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# The Pageant of Democracy–The Presidential Inauguration

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America has no king to coronate and no emperor to enthrone. Nevertheless, as Washington understood, democracy requires its own ceremonial institutions and habits. For the most part, the framers of the U.S. Constitution modeled the presidency around the person of George Washington. As a new nation, the United States needed a leader who could stand as an equal among the kings and princes of the world. As historian Allan Metcalf explains, “To assume its ‘equal station’ among nations, as the Declaration of Independence phrased it, the new United States of America needed a presiding figure who could stand on equal footing with the great hereditary rulers of Europe. Everyone agreed that that would be Washington. He was America’s answer to Europe’s royalty, presiding over a nation not by virtue of his ancestry, but by virtue of his virtue.”

Having led the nation and the fledgling American army to victory in the Revolutionary War, Washington later presided over the Constitutional Convention that designed the very office he would assume. As Metcalf explains, “Washington possessed the exalted character the new nation needed in its leader.”

Washington’s first inaugural address, delivered on April 30, 1789, was a model of humility and formality. Washington stood on the balcony of New York City’s Federal Hall and recited the Oath of Office as administered by Robert R. Livingston, the Chancellor of New York. The nation’s first president spoke of his reluctance to assume this great responsibility, but he also signaled that he would pursue his new responsibilities with vigor. “Among the vicissitudes incident to life no event could have filled me with greater anxieties than that of which the notification was transmitted by your order, and received on the fourteenth day of the present month. On the one hand, I was summoned by my country, whose voice I can never hear but with veneration and love, from a retreat which I had chosen with the fondest predilection, and, in my flattering hopes, with an immutable decision, as the asylum of my declining years—a retreat which was rendered every day more necessary as more dear to me by the addition of habit to inclination, and of frequent interruptions in my health to the gradual waste committed on it by time. On the other hand, the magnitude and difficulty of the trust to which the voice of my country called me, being sufficient to awaken in the wisest and most experienced of her citizens a distrustful scrutiny into its qualifications, could not but overwhelm with despondence one who (inheriting inferior endowments from nature and unpracticed in the duties of civil administration) ought to be particularly conscious of his own deficiencies.” In other words, I enter this office with great humility, but I intend to exercise the powers of the presidency. Washington would emphasize the chief in the title Chief Executive.

Washington added two gestures to the inaugural ceremony. As he was sworn into office, he placed his hand upon a Bible as a symbol of the solemnity of his commitment, invoking God as his witness. In addition, he added the words “so help me God” to the oath as described in the Constitution. Those traditions have continued to this day, with the singular exception of Theodore Roosevelt’s first recitation of the Oath of Office, undertaken in emergency circumstances after the assassination of President William McKinley.

As historians have noted, Washington self-consciously designed the presidency by his demeanor and character in office. As Metcalf explains, “Washington also codified the way presidents should talk. He very consciously established

what he considered the proper occasions on which a president should speak and the proper way for a president to speak on those occasions.”

Thus, the tradition of an inaugural address was established by Washington, and it has become a focal point of American political life and a central ceremony of our democracy.

If George Washington’s first inaugural address was noteworthy for its tone, his second inaugural address is remembered as the shortest ever delivered by a president. Only 135 words long, Washington simply affirmed the Oath of Office and underlined his own responsibility in office. “Previous to the execution of any official act of the president, the Constitution requires an oath of office. This oath I am now about to take, and in your presence: That if it shall be found during my administration of the government I have in any instance violated willingly or knowingly the injunctions thereof, I may (besides incurring constitutional punishment) be subject to the upbraidings of all who are now witnesses of the present solemn ceremony.” History records that Washington was in no danger of being upbraided by his audience.

If Washington’s second inaugural speech is remembered for its brevity, William Henry Harrison’s goes down in history as the longest inaugural speech ever delivered by a president. At 8,445 words, Harrison came close to doubling the length achieved by any other president. Beyond this, Harrison held his crowd during a snowstorm and spoke for an hour and forty-five minutes. Harrison, a hero of the War of 1812, delivered an address that would outrage contemporary secularists.

As he stated, “I deem the present occasion sufficiently important and solemn to justify me in expressing to my fellow citizens a profound reverence for the Christian religion and a thorough conviction that sound morals, religious liberty, and a just sense of religious responsibility are essentially connected with all true and lasting happiness; and to that good Being who has blessed us by the gifts of civil and religious freedom, who watched over and prospered the labors of our fathers and has hitherto preserved to us institutions far exceeding in excellence those of any other people, let us unite in fervently commending every interest of our beloved country in all future time.”

Evidently, a tendency towards long speeches ran in Harrison’s bloodline, for his grandson, President Benjamin Harrison, delivered the fourth most lengthy inaugural address—exceeded only by his grandfather, William Howard Taft, and James Monroe.

In William Henry Harrison’s case, the address did not so much kill his audience as kill him. Standing in the cold to deliver his address, Harrison exposed himself to illness and died shortly thereafter. As one observer noted, “He took the oath of office, delivered a lengthy and tedious inaugural address, appointed many men to office, called a special session of Congress, became ill—and abruptly died.”

The most famous inaugural address was probably delivered by Abraham Lincoln at his second inauguration. Four years previous, Lincoln had delivered an address that spoke directly to the conflict between the northern and southern states, and he insisted on his determination to maintain the union. “Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country cannot do this.” Lincoln’s second inaugural address, delivered March 4, 1865, came as the Civil War was nearing its conclusion. General Robert E. Lee would surrender to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia on April 9 of that same year. Lincoln would die of an assassin’s bullet on the morning of April 14.

As Lincoln addressed the nation at his second inauguration, he delivered one of the shortest but most powerful speeches of American history. The war had divided the nation, pitting brother against brother, and nearly destroying the bonds of sentiment and allegiance that had held the young nation together.

“Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or duration which it has already attained,” Lincoln noted. “Neither anticipated the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.” Lincoln did not mince words in his address, nor did he avoid the central moral issue of his era. He confronted the issue of slavery in his first inaugural address, but at his second inauguration, Lincoln solemnly acknowledged that the entire nation must make

atonement for the evil of slavery and the evil of the war.

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” Tragically, Lincoln would not live to lead the nation to realize this vision.

In the twentieth century, the inaugural addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy are especially noteworthy and etched in the nation’s memory. At his first inauguration, President Roosevelt took an informal but direct tone with the American people, acknowledging the reality of the Great Depression and inspiring hope that the nation’s difficulties could be overcome. “We do not distrust the future of a central democracy,” Roosevelt insisted. “The people of the United States have not failed. In their need they have registered a mandate that they want direct, vigorous action. They have asked for discipline and direction under leadership. They have made me the present instrument of their wishes. In the spirit of the gift I take it.”

As America’s youngest elected president, John F. Kennedy saw himself as a generational pioneer, and he intended to lead the United States to assume a new role in the world and to project American values against the backdrop of the Cold War. “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty,” Kennedy warned. The young president sought to put his presidency in the context of history. “In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glows from that fire can truly light the world.”

Kennedy’s concluding theme became the most remembered words of his short presidency: “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

Just four years ago, President George W. Bush delivered his first inaugural address, pledging to commit himself as the nation’s new leader—even after a divisive election. “Sometimes in life we are called to do great things,” Bush noted. “But as a saint of our times has said, every day we are called to do small things with great love. The most important tasks of a democracy are done by everyone. I will live and lead by these principles: to advance my convictions with civility, to pursue the public interest with courage, to speak for greater justice and compassion, to call for responsibility and try to live it as well. In all these ways, I will bring the values of our history to the care of our times.” The nation will be listening as President Bush delivers his second inaugural address tomorrow. Instead of standing on the balcony of Federal Hall on Wall Street, President Bush will stand on the steps of the U.S. Capitol—a building George Washington envisioned, but never saw.

The inaugural ceremony is part of America’s national heritage and is an essential part of our public pageant of democracy. The president’s taking of a public pledge—standing symbolically before the nation and then delivering an inaugural address—is more than mere custom. Presidential inaugurations are significant milestones in our national history, significant in terms of both meaning and memory.

The nation and the world will be listening to hear what President George W. Bush will signal in what may be one of the most remembered speeches of his presidency.

America is no longer a young nation seeking to be recognized by the world as one among equals. Now, America stands preeminent in the world, and America’s president is the most significant leader on the world stage.

Americans of all political parties should celebrate this day as a testimonial to our constitutional system—the pageant of democracy displayed before a watching world.

