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Anticipating Obama

Is the inauguration of Barack Obama one of the most anticipated in American history?

By *Gleaves Whitney*

Next week's inauguration of our nation's 44th president will command the world's attention like nothing since 9/11 and the death of Princess Diana. Around the globe, record numbers of people will watch television coverage of the event. Some three to four million U.S. citizens will converge on Washington, DC, to experience the festivities. The National Mall, stretching more than two miles from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol's west portico – the “front porch of democracy” – will be packed with onlookers. Indeed, several students from Grand Valley State University have made a special trip to witness this historic civic ritual.

The excitement to share in Barack Obama's first day in office is building for a variety of reasons. First is the genuine pride of many Americans that the nation's first African American will be sworn in as president. He will be placing his hand on Abraham Lincoln's Bible. Probably no one in Lincoln's day imagined that a black hand would someday rest on that Bible in the inauguration of one of Lincoln's successors. This act is a truly redeeming moment in American history.

Second is that Barack Obama represents generational change. Eight U.S. presidents served in uniform in World War II. Two U.S. presidents were baby boomers who came of age during the Vietnam War era. Obama is our first president who became politically aware after Vietnam. The expectation (though it may be naïve) is that the 44th president will not engage in politics as usual, but will bring a fresh perspective to America's challenges and a new style of leadership to the federal government.

Third has to do with the mood surrounding the 2008 presidential contest. Surveys revealed that voters were angrier than ever when they cast their ballots in November. Up to 75 percent of those polled were dissatisfied or extremely unhappy with the condition of the nation. George W. Bush had lost his GOP base and seemingly his way, leaving his successor with two unresolved wars, an economy shaken to its foundations, and bitter debate over waterboarding, Guantanamo, and warrantless wiretapping. McCain's defeat at the polls, even after efforts to distance himself from the sitting president, confirmed the widespread discontent. People clearly wanted change.

These factors go far to show why the inauguration of Barack Obama is one of the most anticipated in U.S. history. But it is not the most anticipated. Three previous such events surely top this one. In 1789, when George Washington made the trip from his home at Mount Vernon to New York City, then the nation's capital, he was greeted by parades and enthusiastic well-wishers all along the way. The people adored the former commander of the Continental Army. They also knew much was at stake. The new republic existed in a world of hostile monarchies. The future of republican government everywhere depended on whether the nation's first president could implement the Constitution and establish a government strong enough to survive. Washington later wrote that he trembled with dread as he watched the adoring crowds and contemplated the coming trials.

In 1861, when Abraham Lincoln prepared to leave Springfield, Illinois, for the nation's capital, he was not even sure what he would be president of. Seven states had seceded after learning of his election. War clouds were gathering on the southern horizon. Lincoln's trip to Washington was fraught with danger. There had been numerous threats of assassination, and a mob tried to menace the president-elect in Baltimore. Lincoln had to spend the evening before his inauguration secretly holed up in the Willard Hotel. Even his ride up Pennsylvania Avenue on Inauguration Day was tense, as numerous body guards surrounded his carriage to block potential assassins.

In 1933, Franklin Roosevelt made the trip from New York to Washington, DC, when the Great Depression had already held the nation in its grip for some three years. The president-elect had narrowly escaped assassination in an attack that claimed the life of Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak. Abroad, international relations were deteriorating fast. Hitler was consolidating power in Germany, Stalin was tightening his grip over the Soviet Union, and Mussolini was about to attack Abyssinia. The world's most terrible war was within a few years of erupting. Nor did the prospects at home look promising. One in four Americans was out of work. The U.S. economy was contracting day-by-day. Americans needed hope that their new president could keep the peace, while bringing back prosperity and stability to the nation.

At the start of 2009, Barack Obama does not face the same threats that George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt had to confront when they took the oath of office. But he is beset by serious crises, and he will have to face them with courage, prudence, and wisdom.



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(Question from Tabitha Bell, senior, hospitality, tourism, and management major)