

# The traditions of presidential inaugurations

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The inauguration of President Barack H. Obama, 44th president of the United States, on the West Front of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., January 20, 2009. Photo courtesy of The Architect of the Capitol.

Every presidential inauguration is a historic event. Each is different, yet all share certain things in common.

Beginning with George Washington, each U.S. president has brought a unique personal history and a different set of goals to the nation's highest office. Each has put a distinctive stamp on the presidency, and on the nation itself.

A close examination of previous presidential inaugurations can reveal how the United States has changed over the centuries. It can also help us understand the remarkable individuals who served as president.

## **It All Started With George Washington**

Since George Washington's inauguration in 1789, the term of each American president has started with a single sentence, the oath of office:

"I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of the President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Although many promises are made as presidential candidates compete for votes, the oath is the first one that really counts. It transforms a citizen into a president and signals the beginning of a new administration.

George Washington set the pattern for future presidents when he delivered the first inaugural address on April 30, 1789. Washington used the opportunity to discuss some of his positions, including his refusal to take a salary while in office.

Washington's rejection of a salary did not become a common part of later inaugural addresses. However, his reference to a religious higher power did set a presidential pattern. In his remarks, Washington hailed "that Almighty Being who rules over the universe."

## **Religion Is Prominent In Inaugural Addresses**

Religious references have appeared in almost every president's inaugural address since then. They have ranged from Thomas Jefferson's "Infinite Power" and Martin Van Buren's "Divine Being" to a mention of "Almighty God."

The Bible used in George Washington's inaugural oath has appeared in other inaugurations. In his 1989 inaugural address, George Bush noted:

"I have just repeated word for word the oath taken by George Washington 200 years ago, and the Bible on which I placed my hand is the Bible on which he placed his. It is right that the memory of Washington be with us today ... because Washington remains the Father of our Country. And he would, I think, be gladdened by this day — for today is the concrete expression of a stunning fact: our continuity these 200 years since our government began."

## **Living Up To Campaign Promises**

When a candidate becomes the president, he or she must try to live up to campaign promises. Some may doubt the sincerity of those promises, or be opposed to them from the start. In his 1841 inaugural address, William Henry Harrison acknowledged that some in the audience did not believe he meant what he said.

Only time would tell how sincere he was, Harrison declared, and history would be his judge. "I shall stand either exonerated by my countrymen or classed with the mass of those who promised that they might deceive and flattered with the intention to betray."

Since Harrison died a month into his term, it is difficult to judge his record. However, his point remains well-taken.

## Grant Was Unhappy With His Critics

Before becoming president, Ulysses S. Grant had led the Union Army during the Civil War. During his inaugural address, he expressed his unhappiness with the way his critics had attacked him:

"I did not ask for place or position ... but was resolved to perform my part in a struggle threatening the very existence of the nation. I performed a conscientious duty, without asking promotion or command, and without a revengeful feeling toward any section or individual. Notwithstanding this, throughout the war, and from my candidacy for my present office in 1868 to the close of the last Presidential campaign, I have been the subject of abuse and slander scarcely ever equaled in political history."

However, Grant said, he was now ready to overlook the lies and bitterness of his critics. Being chosen president was proof that most in the nation felt he had done what was right.

Unfortunately, history has not been kind to Grant. His two terms in office are generally considered to have been ineffective.

## What Will This January 20 Bring?

Bill Clinton focused on economic issues in his inaugural address. As a candidate, he had promised such things as economic improvement and better health care. Although these promises resulted in only modest change, many people believe there was economic improvement while President Clinton was in office.

On January 20, 2017, a new president will take the oath of office. What can we expect on that January day, and after it? What issues will be discussed in the inaugural address? What effect will the new president have on the nation?

History suggests that though the players and the setting may change, some things will remain the same. We can look forward to both progress and problems as our nation heads into the future.

**Quiz**

- 1 Which of the following MOST characterizes inaugural addresses?
- (A) the opposition to campaign promises
  - (B) the promise of transforming the Constitution
  - (C) the inclusion of religious references
  - (D) the desire to defeat political enemies
- 2 Based on the article, President Washington would MOST LIKELY agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) New presidents should consider avoiding references to a religious higher power.
  - (B) Conscientious army leaders make more effective presidents than ordinary citizens.
  - (C) Inaugural oaths must describe how presidents plan to live up to campaign promises.
  - (D) Inaugural addresses should include the president's position on important issues.

- 3 Read the quote from the section "Religion Is Prominent In Inaugural Addresses."

*"And he would, I think, be gladdened by this day — for today is the concrete expression of a stunning fact: our continuity these 200 years since our government began."*

How does the word "stunning" affect the tone of the sentence.

- (A) It gives the sentence a humorous tone.
- (B) It gives the sentence a critical tone.
- (C) It gives the sentence a dramatic tone.
- (D) It gives the sentence a mysterious tone.

- 4 Read the sentence from the section "Living Up To Campaign Promises."

*Some may doubt the sincerity of those promises, or be opposed to them from the start.*

What is the definition of "sincerity" as it is used in the sentence?

- (A) compassion
- (B) honesty
- (C) importance
- (D) usefulness