



Ramon de Elorriaga's 1889 painting commemorates the 100th anniversary of the inauguration of George Washington as the first president of the United States.

# “My Fellow Americans”

FOR TWO CENTURIES, PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATIONS HAVE PROVIDED TRANSCENDENT MOMENTS THAT ECHO LOUDER THAN THE OATH OF OFFICE.

| by Fergus M. Bordewich |

fifty-seven times in the course of the past 224 years, Americans have stepped forward to take the oath of office as president of the United States. They have been old and young, men of wealth and of modest means, some after years of striving for the nation's highest office, and others by tragic accident. Each inauguration is a story in itself.

When George Washington took the first presidential oath of office on April 30, 1789, no one knew if the great national experiment would succeed or fail. He was stepping into a job that he would have to create from scratch: the presidency was then regarded as the weakest branch of government, and endowed with no staff and only uncertain authority. In the

address that he delivered before Congress assembled at Federal Hall in New York City, the first capital of the United States, Washington's hands shook and worry creased his features as he spoke of “the magnitude and difficulties of the trust to which the voice of my country called me,” confessing that “no event could have filled me with greater anxieties” than learning that he had been chosen president.

Thomas Jefferson's inauguration in 1801 marked the first transition from one political party to another. In keeping with his fondness for republican simplicity, Jefferson shunned ceremony and walked from his rooming house to the new Capitol, to become the first president to be inaugurated in

Washington, D.C. Speaking in a lisping, barely audible voice to a country embittered by one of the harshest presidential campaigns in American history, he called for generosity and reconciliation. “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle,” he proclaimed. “We are all Republicans; we are all Federalists.”

Jefferson’s simplicity did not establish a lasting precedent. Later inaugurations became gala affairs, with marching soldiers, brass bands, cheering crowds of well-wishers, and inaugural balls, a tradition that was initiated by James Madison, in 1809. Admission that year was \$4 per person — a shockingly steep fee, at the time.

The first inauguration to take place during wartime — Abraham Lincoln’s second, on March 4, 1865, barely a month before his assassination — produced one of the most eloquent addresses in inaugural history. At 698 words, it was also one of the shortest. Lincoln faced a nation torn by four years of Civil War, in which more than 600,000 had been slain, southern cities had been devastated and the rebellious Confederacy stood on the brink of surrender. Setting the tone, he hoped, for postwar reconciliation, he asserted: “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.” Lincoln’s inaugural parade also was the first in which African-Americans participated, a fitting symbol for the liberation of 4 million former slaves.

During the Gilded Age, inauguration ceremonies continued to become both more elaborate and more crowded as bustling railroads delivered tourists and well-wishers in swelling numbers. In 1897, William McKinley’s inauguration was the first to be recorded by a motion picture camera; it was also the first at which Congress hosted a luncheon for the president and vice president, a tradition that continues to the present day. In 1917, women participated for the first time in the inaugural parade, celebrating the beginning of Woodrow Wilson’s second term, three years before the passage of the 19th Amendment, which would grant women the right to vote. Four years later, Warren Harding became the first president to dispense with a horse-drawn carriage and travel to his inauguration in an automobile.

Few presidents took office at a more fraught moment than did Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, as the United States plummeted into the depths of the worst depression in modern history. On March 4, Roosevelt’s voice rang out from the Capitol, and via radio across the United States, reassuring Americans “that



President Abraham Lincoln delivers his second inaugural address in front of a Capitol whose dome was still under construction.



President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inauguration speech is one of the most famous in recent U.S. history.

the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified fear which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance,” and initiating the New Deal, whose far-reaching effects would establish principles that would last for generations to come.

The only president to win election to four terms in office, Roosevelt's final inauguration took place on January 20 1945, the official date having been moved forward from March 4 by the 20th Amendment, in 1937. With war still raging in the Pacific and Europe, and wartime austerity an official policy at home, it was one of the most modest inaugurations in history — and held at the White House rather than the Capitol. Roosevelt would die less than three months later.

Relations between outgoing and incoming presidents have not always been smooth. In 1953, Harry Truman nearly ruined his amicable relationship with Dwight D. Eisenhower when he surprised Ike by happily announcing that he had brought back Ike's son John from the battlefield in Korea to attend his

swearing in — deeply offending Ike's sense of military protocol. Later, in his inaugural address, Ike went on to lay out the blueprint for a worldwide web of alliances to contain communism, in language that would help set the tone for the Cold War. Calling on Americans to shoulder “the responsibility of the free world's leadership,” he declared, “We sense with all our faculties that forces of good and evil are massed and armed and opposed as rarely before in history.”

Washington's unpredictable winter weather has more than once threatened to wreak havoc on carefully wrought inauguration ceremonies. In 1961, a blizzard slammed into the capital on the eve of John F. Kennedy's inauguration. National guardsmen, Howard University students and ordinary citizens were mobilized in a desperate, mostly successful, nighttime battle to clear the streets. Although cars remained stuck in the snow, and many ticketed invitees never reached the Capitol, millions of Americans watching television saw the hatless and youthful Kennedy pose the challenge that would define a generation and inspire an outpouring of idealism that took shape in New Frontier programs such as the Peace Corps: “Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.”

In 1977, James E. “Jimmy” Carter set out to establish new standards of modesty in Washington by appearing at his inauguration in an ordinary business suit and, for the first time in the modern presidency, walking rather than riding from the Capitol to the White House in the parade that followed. Carter, in his inaugural address, called upon Americans to shoulder “moral duties which, when assumed, seem invariably to be in our own best interests,” thus beginning a national commitment to human rights and the shaping of what he called a more “truly humane world.” He also abruptly cancelled the planned inaugural luncheon. Chief Justice Warren

Burger's wife couldn't have salt and had been scheduled to receive a saltless meal at the luncheon. She begged her husband to bring her a sandwich that she could eat, which he surreptitiously concealed beneath his robe as he administered the oath of office to the new president.

*“Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.”*

— President John F. Kennedy

Beginning with Andrew Jackson in 1829, inaugurations had traditionally taken place on the East Front portico of the Capitol. That changed in 1981, for Ronald Reagan's first inauguration, when the ceremony was moved to the more spacious West Front, in order to accommodate more attendees. Signaling the start of a sharp ideological shift that would shape American politics for a generation, Reagan declared in his



Having been sworn in as the 40th president of the United States in the first ceremony on the West Front of the Capitol, Ronald Reagan gives a thumbs up to the crowd as his wife, First Lady Nancy Reagan, waves from the presidential limousine during the inaugural parade in 1981.



William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton, with his wife Hillary Rodham Clinton at his side, takes the oath of office as 42nd president of the United States from Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist on the west steps of the Capitol in 1993.

inaugural speech: "Government is not the solution to our problem." 1981 also saw the warmest inauguration on record, with a noon temperature of 55 degrees. (Reagan's second inauguration, in 1985, was the coldest on record, at a biting 7 degrees.)

The most heavily attended inauguration in history before Barack Obama's in 2009 was Bill Clinton's in 1993, when he struck a Kennedy-esque note by proclaiming that "profound and powerful forces are shaking and remaking our world, and the urgent question of our time is whether we can make change our friend and not our enemy." Four years later,

Clinton's second inaugural was the first to be broadcast live on the internet, enabling uncounted millions to hear him declare, "We need a new government for a new century, a government humble enough not to try to solve all our problems for us, but strong enough to give us the tools to solve our problems for ourselves."

While presidential inaugurations have evolved over the years, incorporating new technologies, and swelling in both magnitude and ceremony since their beginnings in 18th century New York, each one has reaffirmed the strength and continuity of American democracy, peacefully transferring power even in the midst of war and economic tribulation, in the shared confidence that Americans will eventually find a balance among competitive and deeply held beliefs, differing hopes and dreams, and faith in the nation's continuing ability to grow and prosper in the unknowable future. ★

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*Historian and author Fergus M. Bordewich's most recent book is America's Great Debate: Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and the Compromise that Preserved the Union (Simon & Schuster). For more on Mr. Bordewich and his other works, visit <http://www.fergusbordewich.com>.*