

Opinion: Inaugurations more than hail to the new chief

By Richard M. Skinner

For all their happy pageantry – marching brass bands on parade, solemn invocations, evening gowns at the balls—our inaugurations expose some of the biggest tensions that define the American presidency.

At the founding of our republic, monarchs led nearly every other nation. Even as democratic systems spread, most countries adopted parliamentary systems where legislatures chose prime ministers to head their governments, often alongside a ceremonial head of state to hover above the partisan fray. But the U.S. presidency falls somewhere between: A head of government that assumes office on behalf of a political party, yet is expected to be a unifying head of state for all Americans.

As our first elected president, George Washington was conscious that he was setting precedent for this new position as head of a republic. He had resigned his command of the Continental Army a few years earlier, despite calls for him to keep his wartime powers and rule the nation as a dictator or king. Yet he and his supporters also saw how his vast prestige could help support a fragile new government. So instead of simply taking his oath of office, the only constitutionally-mandated element of an inauguration, they turned Washington's ascension to the presidency into a show—one that publicly reconciled the compound, if not contradictory, roles bestowed on America's top post.

The result blended the trappings of European monarchs with heavy nods to the presidency's democratic foundations. In many ways, the inauguration looked like a coronation, with throngs

of adoring lookers-on, invocations of the divine, and a gun salute. But the new president wore a plain brown suit to the affair, held at Federal Hall in the then-capital, New York. He used his inaugural address to show humility at the task "to which the voice of my country called me," and drew attention to his solemn pledge to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Washington set another powerful precedent eight years later: After two elected terms, he retired. His refusal to cling to control provided reassurance to those who feared the power of a single executive. It also set the stage for peaceful, regular transitions.

After Washington, most of America's presidents decided to keep up the pageantry of the inaugural inauguration too. In 1797, Oliver Ellsworth became the first chief justice to administer the oath of office when he swore in John Adams. Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural was also the first to take place in the new Capitol of Washington, and his second featured the first parade. James Madison had the first inaugural ball in 1809. And in 1981, Ronald Reagan shifted the ceremony from the Capitol's East Portico to its West Front, allowing more of the public to witness the event from the National Mall.

Inaugurations seek to show stability during contentious transitions. But divisiveness can still undermine democracy's big day. Between Abraham Lincoln's election and inauguration in 1861, seven southern states declared their secession from the Union and began forming the Confederate States of America. Rumors spread of plots to prevent Lincoln from reaching the Capitol to ascend the presidency, so the president-elect disguised himself and took a night train through pro-slavery Baltimore to reach Washington on time. Artillery companies guarded Capitol Hill and sharpshooters lined his Pennsylvania Avenue route on Inauguration Day.

Despite the drama, Lincoln used his first address to strike a

conciliatory tone, telling Southerners, "We are not enemies, but friends." It was all for naught. Within six weeks, the Civil War had begun. But America did have a properly sworn-in president at the helm.

Even in the absence of a secessionist movement, partisanship can undercut aspirations for inaugurations to celebrate national unity. In 1829, Andrew Jackson's new presidency marked a stark, populist departure from those of incumbent John Quincy Adams. Following a bitter election fight, his inauguration became more victory party than reconciliation. The outgoing president Adams didn't show. But, fitting the new everyman order, a rowdy crowd of over 10,000 supporters did.

Just as many inaugurations are remembered for presidents-elect who tried to smooth bumpy handoffs. In 1801, Jefferson, the first president to come from a different party from that of his predecessor, declared, "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists."

In 1933, the outgoing Herbert Hoover and incoming Franklin D. Roosevelt, who openly loathed each other during a rocky transition, shared a lift to the new president's inauguration. Hoover mostly scowled as FDR tipped top hat to the crowds. But Hoover honored the tradition that, with rare exception (assassination, resignation, natural death, and a few 19th century cases of animosity), the outgoing president has always made some sort of symbolic show on Inauguration Day. It's perhaps the ceremony's most powerful symbol of the peaceful passage of power.

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