

Trump's inaugural address was a radical break with American tradition

His predecessors tried to inspire. He focused on 'American carnage.'



By **James T. Kloppenberg** January 20

James T. Kloppenberg, the Charles Warren Professor of History at Harvard University, is author of “Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought.”

When you've run a presidential campaign centered on rancor and resentment, how do you celebrate? If you are Donald Trump, the first U.S. president elected without any political or military experience, you celebrate as you ran — with rancor and resentment. His inaugural address, like the man himself, has no precedent in U.S. history.

Earlier presidents offered inspiring visions of bringing Americans together. When we unite, we can enjoy Ronald Reagan's “morning in America” or Bill Clinton's “spring reborn.” Earlier presidents saluted their predecessors and their opponents, paying tribute to their service and their sacrifices. They invited Americans to share their ideals and their abundance with people less fortunate than themselves. Earlier presidents struck the same chord that reverberated from Thomas Jefferson through Abraham Lincoln to Barack Obama: We can transcend partisanship by concentrating on the shared values that span party divides.

President Trump wanted nothing to do with lofty rhetoric, tributes to others in public life, Americans' generosity, or conciliation with his foes. Unlike all who came before him, the new president painted a grim portrait of the nation he now leads as a hopeless and decaying land of blight and carnage, where gangs run rampant and students are “deprived of all knowledge.” Consistent with his campaign rhetoric, the president continued to get his facts wrong: Crime, poverty, immigration, and unemployment are down, not up. The wealth of the middle class has not been “redistributed around the world”; it has been gobbled up by plutocrats at home. His “new decree,” that he will now put “America first, only America first,” recalls the earlier failed attempt, in the 1920s, to defend America's borders by turning the nation's back to the world. Few Republicans or Democrats, and even fewer economists, share his faith that “protection will lead to great prosperity.”

The new president's vision, an American dream of selfishness and isolation (except for the obligation shared with the rest of the "civilized world" to obliterate radical Islam), stands in dramatic contrast to those proclaimed in every previous inaugural address. The contrast, already stark, is deepened when his words are juxtaposed to those of others on the platform. Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) read excerpts from the eloquent pledge of Major Sullivan Ballou to the justice of the Union cause in the Civil War — a reading greeted with jeers from members of the audience apparently still un-reconciled to the outcome of that war. The Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, reading from the Beatitudes, reminded the audience that it is not Trump's "winners" but instead meek and merciful people, the people Trump routinely maligns as "losers," who stand to inherit the kingdom of heaven. The new president had clearly paid no attention to the inaugural addresses of any of his predecessors, nor to the ideas of Rodriguez. His inaugural address offered neither meekness nor mercy, neither olive branches nor promises of reconciliation or healing. Instead, he gave Americans only the same chest-thumping, fist-pumping xenophobia that fueled his ascent to his already precarious perch.

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