Opinion
NCR Voices
U.S. President Donald J. Trump speaks after being sworn in during his inauguration as the 47t

U.S. President Donald J. Trump speaks after being sworn in during his inauguration as the 47th president of the United States inside the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington Jan. 20, 2025. (OSV News photo/Kenny Holston, pool via Reuters)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 20, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

America's civic rituals are astonishingly spare. The inauguration of a president is a short ceremony, constructed around a simple oath prescribed by the U.S. Constitution, and followed by a speech. To the extent we remember these ceremonies, it is usually because of the speeches.

Everyone recalls John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, with its stirring call to service over selfishness: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address is arguably the greatest speech ever delivered by an American. Inarguably, it is the finest statement of Christian nationalism in the history of the American republic, combining a dogmatic belief in

divine providence and judgment with an ethic of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Most people can recall one line from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first inaugural address: "The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself."

It wasn't the best line in the speech. Toward the end, FDR said, "We do not distrust the future of essential democracy. The people of the United States have not failed. In their need they have registered a mandate that they want direct, vigorous action. They have asked for discipline and direction under leadership. They have made me the present instrument of their wishes. In the spirit of the gift I take it." I love those lines.

Advertisement

Eight years ago, Donald Trump's first inaugural address was remembered for its starkly dystopian vision, especially its reference to "American carnage." I thought its most remarkable quality was its solipsism. Trump presented himself as a savior, not a president.

Joe Biden was never a great orator, and his inaugural address four years ago was fine but unspectacular. The ceremony, however, was not. Fourteen days earlier, the West Front of the Capitol had been a crime scene. The guests and the principals entered the dais through the doors that had witnessed some of the fiercest fighting on Jan. 6, 2021. When Lady Gaga sang the national anthem and pointed to the flag flying over the Capitol building as she sang the words, "and our flag was still there," it was a poignant and redemptive moment, a celebration not only of the continuation of democracy but of its recent rescue.

Trump's second inaugural speech was similar to his first, a mix of ego and doom-and-gloom assessment of the state of the nation. He promised to deport "millions and millions" of migrants. He repeated his "drill, baby, drill" mantra, failing to acknowledge that the U.S. has never produced more energy than it is now. Trump overstated the size of his electoral victory. He promised tariffs on foreign goods and lower taxes here at home. Not sure why he decided to extol the virtues of President William McKinley, but there it is.

Apart from the venue, the address could have been a campaign speech although, mercifully, he did not wander off topic and drone on as he did when accepting his

party's nomination in July.

Today's inauguration will be remembered in part because it took place inside due to the cold. This happened before, in 1985, when Reagan's second inauguration also was moved inside because of the cold.

I thought the weather did a better job of meting out justice at Reagan's first inauguration, in 1981. Then it was unseasonably warm. It was also the first time the ceremony was held on the West Front of the Capitol building. Unlike the East Front, which leads primarily to paved surfaces, the West Front leads to grass. All those rich Republicans, dressed to the nines, were ankle deep in mud. It seemed fitting.

At least with the below-freezing cold, we will be spared any claims that this was the largest crowd to attend an inauguration in the history of humankind. In times like this, we relish the small mercies that are available.