

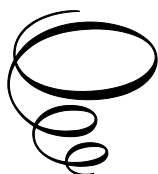
The Drama of Presidential
Inaugurations and
Inaugural Addresses
from Washington
through to Biden

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By

John R. Vile

Cambridge
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**Dedicated to those presidents who have taken seriously
their oaths “to protect, support,
and defend the Constitution of the United States”**

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PREFACE

Although I have spent much of my academic life studying the U.S. Constitution and American constitutional law, I have long held an interest in presidential rhetoric, which may have its roots in my days as a high school and college debater and my years coaching mock trial. I am fascinated by the challenges posed by informing, convincing, and inspiring Americans, and have previously authored a book examining the speeches of victory and concession that candidates for presidential elections give after the results have been announced.

I cannot remember the specific trigger point that led me to decide to read and analyze all the U.S. presidential inaugural addresses, although one of my former professors, Dante Germino, did author a book on the subject. My own renewed interest was largely activated by the controversies surrounding President Joe Biden's inauguration, and what he would say to help calm the roiled waters that had resulted in an unprecedented mob attack on the U.S. Capitol Building two weeks previously.

As I began reading I realized that, like presidential elections themselves, inaugural addresses present not only a window into the souls of American presidents, but also a quadrennial snapshot of American political life that continues to articulate American issues and values. Such speeches are particularly useful when studied in conjunction with State of the Union Addresses, annual speeches that more typically focus on outlining presidents' legislative agenda.

Outline of this Book

Inaugurations are among the most highly ritualistic political affairs in the United States, and there are far more books that chiefly focus on these rituals than on the words in the inaugural addresses. Although several books contain the texts of some or all of the presidential inaugural addresses, only two provide substantial analysis of each of them. One is limited to twentieth century inaugurals (Ryan 1993). The other is an e-book (Singh 2020). Both rely on multiple authors, which provides for specialization, but perhaps at the cost of noting the connections among them. By serving as the sole author

of this volume, I have attempted to provide the context and analysis of all such speeches in U.S. history, including those of vice presidents who became presidents upon the death of their predecessors. I proceed by delineating the chief events connected to each inauguration, especially those that are distinctive, and then summarize each speech.

I am not sure if I would have begun this project had I initially known of the Ryan and Singh compilations of essays, but I consider myself fortunate both in finding these sources and in not knowing about them until I had analyzed each of the speeches on my own. Although I have incorporated insights from these and other essays among my own observations, I did not find it necessary to change the themes of my own essays, which I generally found to be complementary to those that had been previously published.

In addition to the events that accompany formal inaugurations, I decided that it was important to include the statements made by vice presidents who became president on the death or (in the case of Gerald R. Ford) resignation of their predecessors. Because I thought that comparing the inaugural addresses of Lincoln and Jefferson Davis could prove useful, I also included summaries of Jefferson Davis' provisional and formal inaugurals.

Many scholars have commented on the religious elements of the inaugurations, which is also one of my special interests. Where information was available, I have accordingly included information on the Bibles upon which candidates swore their oaths, the passages (if any) to which they were opened, and, since Franklin D. Roosevelt reinstated the practice that Washington had started, on the individuals whom presidents invited to give inaugural prayers.

Although I do not focus as much on some earlier descriptions of inaugurations on parades, inaugural balls, and other accompanying activities, I include basic information about said aspects of inaugurations.

The book proceeds in chronological order, with descriptions of the inaugurations and inaugural addresses from George Washington through Joseph Biden. Although this book examines each inauguration and each speech separately, the introduction that follows points out some common themes, drawing from the larger body of research by historians, political scientists, and professors of speech communication.

Where sources focused on a specific inauguration, I have included references at the end of each inauguration. Other sources, which address more common themes, are included in the bibliography at the back of the

book, which I believe to be the most comprehensive bibliography available on the subject. The index provides a further mechanism for scholars seeking information about particular subjects or themes.

Audience

Much as presidents must do when they deliver their inaugural addresses, I have kept different audiences in mind while writing this book. First are citizens who are interested in a survey of American political life and in basic information about each president and his inauguration. The second audience is composed of high school and college students, especially those taking classes or doing research on the U.S. presidency or rhetoric. Third are scholars and academic researchers. The book should also be especially valuable for reference librarians, who must often answer arcane questions about numerous subjects.

As I wrote this book, I became increasingly convinced that it could be used, perhaps in conjunction with a book on presidential State of the Union Addresses, as the backbone of a college or university class on presidential rhetoric. I know that there is often a gulf between what presidents say and what they do, or prove able to do, and I think that many modern inaugural addresses are less grounded in an understanding of human nature and its limitations than some of their predecessors, but I still think it is important to know how presidents conceived their own role as they gave their first official speech, and what they hoped to accomplish.

Acknowledgements

I owe special thanks to the dedicated staff at the Honors College - especially to Connie Bartemus, who helped with numerous formatting issues and to Susan Lyons, who found pictures of the presidents at the Library of Congress that were in the public domain and incorporated them into the manuscript. Megan Northrup located and Margaret Beer forwarded a copy of a National Park Service Report on Presidential Inaugural Celebrations that were also quite helpful. I am especially appreciative of the librarians at Middle Tennessee State University's Walker Library — especially to Pam Middleton and others in the Interlibrary Loan Office — and to my colleagues and students at the University, where I have now worked for 33 years. I am also grateful to Professor Richard Ellis of Willamette University, who provided some critical comments on a related manuscript that was of great help on this one, and to Professor Barbara Perry at the University of

Virginia's Miller Center, who directed my attention to Singh's analyses of inaugural addresses. Clark Wilson, a gifted student aide, also provided a proofreading of the opening chapter at a critical time, and Adam Rummens, the commissioning editor at Cambridge Scholars, patiently answered numerous questions as I prepared the manuscript.

I have great respect for America's constitutional system and for the freedoms that it provides, and I hope that reading this book will rekindle similar respect among its readers. The problem of political factions predates our own republic, and is a persistent theme not only in James Madison's famed essay in Federalist essay No. 10, but also in early inaugural addresses. Even as I write, our system faces serious issues which are aggravated by attachment to different leaders and rival parties. In my judgment, attachment to some recent leaders has approached idolatry.

When an individual becomes president, that individual must transition from being not only leader of a political party but leader of the nation. As Thomas Jefferson noted in his first inaugural address, referring to the two dominant parties of his day, "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." President Obama reminded the nation that we are not a union of red states, or blue states, but of United States, while President Biden has promised to work as hard for those who did not vote for him as he would work for those who did.

A cartoon that I clipped from *Pearls Before Swine*, written by Stephan Pastis, is entitled "Great Presidential Writings throughout history." It begins with Jefferson's statement that "all men are created equal," continues with Lincoln's "four score and seven years ago," and with Franklin D. Roosevelt's observation in his first inaugural address that we have "nothing to fear but fear itself," before showing a purported tweet from President Trump saying "illegal to punch journalists in the head. Sad!" Although few inaugural addresses have risen to the level of those of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, or John Kennedy, the presidential rhetoric with which we were bombarded from 2016-2020, which found expression in Trump's 2017 inaugural address and was accented by his refusal to attend the inauguration of his successor, did not live up to the high standards set by his predecessors.

Although I am increasingly skeptical of some of the utopian promises that modern presidents often make, I still believe there is room for expressions of hope rather than fear, of understanding rather than outrage, of inspirational calls to public service rather than mere appeals to self-interests, and of developed arguments rather than clichés. I hope that this volume will,

in its own small way, help elevate future inaugural discourse. I also hope that it will, in the slightly paraphrased words of John F. Kennedy, inspire us to ask not what our country can do for us, our party, or our race but what we can do for our country - and, indeed, even our world.

For Reference

- Ryan, Halford, ed. 1993. *The Inaugural Addresses of Twentieth-Century American Presidents*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Singh, Yuvraj. 2020. *My Fellow Americans*. Ebook by Libretron. *Note: because this is an e-book, there are no page numbers to reference specific essays, although they are presented in chronological order.*

INTRODUCTION

Although Americans rejected the perpetuation of European monarchy in favor of democratic-republican government, they have developed their own corresponding ceremonies. Through early American history, it was common for members of the clergy to deliver Election Day sermons, which often emphasized the idea that Americans were a chosen people whom God continued to favor in a New Canaan (Hall 1996). In the nineteenth century, political parties sponsored torchlight parades, which have now largely fallen out of favor. A more enduring legacy was the national nominating conventions first held by the Anti-Masonic party in 1831. Although now known chiefly for ratifying decisions already made in state caucuses and primaries, they remain a colorful quadrennial spectacle.

Presidential and vice-presidential inaugurations have also become a quadrennial feature of American politics, replete with parades, balls, and speeches. The ceremonies are unique in that the president is being installed not only as head of the government, who is responsible for executing the laws, but also as head of state, who is considered to be the ceremonial representation of the nation (much like constitutional monarchs in other democracies). This accounts for the way the taking of the oath “balances the ritz with rite, circus with commencement, and pageantry with protocol” (Arbelbide 2000).

Two scholars have observed that inaugurations have proven to be “a healthy middle ground between a coronation and a coup d’etat” (Stathis and Roderick 1973, 12). Focusing specifically on inaugural addresses, James Hoban Jr. has observed that they represent a “rhetoric of transition” associated with “rites of separation” and “the rite of passage.” Paradoxically, they involve both “the symbolic division of Presidents from their constituency” and “rites of incorporation” with this constituency (Hoban 1980, 282). Noting that the ceremonies mirror “the unresolvable tension between identification and division,” Hoban observes that they “mark a simultaneous beginning and ending — a life crisis for new leaders and a recurring watershed in the nation’s history” (Hoban 1980, 282).

Although they have received little scholarly attention, the inaugurations of state governors are surrounded by similar protocols and celebrations. The inaugurations, or investitures, of college and university presidents are also a mix of solemnity and pageantry (Kubinak 2018).

American presidents, including those who were strong partisans, have often portrayed their accession to power as a triumph of democracy over that of party. In his 1913 inaugural address, Woodrow Wilson thus observed that his elevation was “much more than the mere success of a party” and that “the success of a party means little except when the Nation is using that party for a large and definite purpose” (*Inaugural Addresses* 1969, 199). Similarly, President Kennedy proclaimed in his inaugural address that “we observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom” (*Inaugural Addresses* 1969, 267).

Despite such rhetoric, inaugurations continue to embody both what Milton Lomask describes as a “celebration of freedom,” which reaffirms that the American people choose their own rulers, and a “victory of party” (1966, 23), which also underlines the zero-sum component of presidential elections with both winning and losing candidates and parties. One glory of the U.S. political system celebrated in the inaugural ceremonies is that it has provided for the peaceful transfer of political power—not only from one candidate to another, but also from one party to another

Constitutional and Congressional Provisions

In contrast to its specificity with respect to many other institutions, especially the three branches of government, the Constitution provides little guidance about presidential inaugurations. Article II, Section 1, Clause 8 simply states (in gendered language) that “Before he enter on the Execution of his Office, he shall take the following Oath or Affirmation: -- ‘I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.’” The American Founders held such oaths in high esteem. John Witherspoon, the President of Princeton University who was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, said that the oath was “an appeal to God, the Searcher of hearts, for the truth of what we say, and always expresses or supposes an imprecation of his judgment upon us, if we prevaricate” (Smylie 1966, 271). A modern scholar observes that the oath serves as a reminder that presidential powers “are conditionally granted and come with limits”; they

signal that a president is not free to act simply as he or she chooses (Brettschneider 2018, xii).

Noting that many contemporary scholarly treatments of the oath treat it as “just a formality,” one scholar has observed that many presidents have viewed this oath as a transition to important new responsibilities, and have justified some of their most important actions as mandated by this oath. He describes an interview with former President Lyndon B. Johnson in which Johnson recounted telling his presidential successor, Richard M. Nixon, of the great relief when Nixon took the oath, lifting from Johnson the life-and-death decisions he had been making (Pauley 1999, 4-5). In an earlier era, President Lincoln cited his oath to justify his position that the Union was perpetual.

Congress has legislated a similar, but not identical, oath for the vice president. Since 1884, it has been as follows: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God” (JCCIC).

Congressional law once specified that presidents would be inaugurated on March 4. The Twentieth Amendment, which was ratified in 1933, shortened the time that lame ducks (candidates whose terms continue until their successors are installed) serve by moving this date forward to January 20. Neither date is especially known for mild weather. It would be difficult to advance the current date, on which the formal temperature lows and highs range from 28 to 43 degrees Fahrenheit (“Inauguration Weather” 2017), forward much further. This is in part because inaugural ceremonies must wait on the counting and certifying of votes from the Electoral College (Mineo 2011).

Common Elements of Inaugurations

Many inaugural practices derive from customs and traditions that date back to the inaugurations of George Washington and John Adams in 1789. Some of these are rooted in earlier coronation or investiture ceremonies, albeit being (mercifully) much shorter. Richard Harding Davis once observed that the constitutionally designated procedure in the U.S. takes about six

minutes, where “six hours are required to fasten the crown upon the Czar of Russia and to place the scepter in his hand” (Davis 1897, 160).

George Washington took his first oath of office in public view, on the balcony of Federal Hall in New York City, and proceeded to the Senate Chamber where he gave his inaugural address. The taking of subsequent inaugural oaths was moved inside until, beginning with the first inauguration of James Monroe, inaugurations have customarily been conducted outside (except in cases of bitterly cold and/or inclement weather). Long held on the East side of the Capitol Building, the taking of the oath has, since Reagan’s first inauguration of 1981, been held on the West front, which accommodates a larger audience and presents a better view of some iconic monuments.

The fact that inaugurations are public events may suggest that they have further roots in Middle Eastern history, where the people of Israel, likely drawing from contemporary suzerainty treaties, expressed their acceptance of the law and pledged to uphold it. The most prominent biblical example is the giving and accepting of the Ten Commandments under the leadership of Moses, but Joshua chapters 8 and 24 suggest that this covenant was renewed from time to time, as in the case of Joshua, Moses’s successor. Following this analogy, the people express their faith in the system by casting their vote, and the president binds himself to the people by pledging to uphold the Constitution.

In his inaugural address of 1889, Benjamin Harrison thus observed that “The oath taken in the presence of the people becomes a mutual covenant. The Officer covenants to serve the whole body of the people by a faithful execution of the laws, so that they may be the unfailing defense and security of those who respect and observe them” (*Inaugural Addresses* 1969, 153). In his second inaugural address, Franklin D. Roosevelt referred to “Our covenant with ourselves” (*Inaugural Addresses* 1969, 240). This analogy may account, at least in part, for the prayers that are typically offered at such events and references to God within the inaugural addresses.

In one of the most colorful descriptions of a presidential inauguration (William McKinley’s first), Richard Harding Davis observed that the presidential inauguration “is as impressive in its simplicity as Moses talking to the chosen people from the mountain-side” (1897, 138). He also coined another analogy, noting that the inauguration was “a national celebration, in which every citizen has a share – a sort of family gathering, where all the members of the clan, from the residents of the thirteen original States to

those of that State which has put the latest star in the flag, are brought together to rejoice over a victory and to make the best of a defeat” (1897, 165).

Vice Presidential Inaugurations

For many years, the vice-presidential inauguration took place in the U.S. Senate prior to the presidential inauguration. The president pro tempore typically administered the oath, which was often accompanied by brief remarks by the incoming vice president. One contemporary observed that, in contrast to the dignity of the presidential inauguration, that of the vice president “suggests the director of a railroad addressing the stockholders at their annual meeting” (Davis 1897, 138). If there are memorable vice-presidential inaugural addresses, I have not found them.

Since the 1930s, the vice-presidential inauguration has taken place on the same platform as that of the president just before the presidential inauguration. Typically, they are administered by a Supreme Court justice or a personal friend. Although this has limited the ability of the vice president to give a speech, it has increased the vice president’s public visibility and emphasized the increased importance of the office.

Other Inaugural Traditions

George Washington attended a thanksgiving service shortly after his inauguration. Since the inauguration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, presidents most commonly attend St. John’s Episcopal Church across Lafayette Square prior to these inaugural ceremonies, which has gained a reputation as the “Church of the Presidents.”

The incoming president typically visits the outgoing president (who often leaves a hand-written note in his desk for the incoming president) at the White House, and rides with the new president to the inauguration. Donald Trump remains the only president in the last 150 years who declined to attend his successor’s inauguration despite being physically able to do so. In early inaugurations, presidents were typically escorted to the Capitol by militiamen or other volunteers who made up a type of parade. Today, a parade takes place after the oaths have been administered, the inaugural address has been given, and a luncheon has been held.

Other than times when the oath is administered upon the death of a former president away from the nation’s capital, it has become common for the

Chief Justice of the United States to administer the oath of office. In addition to highlighting the legality of the ceremony, the Chief's presence helps assure that representatives from all three branches of the national government attend inaugural ceremonies and highlight the fact that the president heads only one of them.

Incoming presidents once delivered their inaugural addresses before taking their oath, but they now give them afterwards. Although lacking the pomp and circumstance that surrounds European coronations, an acute observer of William McKinley's first inauguration observed that as the oath was administered "a great transformation which the people could not see passed over the whole of the land, and its influence penetrated to the furthestmost corners of the earth." He explained that "There came a new face at the door and a new step on the floor, and men who had thoughts above office, men who held office, and men who hoped to hold office recognized the change that had come" (Davis 1897, 162).

Inaugural addresses, although selectively remembered, are expected, and it is increasingly common to have a poet and/or one or more musical performances at each ceremony. These include playing "Hail to the Chief" shortly after the incoming president has taken the oath of office, and, often, a rendition of the National Anthem. Modern inaugurations have increasingly incorporated performances by pop stars, both at the inaugural ceremonies and in surrounding events (Petrusich 2021).

Presidential Inaugural Addresses

Of all the aspects of the inaugural proceedings, the presidential address has been the most studied. A few, such as Jefferson's first address, both of Lincoln's, Franklin D. Roosevelt's first, and that of John F. Kennedy stand out. Even the ones that did not achieve such esteem, however, present important snapshots of America's past.

Length

Discounting the brief remarks that vice presidents have made upon being elevated to office by the deaths of their predecessors, inaugural speeches have varied from the 133 words of Washington's second inaugural address to William Henry Harrison's 8,445 words. A study of inaugural addresses from 1789 through 1997 revealed that their average length was 2,374 words each (Whissell and Sigelman 2001, 257).

Common Elements

Such addresses are almost included within larger databases of important presidential speeches, in part because they fulfill four important criteria. In contrast to State of the Union Addresses from Thomas Jefferson to Woodrow Wilson, which were presented to Congress in writing, presidents have delivered all inaugural addresses orally. They are further “addressed to the American people, broadcast to the nation [at least since this has been technologically possible] and controlled by the president” (Coe and Neumann 2011, 731).

Professors Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson identify the inaugural address as a form of epideictic (ceremonial) rhetoric which consists of five main elements. The first two elements that they identify are that inaugurals typically attempt to unify the audience “by reconstituting its members as ‘the people’ who can witness and ratify the ceremony” and “rehearse communal values drawn from the past” (1985, 396). Others have noted that, in so doing, presidents often blend secular and sacred history by stressing such themes as “the national covenant, the holy experiment, the promised land, the virgin wilderness, and the New Israel” (Isetti 1976, 4). Sometimes presidents will put as much emphasis on such attitudinal dispositions, like self-restraint and industry that they identify with Americans, as with particular principles (Beasley 2001).

The third and fourth main elements of inaugural addresses that Campbell and Jamieson identify are those of setting forth “political principles that will guide the new administration” and demonstrating “that the President appreciates the requirements and limitations of his executive function” (1985, 296). As is delineated below, the latter element was more characteristic of earlier than of later presidential addresses.

The fifth main element that Campbell and Jamieson identify focuses on the specific constraints of an epideictic address. These include “urging contemplation not action, focusing on the present while incorporating past and future, and praising the institution of the Presidency and the values and form of the government of which it is a part” (1985, 396).

A simpler and more humorous survey of all the inaugural addresses through that of 2004 has highlighted ten key themes that most of them share, namely:

1. I am not worthy of this great honor.
2. But I congratulate the people that they elected me.

3. Now we must all come together, even those of us who really hate each other.
4. I love the Constitution, the Union, and George Washington.
5. I will work against bad threats.
6. I will work for good things.
7. We must avoid entangling alliances.
8. America's strength=democracy.
9. Democracy's strength=America.
10. Thanks, God (Widmer 2005, 37)

As element three of Campbell and Jamieson's analysis suggests, there is general agreement that inaugural addresses are more likely to emphasize general principles than announce specific policies, which they are more likely to cover during annual state of the union addresses and less formal stump speeches. Although there is variation from one president, and one era, to another, one scholar has identified eleven common themes in presidential inaugural addresses: "(1) civil virtue; (2) nonpartisanship; (3) national unity; (4) general policy principles; (5) cooperation with Congress; (6) popular support; (7) a providential supreme being; (8) the American mission; (9) political continuity; (10) the president's role as defender of the Constitution and union; and (11) federalism" (Ericson 1997, 728-29).

A multi-authored study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century inaugural addresses further found that 99% of inaugural addresses mentioned liberty, 97% belief in God, 96% patriotism, 94% justice, 94% personal responsibility, 92% peace, 71% equality, 68% happiness, and 42% lower taxes (Kinnier et al. 2012, 126-127). The study also noted that while 85% of nineteenth-century inaugurals referenced truth/honesty, only 43% of twentieth-century inaugurals did so; by contrast, whereas only 56% of nineteenth-century inaugurals spoke of courage, 86% of twentieth-century inaugurals did so (Kinnier et al. 2012, 129). Perhaps unsurprisingly, whilst 52% of the nineteenth-century speeches called for lowering taxes, only 25% of the twentieth-century counterparts did so, with Republicans mentioning the topic in 46% of their speeches compared to 23% of Democrats, none of whom did so in the twentieth-century (Kinnier et al. 2012, 129).

A comparative analysis of inaugural addresses, through that of John F. Kennedy, observes that domestic issues were far more dominant in the nineteenth century, and foreign policy in the twentieth. Prominent domestic issues have included "interpretations of our form of government" and "such concepts as democracy, function and powers of the general government, executive function and power, relations with state governments, citizen equality, freedom and justice" (Wolfarth 1961 129). Another prominent

issue in such speeches prior to 1937 was “frugality and efficiency in governmental operations” (Wolfarth 1961, 129).

All of these are serious topics, and the setting of the inauguration lends additional solemnity to such speeches. Inaugural addresses often seek to inspire, but they rarely utilize humor. About as close as such a speech came to be humorous was when John F. Kennedy observed, in making a quite serious point about new nations cherishing their freedom, that “those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside” (Inaugural Addresses 1969, 268).

Classification by Time Periods

Whatever commonalities they share, students of inaugural addresses have sought to group them into discrete time periods reflecting, in part, the power of the institution of the presidency and the political party system during each one. Michael Korzi has argued that presidential inaugural addresses have fallen into three main time periods. The first, which he characterized as the “constitution period” began with Washington and continued to the 1830s. These speeches stressed the president’s commitment to the Constitution and recognized the distance between the chief executive and the people (Korzi 2004, 24). Korzi believes presidents from the 1830s to the beginning of the 1900s tended to exemplify what he calls the “party period,” in which presidents gave less attention to the constitution and put greater emphasis on their duty to exact the people’s will as expressed by the political party that had elected them (Korzi 2004, 22). Korzi believes that this period, in turn, gave rise to what he calls the “plebiscitary period,” in which presidents considered themselves to be the embodiment of the popular will, which they had a duty to facilitate (Korzi 2004, 22). Although Korzi wrote before the Trump presidency, one could argue that it represented the apogee of such a development in that he elevated, and arguably substituted, his own political views for those that the party that elected him had typically represented and made his personality, rather than the party platform, the central object of attention throughout his administration.

Recognizing that his categories were not air-tight, Herbert Stern differentiated among three primary inaugural speech models. He identified those from Washington to Lincoln as that of “the modest, classic public servant”; those from Lincoln through Taft as that of “the prosaic government executive”; and those from Wilson forward as “the phase of the assertive, theatrical, leader-preacher” (Stein 1997, 28). The first and last categories are similar to those that Korzi has articulated.

President Nixon, who read prior inaugural addresses in preparation for his own, concluded that inaugural addresses fell into three types. As summarized by Professor Bochin, these consisted of “those that called for unity, those that called for sacrifice, and those that deliberately sought to strike a note of confidence for a troubled people” (1993, 21).

Stephen Skowronek identified four major periods in terms of the institution of the presidency within the larger political system. He argued that presidents from 1789 to 1832 generally portrayed themselves as patricians who largely stood above party politics. Those from 1832 to 1900 were largely partisans who sought to use patronage to satisfy multiple party factions. Those from 1900 to 1972 were pluralists who bargained with a variety of institutions and interests, and those from 1972 forward were plebiscitary presidents who sought to appeal over the heads of elites directly to the people (1993, 53). Noting that structures of presidential authority were sometimes vulnerable and sometimes resilient within each time period, he observed that presidents who largely opposed such preexisting commitments tended to engage in the “politics of reconstruction” when they were vulnerable and the “politics of preemption” when they were resilient. On the other hand, those who were affiliated with such structures tended to engage in the “politics of disjunction” when they were vulnerable and the “politics of articulation” when they were resilient (1990, 36).

Applying Skowronek’s analysis to presidential inaugural addresses, Mary Stuckey has observed that reconstructive presidents have chiefly focused in their speeches on challenge; presidents of articulation have focused chiefly on celebration; preemptive presidents have emphasized duty; and disjunctive presidents have highlighted renewal (1996, 127). Her analysis of the five main themes that dominate the addresses, however, are similar to those of other commentators. She found that they are “homage to God, stress on the values of freedom and equality, emphasis on the notion of ‘the Nation,’ belief in American exceptionalism, and an appeal to hope combined with the rhetoric of assent” (1996, 128).

Some incoming presidents are presented with better rhetorical opportunities than others. Pointing to the advantage of such “a great moment,” one observer noted that on some occasions “a president can feel the cusp of history under his feet” while those succeeding popular predecessors have “little to say but carry on!” (Von Drehle 1993).

In an introduction to a collection of inaugural addresses, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. claimed that “even in the field of political oratory, the inaugural address

is an inferior art form,” in which “the platitude quotient tends to be high, the rhetoric stately and self-serving, the ritual excessive, and the surprises few” (1965, vii), perhaps proving that familiarity can sometimes breed contempt. By contrast, Wayne Fields has observed that “An inaugural address, particularly one that marks a change in administration, is the most carefully written and elaborately rehearsed speech of any president’s career, and it provides a remarkably reliable indication of what matters to a new president and how he wants to be perceived” (Fields 1996, 114).

Consistent with the analysis of Korzi, J. Richard Broughton has observed that early presidents spent considerably more time describing the Constitution and recognizing the limits that it imposes than have presidents since Woodrow Wilson. A more focused study had shown that presidents from Washington to Jackson were much more likely to reference First Amendment freedoms (especially those of religion and press) than presidents from Kennedy through G.W. Bush, who were more likely to link freedom to free enterprise (Yearwood and Baker 2007, 368). After also noting that “Presidential references to the Constitution in inaugural addresses have decreased during the Twentieth Century,” Edward W. Chester observed that Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, Harry S Truman, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson ignored the document in their speeches (Chester 1980, 576). Broughton believes that presidents who fail to mention the Constitution and its principles miss an opportunity for civic education, and might also raise undue expectations as to what they can accomplish (Broughton 2010).

A scholarly study of the changing content of both inaugural and state of the union addresses has identified five general trends. Over time, both sets of speeches have become more “anti-intellectual,” eschewing “formal word choices for more colloquial ones.” They are more “abstract,” incorporating more “religious, poetic, and idealistic references.” They have become more “assertive,” adopting “a ‘realist’ preoccupation with the language of power” and confidence. They are more “democratic,” not only using the word “democracy” and accompanying adjectives, but also incorporating more “people-oriented, compassionate, inclusive, and egalitarian” language. Finally, they have become more “conversational,” utilizing language “that engenders an intimacy between the rhetor and the audiences, focuses on the trustworthiness of the rhetor, and is highly anecdotal” (Lim 2002, 346).

The Influence of the Audience on Inaugural Addresses

Presidents are directing their inaugural addresses not simply to the individuals on the platform and in the physical audience, but also to those who are listening by radio, television, and other forms of mass media - as well as to historians, political scientists, and rhetoricians who will analyze their speeches in print. Presidents from Jefferson forward released copies of their speeches on the day they made them. Especially since America's triumph during World War II, presidents undoubtedly know that their words will not only be parsed at home but also analyzed abroad, by both friendly nations and by foes.

A longitudinal study of inaugural addresses indicates that, as their audiences have widened via electronic media, the grade level required to understand them has decreased. Indeed, they have declined "ten grade levels over two centuries" (Sigelman 1996, 86; see also Christensen 1980). Another study of state of the union addresses, however, suggests that similar trends in these speeches might be more attributable to the fact that such speeches have increasingly been more tailored to a listening than to a reading audience, and that there may be no "dumbing down" of presidential discourse as a whole (Benoit, Munger, and Apirling 2019).

Studies of presidential inaugural addresses suggest that presidents have relied increasingly on unifying symbols. A scholar has identified 18 such unifying words: "America," "American," "Americans," "citizenry," "Citizens," "Country," "nation," "national," "our," "a people," "the people," "the public," "together," "union," "United States," "unity," "us," and "we," (Sigelman 1996, 86).

Focusing on what she believed to be the five most memorable inaugural addresses in U.S. history (Jefferson's first, Lincoln's second, F.D.R.'s first, Kennedy's, and Reagan's first), Professor Colleen Shogan says that they all "emphatically signify the end of political division and campaigning in an attempt to foster national unity [. . .] emphasize enduring governing principles instead of specific policy proposals [. . .] underscore the collective nature of ideas rather than focusing on the president in the first person as the sole originator of those conceptions," and "tend to be shorter, under, 2,000 words" (Shogan 2020). Another discussion of outstanding inaugural addresses observes that "for the most part, they are idea driven: that is, they are tinged with a philosophical tone about the Presidents' fundamental beliefs in the American system of government and the country's destiny" (Remini and Golway 2008, xii).