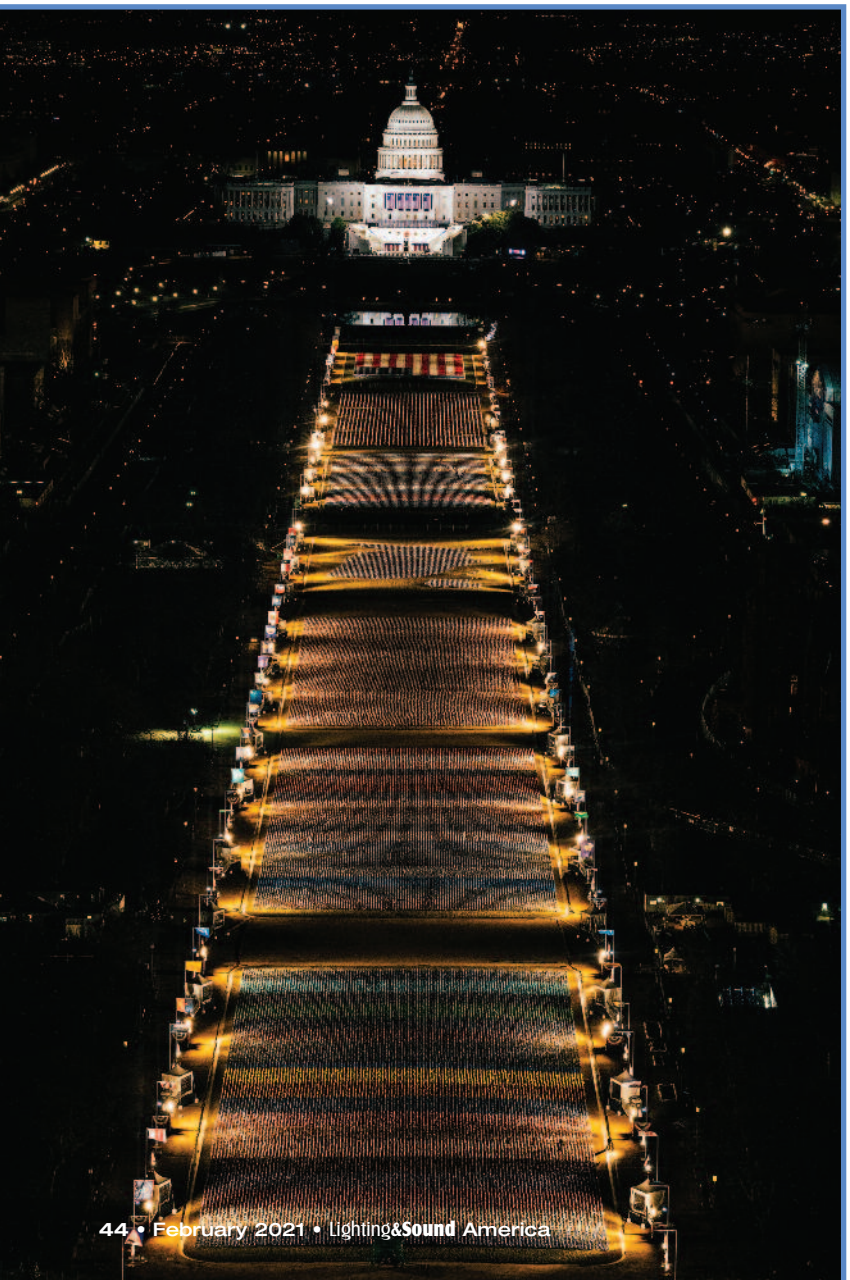
"[The Paladins were] great," Lisle says. "They did great for what we were looking to do."

Manually focusing almost 1,500 fixtures is no small task. His approach was to treat them as 56 banks of light, including 48 Syncrolite platforms plus eight Genie towers.

"[Bandit Lites project manager] Gene Brian had this idea of taking a section of PRT and loading it with two 6-lamp bars like we would in the old PAR-can touring days," Lisle says. "We forked that up, flipped it on its side, hand-lifted the two 8-light moles, attached to them, and strapped this whole thing down to make it safe. So, focus-wise, the rigger or the climber climbed up and it was all right there. It was very easy to focus, and actually the focus went fairly quick. I'd say it took about 30 minutes per section of flags, and there were eight sections. My whole concept was to focus in an array, literally treating those PAR cans like they were doing a big ACL fan and making sure we were catching the sides, working our way toward the middle. Once I saw what that looked like, we would take the eight-lite moles and kind of blast general light for the middle because I knew that's where I was going to have a harder time. It ended up balancing really well doing it like that."



Above left: One of the PAR-can-and-mole combinations used to light the flags. Bandit Lites and Cat Power also provided gear. Above right: Chris Lisle.



High tech/low tech control

The Syncrolites were controlled by an MA Lighting grandMA2 console connected through a combination of fiber optic cables and wireless DMX due to the fact that they had to cross some active streets.

"One of my very first questions was, 'Do we want to do some chases? Are we're going to do any kind of flows or any kind of cool intensity effects?' And the answer was a resounding no," Lisle says.

So, all other lights were controlled by simply turning circuit breakers on and off from the roughly 20 to 30 dimmer beaches located under the Syncrolite platforms.

Lisle says the Image Engineering techs—Nick, Connor Newell, Phil Doccolo—"took good care of me." "When I walked up to the console to program this countdown they wanted, everything was done. I was like, 'Wow, guys, you're kind of spoiling me'."

Of Brian, he says, "He is such a good project manager—very meticulous. I let Gene just run with it." And the techs did literally run with it. "I asked the Bandit techs to let me know which one of them walked the most between load-in and load-out. [Bandit crew chief Mark Scherer] had 180,000 steps over seven days."

Additional personnel included Michaela Jones (Syncrolite account rep), Kelly Kamp (on-site project manager, Image Engineering), Nick, Connor Newell, Phil Doccolo (techs, Image Engineering), Mark Scherer (Bandit crew chief), and Bandit crew Tyler Veneziano, Justin Wilk, Darryl Newcombe, and Nikki Dotson.

Given the January 6 riot and the pandemic, it would be understandable if there were some worries But Lisle said he felt safe on both fronts.

"C3 did a very good job with COVID compliance," he says. "We were tested every other day at the hotel and space within our work trailer and space within the catering compound. Additionally, the Texas National Guard men and women—I'm very appreciative of them. Was it overkill to send 25,000 of them there? I'm not sure, but they sat out in the cold all night and they did great. I'm very appreciative of that."

With the enormous number of fixtures they had, most of which were conventionals, the crew knew there would be lamp burnouts. Before leaving Nashville, Gene Brian guessed they would have 103 of them. In the end, they counted 114.

"Bandit sent a ton of spares. Pulling these fixtures off the shelf, dusting them off, we knew there's going to be some downsides here, but the horsepower and the weather durability gave me what I needed. It was the right fixture for the job. It really was."

Top left and right photos: Chris Lisle; Bottom photo: Chris Reagan