

## INTRODUCTION

An inauguration is the act or ceremony of bringing someone into a position or an office. Every president of the United States has been inaugurated, dating back to the first executive, George Washington. These inaugurations symbolize a peaceful transition of power between administrations. Although the Constitution provides an oath for the new president to take, all other elements of the modern presidential inauguration grew from traditions, changes, and preferences that evolved over 200 years. As the president's residence, the White House plays an important role in inaugurations. Gain a deeper appreciation of presidential inaugurations and transitions at the White House by learning about the history behind the Oath of Office, inaugural parade, parties, and more.

## CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

In 1789, the newly formed United States of America inaugurated its first president, George Washington, with much fanfare in New York City. His inauguration took place before the creation of a permanent capital city or the construction of the White House. In 1801, Thomas Jefferson became the first president to be inaugurated in Washington, D.C., and the second to reside in the White House. Despite the different locations of their inaugurations, Jefferson, Washington, and all other presidents have taken the same oath. Even in the time of crisis after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon Johnson followed this time-honored practice aboard Air Force One (Image 1).



*Image 1*

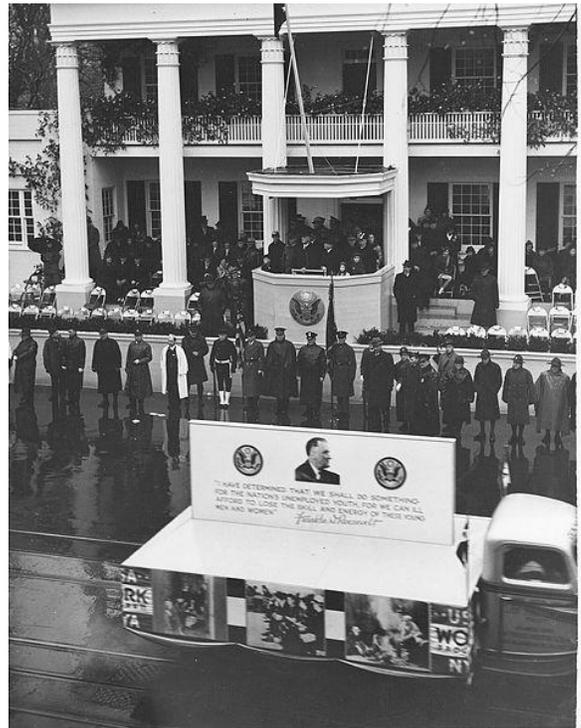
Article II, Section I of the United States Constitution states, "Before he enter on the execution of his office, he shall take the following oath or affirmation: --"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." Most presidents take the oath at

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the Capitol (**Image 2**), but a few times this constitutional affirmation has occurred at the White House. In January 1945, for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt held his inaugural ceremony at the White House (**Image 3**). After Roosevelt's sudden death in April of that year, Harry S. Truman took the oath in the Cabinet Room, located in the West Wing (**Image 4**).

President Roosevelt was the first to encounter a Constitutional mandate that changed Inauguration Day to January 20. In 1937, for his second inauguration (**Image 5**), the 20<sup>th</sup> Amendment was enacted and established “noon on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of January” for the start and end to the president’s and vice president’s terms. Now at the stroke of twelve, the residency of the White House changes hands. Prior to this amendment, presidents traditionally held their inaugurations on March 4, four months after their election. This gap in time created periods where Congress and the exiting president were less productive, posing difficulties in times of crisis such as the secession winter before the Civil War and issues surrounding the Great



*Image 5*

Depression. It was during the Great Depression that the legislature was persuaded to avoid this time gap by adding an amendment to the Constitution. Even when January 20 falls on a Sunday, presidents will take the oath privately, often in the White House, before the public celebrations the following day.

Another tradition on Inauguration Day is the address, or speech, the new president makes to the citizens of the United States. George Washington delivered the shortest speech in 1793, and William Henry Harrison spoke for the longest, almost two hours, during his 1841 inauguration. This first

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speech of the incoming president can set a tone for the new administration as they often share their vision for the country. In his 1961 inaugural speech, John F. Kennedy famously stated, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country,” calling the nation to action on his first day in office (**Image 6**).

After the oath and address at the Capitol, new presidents need to make their way toward the White House, their new home. Today, this act is followed by a parade down Pennsylvania Avenue (**Image 7**). This tradition began with Thomas Jefferson, whose return trip from the Capitol to the President’s House in 1805 encouraged citizens to spontaneously join him in the procession. The



*Image 8*

parade evolved over the course of the nineteenth century with presidents’ reviewing troops, thus highlighting the president’s role as Commander in Chief. After 1881, the parade began to shed some of its military character and adopted a more celebratory, civilian tone. Once at the White House, the president finishes watching the inaugural parade from reviewing stands at the edge of the North Lawn (**Image 8**).

On Inauguration Day, aside from the White House serving as the reviewing stand location, the staff at the residence must prepare for the new first family to move in and assist the former president to move out (**Image 9**). Today, members of the household staff plan weeks in advance for these moves. Although the White House previously held public receptions for citizens, these gatherings are now smaller and privately hosted for special guests (**Image 10**).

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Ending the long day, the president attends celebratory inaugural balls, a tradition that dates back to 1809 when an inaugural ball was held in Washington, D.C., for then incoming president James Madison. The success of the Madison ball set a precedent that others have followed. In the early nineteenth century, local hotels held these balls, but Abraham Lincoln needed to move his gathering to a government building to accommodate the large crowds who wished to attend his second inauguration in 1865. President McKinley held both of his inaugural balls in the Pension Building, now the National Building Museum (**Image 11**). Eventually, even the largest government buildings could not contain the ever-growing inaugural crowds (**Image 12**). In the modern era, inaugural balls occur at multiple locations all throughout Washington, D.C.

The traditions of presidential inaugurations connect the past to the present, from the oath to the inaugural balls. Inaugurations serve as a parallel to the White House itself. The White House remains the president's home, but with each new administration the actual resident changes, carrying on the traditions of the past while creating new practices for the future.

## RESOURCES

*Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing*

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Lyndon Johnson Takes the Oath of Office Following the Assassination of President Kennedy	1963	Cecil Stoughton	Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1123.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1123.tif.info</a>
2	Abraham Lincoln's First Inauguration	1861	Unknown	Library of Congress		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/3993.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/3993.tif.info</a>
3	Inauguration, Franklin D. Roosevelt	1945	Unknown	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/111274.1.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/111274.1.tif.info</a>
4	Harry S. Truman Takes the Oath of Office	1945	Abbie Rowe	National Archives and Records Administration		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/2884.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/2884.tif.info</a>

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5	President Franklin D. Roosevelt in His Reviewing Stand Watching the Inaugural Parade	1937	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6491.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6491.tif.info</a>
6	President Kennedy Speaks with Robert Frost	1961	Department of State	National Archives and Records Administration		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/4955.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/4955.tif.info</a>
7	Inaugural Parade	1909	National Photo Company	Library of Congress		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/3455.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/3455.tif.info</a>
8	Inauguration Day	1925	National Photo Company	Library of Congress		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Calvin%20Coolidge/1113013.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Calvin%20Coolidge/1113013.tif.info</a>
9	Herbert Hoover Greets Franklin Roosevelt	1933	Harris & Ewing	Library of Congress		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Herbert%20Hoover/2818.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Herbert%20Hoover/2818.tif.info</a>

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10	Crowds Waiting in the Rain to Say Good-Bye and Good Luck to President Coolidge	1929	Herbert E. French	Library of Congress		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/2664.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/2664.tif.info</a>
11	President McKinley's Second Inaugural Ball	1901	J. H. Harper	Library of Congress		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6510.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6510.tif.info</a>
12	Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Dance at their Inaugural Ball	1965	Unknown	Library of Congress		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6498.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6498.tif.info</a>
13	President and Mrs. Bush Dance at their Inaugural Ball	1989	Unknown	George Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6518.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/6518.tif.info</a>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Video: The Peaceful Transfer of Power, featuring Dr. Matthew Costello, Senior Historian at the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Podcast: Episode 1 – “Moving Day” from the *1600 Sessions*, presented by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Text: George Washington’s First Inaugural Address. [Click here.](#)



## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Have students choose an Inauguration Day tradition and create an argument for why it is the most important part of the day. Traditions discussed in the contextual essay: the oath, location, date, speech, parade, moving to the White House, and balls/parties.
- Previously, Inauguration Day took place on March 4, four months after the election. Today, Inauguration Day is January 20, two and half months after the election. Reflect on the 20<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Research the historic reasons for this constitutional change and the full text of the amendment. Why did Congress choose January 20<sup>th</sup>?
  - Corresponding questions: Why does the president-elect need two and half months before taking office? What is that person doing during that time?
- At the beginning of the year or semester, have students write an “inauguration speech” setting the tone and goals for what they want from the year or semester.
  - Follow up activity: Half way through the semester or year, have students provide a “State of the Union” speech that provides an update to their goals from the inauguration speech.
- Have the students read portions of presidential inauguration speeches. Once they have read them, have the students compare and contrast the speeches. Find these inaugural addresses collected by the Avalon Project from Yale Law School. [Click here](#).