CIVIC SPIRIT

AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATIONS JANUARY 2025

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Presidential Inaugurations are moments that offer opportunities to reflect on civic ideas surrounding presidential leadership and the messages crafted as new leaders assume office. Beyond the peaceful transfer of power, they represent a fresh start for the nation—a moment to reset goals, assess what's working in government and civic society, and consider what might need change, whether monumental or small. Many of the shifts that have shaped our nation's history were introduced through the agendas of new administrations, often articulated in inaugural addresses, providing both the inspiration and roadmaps for progress.

This educator's resource includes excerpts from these speeches, accompanied by questions designed to deepen understanding of civic themes and concepts. The questions can be used as discussion prompts or to help guide students through close readings of these excerpts. It also offers ideas for bringing these texts to life in an interactive and engaging way in the classroom.

Source 1: John Adams. *Inaugural Address.* March 4, 1797. Excerpt.

What other form of government, indeed, can so well deserve our esteem and love? There may be little solidity in an ancient idea that congregations of men into cities and nations are the most pleasing objects in the sight of superior intelligences, but this is very certain, that to a benevolent human mind there can be no spectacle presented by any nation more pleasing, more noble, majestic, or august, than an assembly like that which has so often been seen in this and the other Chamber of Congress, of a Government in which the Executive authority, as well as that of all the branches of the Legislature, are exercised by citizens selected at regular periods by their neighbors to make and execute laws for the general good. Can anything essential, anything more than mere ornament and decoration, be added to this by robes and diamonds?

Questions for Discussion:

1. John Adams asks, “What other form of government, indeed, can so well deserve our esteem and love?” What does he identify as worthy of our admiration?
2. What aspects of our country do you love or find most worthy of our highest esteem? What about these qualities speaks to you personally?
3. How does the idea of citizens being “selected at regular periods to their neighbors” influence how we think about democracy and participation in governance today?

Source 2: Thomas Jefferson. *Inaugural Address*. March 4, 1801. Excerpt.

All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal law must protect, and to violate would be oppression. Let us, then, fellow-citizens, unite with one heart and one mind. Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things. And let us reflect that, having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions. During the throes and convulsions of the ancient world, during the agonizing spasms of infuriated man, seeking through blood and slaughter his long-lost liberty, it was not wonderful that the agitation of the billows should reach even this distant and peaceful shore; that this should be more felt and feared by some and less by others, and should divide opinions as to measures of safety. But every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In his inaugural address, Jefferson conveys a strong message of unity after the contentious election of 1800. How does he offer this message of unity?
2. Why do you think unity is especially important for a nation preparing for an inauguration?
3. In his inaugural message, Jefferson states, "And let us reflect that, having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions." Do you agree with his assertion that political intolerance can be just as harmful as religious intolerance? Why or why not?
4. Jefferson says that every "difference of opinion is not a difference of principle." How would you distinguish between the two? Can you think of a historical example that illustrates this difference?

Source 3: Calvin Coolidge. *Inaugural Address*. March 4, 1925. Excerpt.

Throughout all these experiences we have enlarged our freedom, we have strengthened our independence. We have been, and propose to be, more and more American. We believe that we can best serve our own country and most successfully discharge our obligations to humanity by continuing to be openly and candidly, intensely and scrupulously, American. If we have any heritage, it has been that. If we have any destiny, we have found it in that direction.

But if we wish to continue to be distinctively American, we must continue to make that term comprehensive enough to embrace the legitimate desires of a civilized and enlightened people determined in all their relations to pursue a conscientious and religious life.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Upon reflecting upon the progress of our country in its 150th year since independence, Calvin Coolidge states, “We have been, and propose to be, more and more American.” What do you think it means to be “American”?
2. Furthermore, Coolidge says, “But if we wish to continue to be distinctively American, we must continue to make that term comprehensive enough to embrace the legitimate desires of a civilized and enlightened people determined in all their relations to pursue a conscientious and religious life.” What do you think he means by making the term 'comprehensive enough'?

Source 4: Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Inaugural Address*. January 20, 1941. Excerpt.

No, democracy is not dying.

We know it because we have seen it revive—and grow.

We know it cannot die—because it is built on the unhampered initiative of individual men and women joined together in a common enterprise—an enterprise undertaken and carried through by the free expression of a free majority.

We know it because democracy alone, of all forms of government, enlists the full force of men's enlightened will.

We know it because democracy alone has constructed an unlimited civilization capable of infinite progress in the improvement of human life.

We know it because, if we look below the surface, we sense it still spreading on every continent—for it is the most humane, the most advanced, and in the end the most unconquerable of all forms of human society.

A Nation, like a person, has a body—a body that must be fed and clothed and housed, invigorated and rested, in a manner that measures up to the standards of our time.

A Nation, like a person, has a mind—a mind that must be kept informed and alert, that must know itself, that understands the hopes and the needs of its neighbors—all the other Nations that live within the narrowing circle of the world.

A Nation, like a person, has something deeper, something more permanent, something larger than the sum of all its parts. It is that something which matters most to its future—which calls forth the most sacred guarding of its present.

It is a thing for which we find it difficult—even impossible to hit upon a single, simple word.

And yet, we all understand what it is—the spirit—the faith of America. It is the product of centuries. It was born in the multitudes of those who came from many lands—some of high degree, but mostly plain people—who sought here, early and late, to find freedom more freely.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What reasons does FDR give for claiming that “democracy is not dying”?
2. Do you think these are effective benchmarks for gauging the health of a democracy? Why or why not?
3. How does FDR compare caring for a nation to caring for a person? Which aspects of this metaphor do you find most compelling, and why?
4. FDR says, “A Nation, like a person, has something deeper, something more permanent, something larger than the sum of all its parts. It is that something which matters most to its future.” In your view, what is most essential to the future of our nation?

Classroom Applications and Activities

★ **Historical and Contemporary Relevance**

Divide the class into groups. Each group selects a different inaugural address excerpt. Students are tasked with researching the historical backdrop of that speech and connecting the historical context to the speech's ideas. Students discuss how the speech has implications for today using the following questions:

- What were the major national and global events surrounding this address?
- How did the president's vision reflect or respond to these events?
- What themes from this speech are still relevant in today's political or social climate?
- How have we seen these ideas either develop or change over time?

★ **Presidential Visions**

Students select one address they connect with most and use it as a reference point to craft their visions for America via their own inaugural addresses. This can be followed by a simulation of inaugural readings with each student reading their vision to the class which includes the following reflections:

- What values or ideals are important to your vision for America?
- How would you address challenges in the country today?
- Is there a specific theme, quote, or idea from a presidential inaugural address that has inspired your thinking? How and why do you think it connects with you personally, and how might it still be relevant today?

★ **For Younger Students**

Instead of sharing lengthy excerpts, select specific quotes from these addresses followed up by questions. Using chart paper around the room, have students walk around the room and share their perspectives on post it notes, followed by a class discussion on their responses. Questions can include:

- How does this quote make you feel? Why?
- What does this quote suggest about how the president wants to help the country?
- How could we apply this idea to improve our community or school?