

Donald Trump's Unprecedented, Divisive Speech

David Von Drehle

Updated: Jan 20, 2017 7:31 PM Central

The [inauguration of a new president](#) is always a balance between the national legacy and the promise of a fresh start. It is common for the speaker to try to set himself apart. Nevertheless, when Donald John Trump stood for the first time as the 45th President of the United States in a light rain to deliver his address, [he went where no president has gone in more than a century](#). Trump's message was not on the order of John F. Kennedy's torch passing, or Ronald Reagan's declaration that government is the problem. It was not even a 21st century version of Andrew Jackson's attack on corrupt and incompetent Washington. In 16 mostly harsh, mostly confrontational minutes, Trump laid out a view of America's destiny and place in the world that would alienate his predecessors dating back to Theodore Roosevelt and beyond.

It may go down as one of the most consequential—or one of the most misleading—speeches in the history of presidential inaugurations. Newly sworn into office, Trump announced a U-turn in the foreign policy that has defined America's place in the world for more than 70 years. And while he was at it, he savaged the record and the motives of a large number of the men and women seated around him on the West Front of the Capitol. For all his reputation as a builder, he entered office as a wrecking ball. His choice of Vice President Mike Pence and his Cabinet appointments have been sharply conservative, but President Trump's first message to the world was as radical as they come, and as populist as a pitchfork. If he truly means what he said (always a pertinent question for a fellow who once said he enjoys being compared to P.T. Barnum), Washington is about to become even more rancorous. And the world is in for some very big—and entirely unpredictable—changes.

American power, Trump suggested, is a mirage. What happens abroad is a distraction from what matters at home. And the United States should look with suspicion, not pride, on the success of its allies and trading partners. In a zero sum world, we either win or lose.

“For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry,” he said as the rain began to fall. “Subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military. We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own, and spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.

“We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon,” Trump summed. “From this

day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it's going to be—always—America First.”

Diverting from his prepared speech, he repeated the phrase: “America First.” The words were discredited for generations of American leaders by their linkage to the movement that campaigned, in 1940 and 1941, to cut off U.S. aid to Great Britain in its desperate struggle against Hitler. Republicans and Democrats alike shared the conviction that America First was the slogan that preceded disaster, and ceded the world stage to tyrants. After World War II, the U.S. fully embraced the role of democracy's guardian, safeguarding its allies and spreading prosperity. It became common to speak of the president not just as a national executive, but as “leader of the free world.”

Now here was Trump, amid the marble and flags and grandeur of American power, giving no sign that he wanted that title. Instead, the old phrase was made new again—not by a protesting fringe this time, but by the man in charge, a man who sees America as a crippled victim.

Maybe it was all a bargaining chip. Maybe after he renegotiates a few trade deals and duns NATO members to pay their fair share, Trump will pronounce the U.S.-led world order fully fixed and better than ever. As always, it was disorienting to attempt to gauge his sincerity. In the same speech, after all, he had this to say about the former presidents and members of Congress who had come to consecrate his new powers:

“For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered, but the jobs left, and the factories closed,” he said. “The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country.”

There were two competing tribes in America, us and them. “Their victories have not been your victories,” he said. “Their triumphs have not been your triumphs. And while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.”

Then, minutes later, he stepped out of the rain to celebrate with those same ravagers at a gala lunch in Satutory Hall. In response to a toast, purred the language of permanent Washington: “Whether you are a Republican or Democrat, it doesn't matter, we're going to get along.”

A president can be lawfully created in the most humble, private circumstances. On a summer night in 1923, Vice-president Calvin Coolidge was awakened by his father at his family's rustic Vermont farmhouse. A telegram had just arrived: President Warren Harding was dead. The elder Coolidge, a notary public, administered the oath of office to his son in the pre-dawn darkness with just four witnesses. “The oath was taken in what we always called the sitting room, by the light of the kerosene lamp,” Coolidge recalled in his memoirs.

Everything else is symbolism. A little grain of legal business—passing authority from one person to another—is wrapped and tassellated in pomp as huge as the Capitol dome and as small as the morning's White House breakfast. The ritual aims at a purpose, and the purpose is to heal a nation that

has laid its divisions on the table. An inauguration reminds us that our elections are not wars, they are intra-squad scrimmages. There may be some eye-gouging involved, but after the whistle blows we all retire to the same locker room and brace ourselves, together, to meet the world.

This is why President Obama welcomed Trump and his wife Melania for coffee before they rode together to the Capitol. It's why three former presidents—representing both political parties—traveled to Washington to sit respectfully on the in the rain. Jimmy Carter, at 92, returned to the spot where he took the oath 40 years earlier. He has been a former president longer than anyone in American history, and he looked as if he might go on indefinitely. George W. Bush was relaxed and informal. His ailing father remained in Houston, having written Trump that a trip might put him “six feet under.” (As a hero of World War II, a veteran diplomat, and the architect of the post-Cold War global design, the elder Bush certainly might have fallen faint had he witnessed Trump's speech in person.)

More subdued was Bill Clinton, who sat pensively beside his stoic wife. Hillary Clinton amassed nearly 66 million votes against Trump—the largest total ever for a losing candidate. Eight years ago, she sat on this spot to watch the man who narrowly beat her for the Democratic nomination take the oath. Now she was nodding and forcing an occasional smile through an even more excruciating ordeal.

Trump's narrow victory over Clinton was a particularly bruising clash—so the incoming chief executive had plenty of wounds to heal. But through the frantic weeks of his transition, Trump continued to practice the us-against-them politics that won him the job. His petulant Twitter feed chattered with denunciations of U.S. intelligence agencies, various media outlets, actress Meryl Streep and civil-rights icon Rep. John Lewis. His opponents reciprocated, maligning Trump's motives and disputing his legitimacy. Polls taken in the days before the event suggested that the tone had taken a toll: Trump's approval rating was the lowest on record for an incoming president. He appeared to have lost ground with the public since Election Day, a reversal of the typical trend in which incoming presidents gain in stature.

Only near the end of his speech did he make a gesture towards unity—and this only after he had indicted Washington and denounced the world. “When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice,” Trump declared. “The Bible tells us, ‘how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.’ We must speak our minds openly, debate our disagreements honestly, but always pursue solidarity.” Never mind the predations of the ruling class he had just described. “When America is united, America is totally unstoppable,” he said.

But it was only a gesture. Trump's rallying cry was resentment: resentment of foreign governments and industries, resentment of elected leaders and faceless elites, resentment of the empty factories and haunted cities that define the American landscape as rendered by its new leader. “American carnage” is how he tallied it all up, in a phrase as dark as any spoken by an American president. Even Franklin D. Roosevelt, who gave voice to the “ill-housed, ill-

clad, ill-nourished” of the land, only painted “one-third of the nation” in those terms. To hear Trump, the entire country is a wreck. Many among us were the wreckers.

Security was tight—some 28,000 law enforcement officers prepared for every possible threat, from rioting protestors to a terrorist attack. And the crowd was huge by historical standards. Event organizers expected about 800,000 witnesses—more than three times the number that turned out to watch Ronald Reagan take the oath in 1981. But compared to the recent inaugurations of Barack Obama, the turnout was modest. It was no more than half the audience that swarmed the National Mall in 2009.

Indeed, much of the buzz leading up to the day had to do with the people who would not be attending. More than 60 Congressional Democrats announced they would boycott the swearing-in ceremony. The Hollywood A-list gave it a pass. Professors on campuses across the country organized counter-Inauguration “teach-ins” to inoculate their students against Trumpism. There was even pressure on a group of Girl Scouts to withdraw from the Inaugural parade.

Trump himself had to be talked into honoring the entire ritual. He was not convinced at first that all the ceremony was necessary. “Do we have to have a parade?” Trump asked during an early planning session. How about two or three balls, instead of 14? One certain thing about Trump: he’s not much for tradition. At a pre-Inaugural musicale on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he speculated that it might be the first time anyone staged a concert at that venue, seemingly unaware that it’s an every-four-years thing.

He was eager to get inside the Oval Office, behind the desk and down to work. The sooner America saw the businessman-President barking orders and sending heads rolling, the better. Only in the last few weeks before the Inauguration did he come around to the importance of the ceremonial day, the historical gravity, the message it sends.

From the moment the President-elect arrives at the White House door and is welcomed inside for an awkward breakfast, until the moment when that same person, duly sworn, steps down from the parade grandstand to walk through the same door into a place now called home, the entire Inauguration Day is a ritual. It honors and strengthens the conviction that what we share is bigger than what divides us, and what we decide, in our elections, matters more than any person or any party.

“George Washington knew that the inauguration of the second president was more important than the inauguration of the first,” Inauguration chairman Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri observed in a preview of his own ceremonial remarks. That was the moment when America’s founders delivered on the promise of a government larger than its leader. “And historians say that the third inauguration was even more important,” Blunt continued—for that was the first passage of power from one party to its rival.

It was then that Thomas Jefferson delivered the first healing inaugural address. “We are all Republicans. We are all Federalists,” he said. The

American experiment, it seemed, could survive the sort of factionalism that meant murder and war in other places and other times.

“We’ve been doing this longer than anyone in the world,” Blunt mused, and the durability of this civic respiration—inhaling the hot breath of factional politics, exhaling common purpose, however temporary—moved Ronald Reagan, in his 1981 Inaugural address, to call the ceremony “both commonplace and miraculous.”

Even when Trump came to see the need for this American sacrament, he wanted to keep it short. The picture he sought to plant in the national mind was Trump-in-command. As he spoke, government painters were already at work, remaking his West Wing. If Trump did not want to be stranded on a reviewing stand waving to high school marching bands in the gloaming of a winter evening, he must complete his own parade up Pennsylvania Avenue briskly. Which would only be possible if he poked his fork into the customary lunch with Congress shortly after noon. Which could only happen if his speech was crisp and tight. It was all something to be managed and put in the rearview mirror.

This was his thought process. His role, the one he cared about most, was destroyer—not steward—of the status quo. He could imagine himself this way because he was something new. He was famous in a way that politicians are not, tabloid famous, reality TV famous. It is Trump’s conviction, now vindicated by the Electoral College, that fame, properly managed and wielded, equals power.

It’s no easy thing to reconcile that conviction with the idea that power, in America, is bigger than any individual. But Trump submerged his own ego in the idea of an empowered populace. “The forgotten men and women of our country,” he promised “will be forgotten no longer.”

This message, and the nationalist jingo that Trump has married to it, has been a long time coming. It was spawned by the culture wars, stoked by the Great Recession, and spread by the winds of technological disruption. We the People have often been leery of political establishments, but rarely have the insiders looked so feckless in the face of global pressures, and never has it been so easy to communicate their perceived failures.

Trump was right when he said that the message is bigger than the messenger—another statement that he might not believe, deep down. But he not an outsider any longer. He is the president. His words will have consequences. As another Inauguration Day faded from Washington with the faint sun in the clouded West, the world began preparing for their arrival.

This piece appears in the Jan. 30, 2017, issue of TIME.