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Now is Right Time to Heed Washington's 1st Inaugural Address — a Call to Unity

By David Head
UCF Forum columnist
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The president's speech advocated no specific policies, but he outlined his vision of the nation's destiny.



Washington delivering his inaugural address to members of Congress. Painting by T.H. Matteson.
(Library of Congress)

On Inauguration Day — January 20 — I always think there's no better time to recommit to the spirit of the man who held the president's office first.

George Washington, the man who invented the inauguration speech, crafted an address that speaks to what unites Americans.

Washington took office in a precarious moment. The previous government, the Articles of Confederation, had failed and nothing guaranteed there would be a second president if Washington faltered. Washington's words as he assumed office announced his goal: a nation unified despite its deep disagreements.

His inauguration took place in New York City, then the country's capital, on April 30, 1789. Congress, though supposed to meet in early March to certify the results of the presidential election, couldn't muster a quorum until April. The delay revealed the indifference of the new representatives and senators toward the new government. Rhode Island and North Carolina didn't send any representatives at all. They hadn't ratified the Constitution yet.

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According to the Constitution, the sole required part of a president's inauguration is to recite a specific oath of office. But over the spring, as Washington saw he would be elected president, he decided he should also give a public address.

Washington's speech followed his taking the oath, which he completed publicly while standing on the second-floor balcony of Federal Hall on Wall Street. As the crowd cheered and huzzahed its acclaim, he repaired inside to address Congress.

The speech itself was brief. A mere 1,400 words, it might have taken less than 10 minutes to deliver. The speech advocated no specific policies. But what Washington lacked in innovative ideas, he made up for in his vision of the nation's destiny.

"Among the vicissitudes incident to life," [Washington began](#), "no event could have filled me with greater anxieties" than learning he would become president. He felt unequal to the task, he said, but he could not resist being "summoned by my country, whose voice I can never hear but with veneration and love." Washington, who hungered for fame as much as any renowned leader, played coy, but with a purpose: He signaled that he was not ambitious for power as famous men often were or as liberty-loving Americans feared.

Fortunately for our democracy, he demonstrated that America and its president would be something different.

Washington continued with an exhortation to unity. But he didn't lecture his audience or shame people for their disagreements. He didn't offer sappy bromides that no rough-and-tumble politician believes. Instead, he recalled the shared sacrifice of the revolution and what he saw as God's providential care for guiding the United States, his words

turning his listeners' minds to what they'd accomplished together and to the beliefs they shared.

“No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States,” the president said. “Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”

Washington didn't need to state the implications outright: Just as the nation had achieved its independence together, it could launch the new government together.

After a brief allusion to a Bill of Rights and his promise to accept no salary but only reimbursement for his expenses, Washington closed by once more invoking “the benign parent of the human race.” He called for divine blessing on officials whose “enlarged views” along with “temperate consultations” would frame “the wise measures on which the success of this government must depend.”

That's the spirit presidents should always emulate: a humble symbol of unity. Washington's words are a reminder of what the American people have accomplished, his manner serious but hopeful.

It's a difficult task. A president is a political figure, and politics means making choices that anger some people. But presidents should speak — especially on Inauguration Day — with devotion to the country, including the people who didn't vote for them.

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