

THOMAS JEFFERSON, “FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS,” WASHINGTON, D.C. (4 MARCH 1801)

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Abstract: Jefferson’s first inaugural address was delivered at a crucial turning point in the fortunes of the young republic. This essay examines how the speech sought both to satisfy and reshape the political expectations of its moment; identifies key functions of the genre of presidential inaugural addresses; and suggests several implications for civic discourse in our own time.

Keywords: Jefferson, presidential inaugural address, genre, early republic, Enlightenment

The Constitution of the United States of America addresses the presidency in four sections under Article II. There it stipulates such matters as duration of office, executive powers, and conditions for impeachment. Although the framers thought it necessary to require that the president “from time to time give to the Congress information on the State of Union,” nowhere does it mention an inaugural address. Neither, as far as we can tell, did the delegates of 1787 ever debate or otherwise even consider such a provision during deliberations of that summer. Nor does it appear to have figured whatsoever in the protracted ratification contests that extended into the following year. Why then, do newly elected presidents deliver an inaugural address?

The short answer is because George Washington chose to launch his presidency on April 30, 1789, with a speech to the nation’s first House and Senate on the second floor of Federal Hall in New York City. Like virtually everything else Washington did at the time, that speech set a precedent, and it has remained solidly in place ever since. Who now would be so bold as to depart from a practice so deeply ingrained, so definitive of our shared commitment to democracy? But there is another, more complex and compelling answer than simply following in the footsteps of the first president. That much is important, of course; still, inaugural addresses perform crucial services for maintaining, enlivening, and ensuring the prospects of democratic government. The historical conditions have changed, of course, and the speeches vary in length and quality. Certain constants continue to underwrite their delivery, however, and they are bound together in a tradition inseparable from what it means to participate in American democracy.¹

Thomas Jefferson’s first inaugural address (March 4, 1801) provides a striking case study in the rhetorical functions of the genre. At 1716 words and only six paragraphs, the text from which he spoke is brief; this was characteristic of its author, who prized concision, elegance, and force. Though short, the speech was immediately praised for its “felicity of thought and expression,” and generations later Jefferson’s address was still being lauded as “astonishing, and perhaps unequalled in the instance of any similar production.”² In the following, I offer an account of this “production,” its author, the circumstances of its delivery, an analysis of the text itself, and the ways in which its statements retain their vitality as resources for democratic thought.

The nation’s third president was and remains a bundle of contradictions. The author of the Declaration of Independence held hundreds of human beings in bondage. Jefferson was a

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Deist, but keenly interested in the moral teachings of Jesus; among the most cosmopolitan leaders of his generation, he was intensely devoted to state government and all things Virginian. Widely hailed for his eloquence and command of the language, the “Sage of Monticello” was no orator, sought indeed to avoid the platform whenever possible. Rather than ignore, excuse, or otherwise finesse these realities, we might better learn to acknowledge them at the start; they are in fact crucial to better understanding the creative reaches and moral limits of the man.

One such tension is particularly important for our grasp of the inaugural address. Put bluntly, we may ask: was Jefferson a statesman or a politician? Should we regard him as a wise founding father who transcended partisanship? A savvy and ambitious power broker? The address teaches us that he was neither one nor the other, but both; like the speaker himself, it embodies fundamental tenets of republican government. At the same time, the speech is intensely concerned to manage the conflicting and red-hot issues born of competing visions for that government. For all the praise accorded to Jefferson as the “Sage of Monticello,” he was unquestionably a political animal. He understood power, and he wanted to use it to optimal effect. Hence the Inaugural Address.³

In short order we will turn to its immediate contexts. Here we want to establish our coordinates by identifying the key assumptions driving Jefferson’s thought generally and the speech specifically. For while it is certainly true that the Virginian was a political animal, it is equally true that he was a quintessentially Enlightenment thinker. Who he was and what he said cannot be extracted from a remarkable period in the European west dating from the late seventeenth and well beyond the eighteenth century. In the sciences, the arts, philosophy, and more, the period burst with innovative thinkers, including Newton, Locke, Voltaire, Franklin, and Jefferson.

Now, the term “Enlightenment” has been subjected, rightfully, to all manner of definitions, challenges, and re-definitions. For our purpose, it is enough to observe the work of certain premises that gave shape and force to the Jefferson creed. Three command our attention. First: *Reason*. That is, Jefferson and all Enlightenment figures celebrated the human capacity for rational thought and action; true, this faculty had to be retrieved from the powers of darkness (superstition, despotism, etc.); it had to be nurtured, protected, and allowed to flourish. But the payoff would be incalculable. Second: *Rights*. That is, human beings, by virtue of the fact that they are human beings, are entitled to certain rights. Among these are, famously, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Third: *Progress*. There is throughout all the various expressions of Enlightenment thought a shared assumption that given the free exercise of one’s rational capacity, and equipped with the protections afforded by natural rights, humans may with confidence turn their back on the benighted past and stride purposefully toward a better tomorrow. Are these ideals, rarely met? Of course they are. That they are ideals worth aspiring toward is the operative assumption driving Jefferson and the Inaugural Address.⁴

Context: The “Revolution of 1800”

The nation to whom its third president addressed these ideals was all of twelve years old. This gives one pause, and prompts us to ask how things were going for the new republic. The record was mixed. On the upside, there was still a country to address; that much was not to be taken for granted, and no one alert to the vagaries of European imperialism did so. If one person may be thought responsible for keeping the nation in being, it was Washington. His steady hand, principled leadership, and undying optimism was believed by most to have secured the nation, in

the words of the *Declaration*, its place “among the powers of the earth.” A bill of rights had been amended to the Constitution; Rhode Island, Vermont, Kentucky, and Tennessee had come into the union; and several important treaties had been forged. On the downside, partisan divides were beginning to emerge; a fugitive slave act had been passed, and boded ill for that most vexatious of issues; the “Whiskey Rebellion” erupted and had to be put down by federal force; and foreign relations with Britain and France remained strained. The prospects were not altogether dim, but they were not entirely bright either.⁵

By the middle of the decade a new phenomenon in America was rapidly making itself apparent, and would bear decisively on Jefferson’s speech and its legacy. Political parties, or “factions,” as they were dismissively called, now began to organize and direct competing visions for the nation. Over and against the “Federalists” stood the “Democratic-Republicans.” The resulting split between Hamilton, torchbearer for the former, and Jefferson and Madison, champions of the latter, was to introduce a degree of strife into the nation’s leadership unwanted and feared by many. Suddenly, it seemed, the sober paternalism of Washington’s day was being displaced by the rancor, smear campaigns, and media bias so frequently lamented in our own time. Jefferson himself sighed in 1797 that “Men who have been intimate all their lives cross the street to avoid meeting, and turn their heads another way, lest they should be obliged to touch their hats.”⁶

Predictably, perhaps, Jefferson’s election in 1800 bore the marks of these new divisions. After the heated debates, back-room maneuvering, and newspapers battles had subsided, Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr prevailed over John Adams and Charles Pinckney by securing Southern and northeastern urban voters. But that was not the end of the affair: before passage of the eleventh amendment, the second-place candidate became vice-president. In this case, both Jefferson and Burr won 73 electoral votes. After a wrangle in the House, Jefferson was at length named the chief executive. The newly elected president thought the nation had just passed through a second revolution, bloodless but no less committed to the foundational principles upon which the republic must stand. A newspaper editorial at the time announced that the “voice of the majority of the people has declared itself in favor, not only of particular men, but of particular measures. The contest, which has just passed, was a contest of principle.”⁷

The election of 1800 was indeed a “contest of principle.” It was also a rough and tumble exercise in republican politics; noisy, grasping, daring. To deliver an inaugural address under such circumstances is to speak not to democracy but from within its distinctive environment. And to the extent that this environment is itself shifting, uncertain, and frequently disordered, such an address will, if effective, seek to impose a certain moral coherence, to reassure the people that in spite of it all, there is hope that the grand experiment in democracy may be redeemed. As a rhetorical genre, the inaugural address is designed to exemplify such coherence, to reaffirm basic commitments, and animate the vital transmission of principles into practice. Through all the varied performances and different talents that mark the tradition of presidential inaugurals, they yet bear at least these aspirations in common. As a final approach to Jefferson’s speech, it will thus be worth a brief reminder of what these particular expectations are and why they matter.

Commitment #1: The Office is More Important than its Occupant

Historically speaking the track record for democracies is not particularly good. There are a number of reasons why this is the case, and observers since antiquity have not been shy about pointing them out. Democracies ground themselves in the will of the people; yes, but the people

may themselves be deluded. Without the superintending authority of a monarch, or emperor, or tsar, they can spin out of control and devolve into anarchy. And—this is key—they remain exposed to the wiles of a leader so powerful as to usurp the power of the people and repurpose it to their own end. This we call demagoguery, and it persists as a very real threat to democracies in our own time. Citizens of the early republic were keenly aware of this danger. Their slogan: “Measures, not men!” Many, but not all, inaugural addresses reaffirm this commitment, beginning with Washington’s first and continuing through the scores to follow. Typically, the newly elected president stresses early on that they hold the office in trust, and that this trust ultimately is not theirs but rightfully of the people.

Commitment #2: The Transfer of Power is Safe and Proper

Resorting again to the historical record: we humans seem not especially good at handing over power. A brief glance at the grim story of the world’s experience with despotism, revolution, and political violence tell us as much. Are democracies any better at managing the peaceful transfer of power from one administration to another? Time will tell, but in the early going at least we know that many were deeply anxious about the matter. Given the turmoil of 1800, these concerns were not unreasonable; nor would they be on the eve of civil war, in the context unprecedented economic depression, or times of drastic social polarization. Inaugural addresses may be expected, accordingly, to function as a means of assuring citizens—and the world—that in fact the democratic process is working; that the rules have been obeyed; and that for all the noise and dissent the center still holds. They function as ritualized affirmations of collective identity; assurances that as the people cross a liminal threshold of leadership, the terms of our shared humanity remain clear and compelling.

Commitment #3: One People, Many Voices

Democracy is by definition audacious. Its proponents seem to believe that a heterogeneous mass of people can actually negotiate their endless differences to a common good. That there is even such a thing as a “common good” is itself a fairly outlandish idea: in just what does such a good inhere? The story of American democracy is in no trivial sense a story of a people trying to answer that question. Are there in fact any common denominators that keep us recognizable to each other as “fellow citizens”? If not, the great experiment fails; if so, we have reason to push ahead. The way has never been smooth, and will never be smooth; this, because democracy seeks that most difficult of political ideals: from many, one. Again, the inaugural address may be understood as a rhetorical means to this end. This is why they tend not to rehearse partisan specifics (there may be a few) but to emphasize widely shared values and fundamental principles. The details will come later, with the inevitable partisan fights; for now, the speaker insists, it is important to acknowledge a shared inheritance and celebrate the best of ourselves.

Commitment #4: Divine Guidance

In 1789, the nation’s first chief executive concluded his inaugural address with the prayer that “the benign parent of the human race” might guide the new nation according to his will and ensure the “enlarged views, the temperate consultations, and the wise measures on which the success of this Government must depend.”⁸ Washington was not by usual measures given to Christianity, although most of his fellow citizens certainly were. Still, he thereby enshrined a commonplace appeal to the divine that remains a feature of all ensuing inaugural addresses.

What are we to make of this, especially in light of the country's long-standing investment in the separation of church and state? The question is more complex than can be addressed here, and Americans continue to struggle with the issue. At a minimum, however, we can at least acknowledge the persistence of the appeal. More broadly, we may consider the enduring commitment it registers that democracy is ultimately a matter of faith, that it has moral authority, and that most Americans are responsive to the role of divinity in the affairs of public as well as private life. We now turn to the address itself.

Analysis of the Text

About a thousand people had gathered before the unfinished Capitol at noon, March 4, 1801. Thomas Jefferson made his way from a nearby boarding house, inconspicuously attired and, given his natural residence, no doubt took a few deep breaths as he reached for the papers in his breast pocket. Chief Justice John Marshall administered the requisite oath of office, the speaker turned to his audience, and proceeded to deliver what one witness described as a “model of eloquence” by “one of the best writers which our country has produced.”⁹ In the following, we will bend closely to the text, try to discern therein the grounds of this eloquence, and note its interplay of Enlightenment principles and rhetorical functions that constitute the artistic achievement of the address taken a whole. This will require some patience, but the payoff should be clear.

We noted above the republican insistence that presidents are but temporary occupants of an enduring office. That Jefferson was deeply committed to this standard is evident from the very beginning. Figuratively speaking, he might be seen as first assuming the stage front and center, and then, having commanded his audience's attention, begins to step backward; in this way, Jefferson signals that the occasion of the speech is greater than the speaker himself. The following passage from paragraph one perfectly captures this principle:

A rising nation, spread out over a wide and fruitful land, traversing all the seas with the rich productions of their industry, engaged in commerce with nations who feel power and forget right, advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye—when I contemplate these transcendent objects, and see the honor, the happiness, and the hope of this beloved country . . . I shrink from the contemplation, and humble myself before the magnitude of the undertaking [1].¹⁰

This positioning of the speaker before his subject is not a novel move: ancient rhetoricians indeed had a term for it—*ingratis*—and it generally remains a standard in the lore. In this case, however, Jefferson's humility is ideologically weighted, something more, we may assume, than a token gesture. Democracies, we recall, are thought to be particularly vulnerable to the siren calls of the demagogue; we recall, too, that this particular democracy was only a little over a decade old. The temptation to assert the power of the person over and above the strictures of office must have been great.

Jefferson, like Washington and Adams before him, thus shows himself to be conspicuously disinterested in the politics of personality. As if to confirm the point, he returns in the penultimate paragraph to assure his “friends and fellow citizens”:

I have learned to expect that it will rarely fall to the lot of imperfect man to retire from this station with the reputation and the favor which bring him into it . . . I shall often go wrong through defect of judgment. When right, I shall often be thought wrong by those whose positions will not command a view of the whole ground. I ask for your indulgence for my errors, which will never be intentional, and your support against the errors of others who may condemn what they would not if seen in all its parts [5].

On reflection, we can see in these lines more than glib false modesty. It is rather consistent with our point about the fusing of principle and expedience that Jefferson shows himself the humble statesman—even as he acknowledges the inevitable frustrations and partisanship with which he will be met. Jefferson was a profound political philosopher; but he was also very much a politician, and he knew that he had a lot of work ahead if he was to overcome the corrosive effects of the late campaign. He knew, too, that he had been source and object of fears real and imagined. Upon receiving the text in printed form, editors of a rival newspaper observed that it clearly was written by a man “who knew that he had been suspected and dreaded, as an enemy to the government, and who, from motives of interest and policy, felt the necessity of securing the favorable opinion of his political adversaries. This was wise and prudent.”¹¹

Indeed it was. Wise because republicanism in principle demanded legitimate authority; prudent because such authority could never be presumed. This much seemed inherent to democracy, and helped to shape both its prospects and limits. At the center of the issue was power: where it came from, in whose name it was to be exercised, and at what point its reach did or did not exceed acceptable boundaries. These matters are taken up next. Jefferson’s reflections here may justly be accounted among the most memorable formulations of the republican creed in the history of American political thought. The paragraph is relatively lengthy, but performs a great deal of work in a short space. In effect, Jefferson has three tasks before him: he needs, first, to explain how American politics differs from European experience; second, to reassure his fellow citizens that the recent election season, though divisive, can be overcome in a spirit of unity; and finally, to affirm the stability, strength, and future of the new nation.

Inaugural addresses are designed to bring people together. That is their rhetorical charge. Students of the art are quick to point out, quite rightly, that the symbolic appeal to unity is accompanied by a process of differentiation. That is: every “we” presupposes a “them,” a not-we. America in 1801 was still very much a nation in search of a “we,” a coherent, identifiable body bound together under the sovereignty of its people and the rule of law. Jefferson accordingly sought to strengthen these bonds not by explaining away the bumptious energies of the late election but indeed by celebrating them. He did this by drawing attention to the ways in which Americans conducted their politics—noisily, aggressively, dramatically—and then contrasted such conduct with their cousins across the sea.

We might well remind ourselves what had transpired in the scant years since Washington’s assumption of office: the fall of the Bastille, the “Terror,” wars involving France, England, Austria, Prussia; the rise of Napoleon, yet more war on the horizon and devastation to the continent. Against this background, was there really so much to fear from a little political scrapping as witnessed on this side of the waters? Hardly. “During the contest of opinion through which we have past,” Jefferson explained, “the animation of discussions and of exertions has sometimes worn an aspect which might impose on strangers unused to think freely and to speak and to write what they think” [2].

Europeans just did not understand American ways—yet. They would, in time, if the nation embraced its role as a model for the new order of things. The American experiment held that human beings could have it both ways: it could fully realize itself as a democracy *and* remain intact as a sovereign entity. But this was possible only if the people returned to their first principles, those abiding values cementing the “We.” In Jefferson’s famous words:

During the throes and convulsions of the ancient world, during the agonizing spasms of man, seeking through blood and slaughter his long-lost liberty, it was not wonderful that the agitation of the billows should reach even this distant and peaceful shore; . . . But every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it [2].

There is perhaps no better, no more pure distillation of Enlightenment political thought in the English language. To appreciate its force is to see how it suspends otherwise destructive energies—precisely those of greatest threat to democracies—in a productive state of tension. The Enlightenment principles of reason, rights, and progress are not here invoked as utopian abstractions; on the contrary, they are deployed as real, pressing, and absolutely necessary. If we look at the passage from the other side, we see Jefferson the political pro, the tough-minded strategist. He is after all speaking as the winner, and winners tend to say things like “we are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.” Still, one can fully acknowledge this fact and note that such appeals are not merely cynical. As in the best of the inaugural addresses, the speaker here forges his principles in the crucible of debate, and disciplines the debate by insisting on shared principles.

And what are those principles? We mentioned earlier that one of the key functions of the genre is to explicitly denote certain values, presumably held in common and intact after the give-and-take of the political arena. The moment of delivery is not the time to pick a fight; this norm will of course be violated regularly in the years to come, but in some ways America in 1801 was still in the age of Washington, when common civility—the We—remained very much a respectable goal. Hence the second and third paragraphs: together, they provide a kind of inventory of republican ambitions, assumptions, and no small amount of bragging that have since become familiar to our ears. They are all arguable, to be sure, and remain contestable. But they endure as commonplaces, for good and ill, of the democratic faith. As if in response to the question: Who are we? Jefferson answers in part that we are a people committed to “union and representative government,” ready to help others in trouble, heir to a wondrous land, aspiring to “honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man.” All of this, Jefferson concludes, represents “the sum of good government,” and is “necessary to close the circle of our felicities [3].”

Then as now, critics were quick to point out flaws in the account. These we need to recognize as well. Jefferson was, in today’s terms, an American exceptionalist; no doubt about that. He could be maddeningly silent on many of the woes besetting indigenous peoples. To many he remained stubbornly anti-Christian. And, above all, he seemed and still does seem bafflingly oblivious to the evils of slavery. Glowing pronouncements that Americans were “too high-minded to endure the degradations of others,” that they “shall not take from the mouth of

labor the bread it has earned [3]” and so on may rightfully be seen as willfully obtuse. This kind of moral blinkering is itself a legacy of the speaker and the speech, and it too remains part of the American inheritance.

The final two paragraphs return us to the text’s opening themes of person and providence. We have observed how very early in the speech Jefferson seeks to position his own limited powers within the context of the office he now assumes; this he does by magnifying the democratic forces—the people—who placed him there. Now he again acknowledges the “approbation implied by your suffrage” as a “great consolation to me,” and promises in turn to “retain the good opinion of those who have bestowed it in advance, to conciliate that of others by doing them all that is in my power, and to be instrumental to the happiness and freedom of all” [5]. The speaker’s final paragraph extends upon these sentiments by appealing to the divine. In view of Jefferson’s alleged atheism, the passage, though brief, is telling and warrants citing in full:

Relying, then, on the patronage of your good will, I advance with obedience to the work, ready to retire from it whenever you become sensible how much better choices it is in your power to make. And may that Infinite Power which rules the destinies of the universe lead our councils to what is best, and give them a favorable issue for your peace and prosperity [6].

The language here is classically Jeffersonian. It succinctly captures the modesty he thought appropriate to the occasion, gestures pointedly to the democratic principle of popular sovereignty, and invokes a decidedly Deist conception of a superintending moral authority. While it probably did not allay his critics, of whom Jefferson had many, the sentiments here expressed punctuate the preceding paragraphs and offer a moving prospect of the coming times.

Legacies

Shortly after reading a print version of the address, Jefferson’s French friend Pierre Samuel DuPont Nemours wrote that the speech, “like all your thoughts and writings, is full of wisdom, judgment, and illumination, and contains a divine moral.”¹² That is high praise indeed, and we may agree that it stands as one of the greatest instances of the genre in American presidential history. That is not the same as saying, of course, that its “divine moral” has been taken always to heart, or that today we embrace its every tenet. Certainly, it ranks with Lincoln’s two inaugural addresses in its artistry and command of the language; and no one would doubt that in the speech we find an exquisite rendering of the democratic spirit.

At this point, we may conclude by identifying the several principles that seem to remain, in some ways as reminders, as cautionary notes, and as ideals worth striving toward. First, we may grant that Jefferson’s modesty was genuine; the extant evidence, and there is a good deal of it, indicates that he really did see himself as a short-term public servant, invested with specific Constitutional powers and restrained by these powers. Second, like most Americans, he was very much aware of how precarious democracy could be; thus, the reassurance that the transition from one administration to another was safe and sound. Third, the inaugural address identifies those shared commitments that united a disputatious and striving people. Finally, his appeal to “that Infinite Power” reminds us that democracy remains in several, complex and sometimes elusive ways, a matter of faith. George Washington knew this; Abraham Lincoln certainly did; Barack

Obama as well. They understood, ultimately, that for democracy to become real, the people had first to *believe* in it.

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Notes

¹ For the role of inaugural addresses in the early republic, see Stephen Howard Browne, *Jefferson's Call for Nationhood: The First Inaugural Address* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003).

² *Independent Chronicle*, March 3, 1801, 1; Henry Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1858), 633.

³ A provocative and compelling case for Jefferson's political acumen may be found in Richard K. Mathew, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson: A Revisionist View* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984).

⁴ An excellent introduction to the theme of Jefferson and the Enlightenment is Annette Gordon-Reed and Peter S. Onuf, "*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs:*" *Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination* (New York: Liveright, 2016).

⁵ For the electoral politics of the decade, see Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶ Jefferson quoted in John R. Howe, "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1967): 148.

⁷ *National Intelligencer*, March 9, 1801, 1.

⁸ Washington's address is treated at length in Stephen Howard Browne, *The First Inauguration: George Washington and the Invention of America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).

⁹ *Independent Chronicle*, March 3, 1801, 1.

¹⁰ All passages from Jefferson's Inaugural Address are cited with reference to the paragraph numbers in the printed text that accompanies this essay on the VOD website.

¹¹ *New England Palladium*, March 31, 1801, 3.

¹² Du Pont Nemours to Jefferson, in Dumas Malone, ed., *Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Pierre Samuel Du Pont Nemours, 1798-1817*, trans. Linwood Lehman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), 30.