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# Inaugurations in American History

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## Inaugurations in American History

Which inaugurations have been the most memorable?

By Gleaves Whitney

The president is the one individual upon whom all the American people can cast their cares. So the formal installation of a president is a major event, the American equivalent of a coronation.

The most significant inauguration in U.S. history was arguably the first. Aware of the importance that this national ritual would take on, George Washington established several precedents during his first inauguration. The swearing-in took place outside. The oath was taken upon an open Bible. Washington added the words "so help me God" to the constitutionally prescribed oath of office. Immediately after the oath, he bent over to kiss the Bible.<sup>[1]</sup> An inaugural address was given to the Congress assembled inside Federal Hall, the building in New York City that served as the Capitol in those days. The contents of that first inaugural address served as a model for subsequent addresses. Also festivities accompanied the inauguration, including a church service, a parade, and fireworks.<sup>[2]</sup>

Although inaugurations are like coronations, it's no guarantee that inaugural addresses will be great or even good orations. There have been 56 inaugural addresses, but only a half dozen or so are truly memorable. Many people wonder why this is. Robert Dallek explains that these orations reflect the broadest consensus in American culture. In trying to reach out to as many citizens as possible, presidents do not attempt to be innovative but massage the tried-and-true themes of freedom, unity, American exceptionalism, and the goodness of the American people.

### SEVEN MEMORABLE INAUGURAL ADDRESSES

**George Washington's** first Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789, put the new nation in world historical context: "the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."

**Thomas Jefferson's** first Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801. After a bitter election that resulted in the first transfer of power from one party to another, he tried to unify the young nation, exclaiming, "We are all Federalists; we are all Republicans."

**Abraham Lincoln's** second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, during the closing days of the Civil War, called for "malice toward none," and "charity for all."

**Franklin Roosevelt's** first Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933, during the depths of the Great Depression, proclaimed, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

**Franklin Roosevelt's** third Inaugural Address, on March 4, 1941, was a paean to the idea and reality of American democracy when Europe and Asia were being ripped asunder by the Axis juggernaut.

**John F. Kennedy's** Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961, challenged fellow citizens: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

**Ronald Reagan's** first Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981, pressed a new idea to reverse the growth of big government: "In the present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem."

### OTHER FACTS AND HIGHLIGHTS

**The longest inaugural address** was William Henry Harrison's in 1841. He delivered the 1 hour 45 minute oration without wearing a hat or coat in a howling snow storm, came down with pneumonia, and died one month later. His was the shortest tenure in the White House.

**The shortest inaugural address** was George Washington's second, in 1793. Yet he had the most important administration in American history. So the longest inaugural address was followed by the shortest administration in U.S. history, and the shortest inaugural address occurred at the midpoint of the most important administration in U.S. history.

**Most meaningful ad libbed line and gesture:** George Washington added the words "so help me God" to the oath of office (the original text of which is prescribed by the U.S. Constitution), then bent forward to kiss the Bible. How did these words and this gesture come about? Supposedly the chief justice of New York's Supreme Court admonished Washington and others that an oath that was not sworn on the Bible would lack legitimacy. As no Bible could be found in Federal Hall, where the swearing in was to be held, one was borrowed from a Masonic lodge a few blocks away.

**First president inaugurated in Washington, DC:** Thomas Jefferson, on March 4, 1801. George Washington had been inaugurated in New York City (1789) and in Philadelphia (1793), and John Adams had been inaugurated in Philadelphia (1797).

**First president to eschew his successor's inauguration:** John Adams, on March 4, 1801. The campaign of 1800 between the sitting president, Adams, and his vice president, Jefferson, had left deep wounds. Adams was in no mood to celebrate and left town.

**Tradition of attending a religious service on the way to the Inauguration:** began with Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. George W. Bush is attending St. John's Episcopal Church near the White House.

**Striking moment from today's perspective:** when Dwight D. Eisenhower asked listeners to bow their heads: "...[W]ould you permit me the privilege of uttering a little private prayer of my own?" Some reference to God, or asking for God's blessings on the United States, has been a part of all 55 inaugural addresses. But Ike's gesture was a first.

**Funniest line in a first inaugural address:** Presidential historian Paul Boller has read every inaugural address (for which, he says, he deserves a medal), and he claims that there is not a single funny line in the official texts. However, our eighth president, Martin Van Buren inadvertently made the audience laugh when he said, "Unlike all who have preceded me, the [American] Revolution that gave us existence as one people was achieved at the period of my birth; and whilst I contemplate with grateful reverence that memorable event..." Van Buren meant that he revered the American Revolution, but to the audience it sounded as if he revered his own birth.

**Most surprising moment at an inaugural ceremony:** on January 20, 1953, when Texas-born Dwight Eisenhower, in the reviewing stand, was lassoed by a cowboy who rode up to him on a horse.

**Rowdiest inaugural celebration:** at Abraham Lincoln's inauguration, the crowd grew so rambunctious that the police had to be called in.

**Dumbest thing a president did at his inauguration:** in March of 1841, William Henry Harrison gave his Inaugural Address -- the longest in



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presidential history, nearly two hours in length -- in a snow storm without wearing a hat or overcoat. He came down with a bad cold that developed into a major respiratory infection (probably pneumonia), and was dead within the month. (Of course, many other presidents have acted similarly in extremely cold temperatures during their inauguration. The night before John Kennedy was sworn in, a cold front hammered the East Coast, leaving snow and frigid temperatures in its wake. Watch the film clip: JFK removed his overcoat before standing up to receive the oath of office and deliver his address.)

**Warmest inauguration:** Ronald Reagan's first, on January 20th, 1981, when the temperature at the swearing in was 55 degrees.

**Coldest inauguration:** Ronald Reagan's second, on January 20th, 1985, when the temperature at noon was 7 degrees. The events were moved inside the Capitol. By the way, Congress had to pass a last-minute resolution to give permission to use the Rotunda for the event.

**Best book about inaugurations:** Presidential historian Paul F. Boller Jr. of Texas Christian University has written the best historical overview titled *Presidential Inaugurations*.

As a rule, second inaugural addresses are not as long as first ones. As in so much else, George Washington set the example, with an extremely brief second inaugural address that would endure as the shortest in American history. Abraham Lincoln explained why brevity was called for the second time around: "At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement in detail of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented." And then Lincoln went on to deliver arguably the most memorable Inaugural Address in U.S. history, contemplating an inscrutable God's just punishment on the North and South because of the existence of slavery.

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[1] Paul F. Boller Jr., *Presidential Inaugurations: From Washington's Election to George W. Bush's Gala* (San Diego: Harcourt, 2001), p. 13.

[2] From the Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/inaugural-exhibit.html>.

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*(Question from Brenda T. of Colorado Springs)*