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The Company He Keeps

Gleaves Whitney

Grand Valley State University

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The Company He Keeps
George W. Bush is one of a few.

By Gleaves Whitney

Of the 55 inaugurations of U.S. presidents, only 16 have been second inaugurations; only six of these have occurred during wartime. So George Walker Bush joins an elite club — alongside Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Richard Nixon — when later today he takes the oath of office and delivers a wartime second inaugural address.

This week's gala is the most guarded and costly ever, featuring 9 balls, three candle-light dinners, two church services, a concert, and a parade in which 73 different groups have been selected to participate.

Because of Iraq, there is tension surrounding this inauguration, perhaps more than around previous wartime inaugurations. Thomas Jefferson was the first wartime president to celebrate a second inauguration. But when he did so in March of 1805, the Tripolitan War with the Barbary pirates was quickly winding down. A naval blockade was forcing the Muslims to the bargaining table, and they would sign a treaty in three months. The president only indirectly referenced the war in his speech.

Abraham Lincoln was another wartime president to go through a second inauguration. When he did so in March of 1865, the Civil War was for all practical purposes over. Robert E. Lee would surrender at Appomattox Court House in a month. It was on this occasion that Lincoln gave, arguably, the greatest inaugural address in American history.

Franklin Roosevelt was another wartime president to go through an inauguration, his fourth it so happened, in January of 1945. In FDR's case, too, the war was winding down. The *Wehrmacht's* last desperate attempt to turn back a rising Allied tide had failed with the Battle of the Bulge, and Americans could anticipate the end of strife in both the European and Pacific theaters.

Likewise with Richard Nixon. By January of 1973, peace was at hand in Vietnam, as Kissinger had announced the previous October. Within a few days of the inauguration, a peace treaty would be signed, enabling the U.S. to save face long enough to withdraw from Southeast Asia.

In each of these instances, America's wartime efforts were on the verge of success or surcease when the president delivered his inaugural address. The prominent exception was James Madison's second inauguration in March of 1813. It took place in the shadow of the War of 1812 that had erupted a few months earlier and showed no signs of simmering down. The war against the world's greatest superpower was going badly for the Americans. Everyone sensed that it would get worse before it got better, since it was being fought in our waters and on our shores. Madison's entire second inaugural address was devoted to the conflict. He went so far as to call hostile Indians the terrorists of the day.

We know that George W. Bush's second inauguration is not occurring at the beginning of the war. We do not know if it is occurring at the end of the war. It helps that the Iraqis are holding landmark elections in ten days. Still, the American people want to know when and how U.S. troops can get disentangled from a military and diplomatic briar patch.

If the Iraqis can assume control over their own security, if they can establish a sustainable constitutional democracy in the next few years, it will be to George W. Bush's everlasting credit. Future generations will praise his idealism, courage, and audacity. They will appreciate that he embarked on one of the most breath-taking adventures in human history — that of planting the fragile liberty tree in the sandy

soil of the Middle East.

In domestic policy, George W. Bush has also proven to be a president of big ideas. He is determined to reform taxes, torts, and Social Security — this last being the 800-pound gorilla inside the Beltway. A previous time a president tried to reform Social Security, he and his party were spanked hard. Remember what happened to Ronald Reagan's party in the mid 1980s? In off-year elections, Republican candidates lost ten Senate races, and the GOP lost control of the Senate. Only in 2006 will we know if Bush can do better.

The question today is: Can Mr. Bush's second inaugural address be as bold as his ideas? Can he use the speech to set an idealistic, energetic tone for the next four years? We can anticipate the predictable elements that inform wartime inaugural addresses. There are seven:

- He will show humility and gratitude to the American people for entrusting him to be their president for another four years.
- He will go out of his way to thank the soldiers, sailors, and fliers who have been at war for more than three years in the Middle East.
- He will recap some of the challenges of our age and review some of the administration's successes in dealing with those challenges.
- He will re-present his vision of freedom to the American people — a vision of expanding freedom around the world, and staking out more freedom at home. If he is true to form, the president will paint his vision in bold colors, not pale pastels.
- He will sketch a few policies in brief, sharp lines, saving the details for the State of the Union address to follow.
- He will challenge political opponents to join him in achieving his vision. (The problem for Bush is that he has a slim mandate to govern. Compared to other second-term presidents, he won the 2004 election by the smallest percentage of the popular vote since 1824, when such numbers started being tallied, and he won the Electoral College vote by the second smallest percentage ever. This sobering reality is offset by the fact that his shirttails helped build GOP leads in both houses of Congress — no insignificant achievement.)
- Finally, he will ask fellow citizens for their support and prayers and may, like Dwight Eisenhower, offer a prayer of his own.

That's the formula. Several of our leaders — Washington, Lincoln, FDR, Kennedy, Reagan — understood that the president occupies a unique place in our constitutional republic. Like a king, he is the only individual on whom the entire nation can cast its cares. Accordingly, their words captured the imagination of the American people. How President Bush's ideas, diction, and delivery are received will depend on how the speech resonates with those "better angels of our nature," the deep sense of who we are. It's a safe bet that this 17-minute oration will be more than a run-of-the-mill second inaugural address, but only time will tell if it's a speech for the ages.

— *Gleaves Whitney is director of the [Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies](#) at Grand Valley State University.*