

## Obama's Inaugural Speech: Breaking with the Past While Looking to the Future

An estimated 49 million Americans watched President Obama's inaugural address, breaking records for TV audiences as well as online views and streams (de Moraes). Tens of millions of Europeans watched it on their TV sets alongside millions more throughout the rest of the world, although the rest of the world went uncounted in the mainstream media (Roxborough). Mr. Obama's speech displayed an acute awareness of the traditions of the past but also the modern concerns of this global audience. Throughout the address, Mr. Obama follows the traditional form of inaugural addresses and employs numerous historical references to tie back to traditional American political values while clearly marking a comprehensive break with the agenda of the last eight years. And while still couched in the stilted format of inaugury, the address introduces new ideological concerns alongside the familiar ones by using the metaphorical language of globalization to introduce new populations into the national and global consciousness.

The president's inaugural address holds a special place in American political rhetoric for both its symbolic power and distinctive language. During the campaign process, a folksy tongue issuing "down-home" metaphors is the preferred method of persuasion, commonly held to appeal to the average American in an arguably outdated conception of the average US citizen. The inaugural address, on the other hand, offers the president an opportunity to break free of the studied common man language and slip some poetry into the political conversation. Unfortunately, as Jonathan Raban writes in *The Guardian*, inaugural addresses tend to err on the side of ponderous rather than poetic. Mr. Obama, whose speeches have drawn rapturous praise for their inspiring eloquence, was expected to do the form proud.

The traditional format of the inaugural address opens with thanks to the predecessor and the peaceful transitional process and closes with an appeal to God to bless the nation, usually including an honorific title for the deity such as "the benign Parent of the Human Race" (Raban). In a wise

departure, Mr. Obama omits such an honorific, but he adheres to the rest of the schedule. Ornate phrases like “rising tides of prosperity” and “still waters of peace” signal an attempt to mimic the phraseology initiated by George Washington’s first address in 1789, and references to “We the People,” “forebears” and “founding documents” draw a direct connection to the historical roots of American politics and ritual. While the address goes on to touch upon a wide range of topics, the language returns again and again to references that ground it in the inaugural tradition. When addressing the national character, the president mentions both the homesteaders who shaped the country as well as soldiers from each high profile US war through Vietnam. Before closing, Mr. Obama quotes from Thomas Paine, although many were expecting a more recent reference to Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt or perhaps another American leader, Martin Luther King (Safire et al). But while Mr. Obama employs respectful language building strong connections to the roots of the nation, the content of the speech is laced with a strong rejection of George W. Bush’s policies of the last eight years.

In the days that followed the inauguration, the reactions of commentators were mixed. A few dominant reactions emerged—that it was at a minimum a good speech, that it was forceful, even “muscular,” and that it was full of purpose (Safire et al). Also, that it lacked a memorable theme and was a wholesale rejection of the policies of the administration of the last eight years (Safire et al). This last point was highlighted in the *Washington Post* among other journals, as Dan Eggen writes that “Mark McKinnon, a GOP consultant and former Bush adviser, wrote ... that some thought Obama took ‘unnecessary shots’ and used ‘borrowed ideas’ [in his inaugural address].” And Jonathan Raban notes that “in no inaugural has a president so completely repudiated the policies of his predecessor as Obama did on Tuesday.”

After listing off a series of crisis issues facing America, Mr. Obama uses stern language to repudiate the current political struggles that dominate Washington: “We come to proclaim an end to

the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics.” He urges us instead to “choose our better history” and to defend the idea that “all are equal” and “all are free.” Just a few paragraphs later, he again returns to this idea, stating “our time of standing pat, of protecting narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions – that time has surely passed.” Mr. Obama is perhaps at his strongest when he uses such simple straightforward language to appeal to common sense. As Sam Leith points out, “Obama borrows one of Lincoln’s most effective rhetorical tricks ... the sudden drop in register to plain style.”

But the plain speaking appeals to more than just common sense—Mr. Obama also introduces a new rhetoric of inclusion that subtly declares a restructuring of global hegemonic structures while maintaining America as a leader in this newly shifted world order. When he talks of the “cynics who fail to understand ... that the ground has shifted beneath them,” and that “the stale political arguments ... no longer apply,” the president employs powerful imagery to delineate a map of political agendas that has been redrawn by traditional or nontraditional means and populations. He goes on to make even clearer references to previously ignored populations later, mentioning that America’s strength comes from its “patchwork heritage” and is “shaped by every language and culture drawn from every end of this Earth.” He even mentions the “nonbelievers” for the first time in an inaugural speech. The newly minted language of globalization is furthered in the passage “the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve ... as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself....” In addressing the global stage, Mr. Obama continues to reframe the power structures of the Bush era for a new age: “To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect.” He does, however, reserve a position of dominance for the US going forward, explicitly saying “America ... is ready to lead once more.”

President Obama's inaugural address will ultimately be judged on the next four years, but contains powerful promises of a new age of responsible governance in America. By tying his speech to its historical antecedents, rejecting the political agenda of the last eight years, and introducing a more inclusive rhetoric of globalization, President Obama has delivered a speech that could redefine the stage of American politics.

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