

AlbertMohler.com

Inaugural Observations –Democracy on Display

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Friday, January 21, 2005

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The sun broke through the clouds just as the presidential party arrived at the special inaugural platform built on the west steps of the U.S. Capitol, and the crowd forgot the cold for the duration of the program. I was especially glad to see so many families—including young families—gathered for the event.

Getting to the event was the hard part. Citizens with passes to the ticketed sections had to work through a security process that would make airports look like amateurs, and most attendees had to walk through a maze of security checks and obstacles—the most direct routes to the viewing areas were blocked by security forces. Thousands trudged through the snow onto the Capitol lawn. One young dad, carrying a preschool boy in his arms, just quipped to his son, “You had better remember this.”

By 10:30, the program began with music by military bands and various individual artists. The crowd was happy and ready for the big event to begin. The build-up to the swearing-in ceremony is very impressive. Mary and I were in the frozen crowd four years ago, but the weather that year prevented as much enjoyment of the unfolding ceremony.

The traditions of democracy are important, and none of these traditions is more important than the presence of former presidents at the inaugural ceremony. This year, former Presidents Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton were present. Each entered the platform area after a rousing military fanfare. This custom is important—both for America and for the watching world. The peaceful transition of administrations is an American distinctive, and proof of our respect for constitutional government. The presence of two Democrats on the platform as former presidents sent an important signal. President Carter displayed a sober face throughout the ceremony, but President Bill Clinton seemed to enjoy the whole event, swaying with the music and smiling at the crowd. Perhaps he was dreaming of being back up there in four years, this time as the First Husband. It would be best not to dwell on that thought.

Of course, the Bush family was there in a big way. President George H. W. Bush looked like America’s proudest father while Florida Governor Jeb Bush looked like the impish little brother, snapping casual photographs with a disposable camera.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist was a portrait of courageous determination as he came to the platform in order to administer the Oath of Office to President Bush. This is clearly a very sick man, and it must have required every ounce of strength he could muster to fulfill this role. Nevertheless, he proved his skeptics wrong by making it through the Oath and completing his task. That was an act of true grit.

President Bush’s second inaugural address was very different from his first. America’s President seemed to be

speaking to the entire world as much as to his fellow Americans. He spoke eloquently of America's purpose and role in the world, and of this nation's commitment to spreading liberty and freedom around the globe. The speech should be long remembered as a manifesto for freedom's spread to every corner of the globe. With the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the background, the President delivered some of the most memorable lines of his presidency. "We are led," he said, "by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."

This is hardly a new theme for this president, but these were words of true eloquence, sending an important signal of America's resolve around the world.

His most pointed words were addressed to the international community. "Today, America speaks anew to the peoples of the world: All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you. Democratic reformers facing repression, prison, or exile can know: America sees you for who you are: the future leaders of your free country. The rulers of outlaw regimes can know that we still believe as Abraham Lincoln did: 'Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it.' The leaders of governments with long habits of control need to know: To serve your people you must learn to trust them. Start on this journey of progress and justice, and America will walk at your side. And all the allies of the United States can know: we honor your friendship, we rely on your counsel, and we depend on your help. Division among free nations is a primary goal of freedom's enemies. The concerted effort of free nations to promote democracy is a prelude to our enemies' defeat."

He also called Americans to live up to our national ideals. "In America's ideal of freedom, the exercise of rights is ennobled by service, and mercy, and a heart for the weak. Liberty for all does not mean independence from one another. Our nation relies on men and women who look after a neighbor and surround the lost with love. Americans, at our best, value the life we see in one another, and must always remember that even the unwanted have worth. And our country must abandon all the habits of racism, because we cannot carry the message of freedom and the baggage of bigotry at the same time."

The coupling of "the message of freedom" with "the baggage of bigotry" was both powerful and prophetic. With these words, the President telegraphed an important tone of humility mixed with determination.

Houston pastor Kirbyjon Caldwell ended his benediction by praying in the name of Jesus, sending secularists again into a fit of outrage. That was another brave and noteworthy moment.

The Inaugural Parade and the President's review of the military took most of the afternoon, and then the action shifted to the inaugural balls. President and Mrs. Bush visited the balls in sequence, making a brief appearance, dancing a few steps, and then darting to the next festivity. The entire sequence of inaugural events comes to a conclusion Friday with a prayer service at the National Cathedral—then it's back to work. For the City of Washington, that will no doubt come as a relief. For the nation, the events of this week should be reassurance that democratic principles and constitutional government really can survive—and must.

