

LANGUAGES OF POLITICS IN AMERICA



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How do Americans imagine themselves and their government? What past, what future do they create for themselves, driven by what values and hopes and fears, shaped by what conception of themselves? Such are the questions Jedediah Purdy pursues in this essay. His investigation is necessarily historical, for these questions would be answered differently at different times in our history; it is also in one sense political, for it is often the case that the struggle between parties, or candidates, is about the right way to imagine ourselves.

In his exploration of the transformations that our language of politics has undergone Purdy makes use of many pieces of evidence, but focuses especially upon the form we know as the presidential inaugural address, the moment at which the newly elected president seeks to articulate a vision that will command widespread assent, including among his political opponents. The sequence he traces, from Jefferson and Lincoln through Wilson, Roosevelt, Johnson, Reagan, Clinton, and the two Bushes, defines our present situation as what Purdy calls a tepid consensus, the exhaustion of political language. The question he presents and begins to answer is how our language of politics might properly be given new life, direction, and shape. He begins by sketching our recent history and present situation, topics to which he returns at the end.

It may seem natural to dismiss presidential inaugural addresses as pabulum and vague uplift. One sounds a lot like the next, and none sounds much like the way we talk when we know what we mean to say and trust that the listener can hear it. These presidential speeches feel exhausted, congested, trapped in language that sounds more like a worn-out ceremony than like a living stream of words. This dismissal is not just a cynical mistake: there is a lot of truth in it. It has not always been that way, though. Of course, presidential speeches have always been calculated and in some ways artificial.

They have never used the language of everyday life. But the kind of artificiality they convey today is special, and understanding it is a way to get at the exhaustion of political language in general. It is also a way to see what would have to change for political language to be more alive than it is now—and how difficult that change might be.

The inaugural address falls in a pivotal moment. Now that the energy and animus of the campaign have begun to drain away, the president has to take on a different kind of persuasion: not reinforcing the loyalty of his supporters, but showing voters who lost, who may have spent the campaign season mistrusting and disdaining him, why he deserves a share of their loyalty, too. Presidents have always marked the day as a turn from partisan to national identity, since Jefferson declared at the end of a bitter campaign, “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.” Moreover, since that first address of Jefferson’s, new presidents have treated the inaugural as a time to set out their interpretation of the American constitutional community.

Woodrow Wilson gave this custom a new democratic inflection in 1913, describing himself as interpreter in chief of the electoral tumult that had put him in the White House. Using a new term to describe what he would do in the address, he offered “to interpret the occasion” and argued that the Democratic victory was important beyond the sake of the party, because “the Nation . . . now seeks to use the Democratic Party . . . to interpret a change in its own plans and point of view.” This imagery added something essential to the president’s role. Earlier presidents had cast themselves foremost as bearers of constitutional principle, not wholly unlike the justices of the Supreme Court. Wilson’s new chord was more romantic and visionary. The president was to try to give a voice, a coherent aim and attitude, to the diverse and inchoate motives that had swept him to power. He was now a kind of democratic oracle, tasked with expressing not just the ground rules of constitutional community but its emotional—even sensual—quality and the people’s active power to redefine their political life through action.

Inaugural language has always addressed the theme of dignity: what gives a citizen a place to stand and esteem in his or her own eyes and those of others, and how does the political order help make this dignity real? This question is nested within a more general one: what gives an individual life its value? It also contains a more specific question: what is the role of the state, the institutional expression of political power, in relation to the value and dignity of life?

THE TEPID CONSENSUS

For nearly twenty years, since the election of George H. W. Bush in 1988, the main themes of American political language have not been political at all. Instead, they have concentrated on private virtue, the personal qualities that uphold good families, workplaces, and civic organizations. Although there is precedent for this kind of talk, it is new in important ways. Its central ideas—character, responsibility, and service—have never before figured so prominently or in such apolitical ways as they do now.

The major landmarks in this consensus, the two inaugural addresses each of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, took place in decades of political animosity. Partisans on both sides learned to disdain the other party's president as a moral or intellectual degenerate and to suspect his adamant supporters of being not fully American—or, maybe, the wrong kind of American. But imagine you were to read both presidents' addresses as a visitor from another century, unfamiliar with local partisan cues, such as Republicans' propensity to mention charter schools in a positive light while Democrats keep silent because of their debt to teachers' unions. You would notice a difference in the frequency of religious language: God figures in the critical moments of Clinton's speeches and throughout Bush's. Of course, Bush's second inaugural includes a great deal of war talk. Otherwise, you would probably get the impression of a profound moral consensus, where the same terms and ideas anchor both parties' rhetoric. You might also suspect that you had come across a political culture whose members had no idea what their political life was for—none, anyway, that they could take seriously themselves.

Recent presidential language takes its shape around a few landmarks. *Responsibility* is a touchstone word for both Clinton and Bush. In his first inaugural, Clinton defined “what America does best: offer more opportunity to all and demand more responsibility from all.” It was time, he said, “to break the bad habit of expecting something for nothing, from our government or from each other,” and time to “all take more responsibility, not only for ourselves and our families but for our communities and our country.” Four years later, he announced that “we need a new sense of responsibility for a new century” and, again, that “every one of us, in our own way, must assume personal responsibility, not only for ourselves and our families, but for our neighbors and our nation.” George W. Bush dedicated his 2000 nomination address to the theme of responsibility, urging a “re-