My Fellow Americans- Presidents and Their Inaugural Addresses

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[00:00:00.4] Jeffrey Rosen: This week, President Trump delivered his second inaugural address, and the NCC convened a great group of scholars to put his remarks in historical context. Hello, friends. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution center, and welcome to We The People, a weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. In this episode, Michael Gerhardt, Kate Masur, and Ted Widmer join me to reflect on President Trump's speech and to discuss inaugural addresses throughout American history. All three contributed to the recently published book *My Fellow Presidents and Their Inaugural Addresses*. Enjoy the conversation. Welcome Michael Gerhardt, Kate Mazur, and Ted Widmer. Let me start by actually asking a broad question about presidential addresses throughout history. Ted Widmer, you wrote the really riveting, fluid and compelling introduction to this new volume of presidential inaugural addresses. You identify a handful of them as truly great, including Jefferson's first and FDR's first, and Lincoln, of course, and Kennedy. Share with our listeners and our audience what broad lessons can we learn from presidential addresses throughout history?

[00:01:45.6] Ted Widmer: Well, thank you, Jeff, and thank you for hosting this. It's really great to be here and so soon after the inaugural address we heard yesterday. But as I found studying the topic, and I wrote this in my intro to the book, it's something of an invented tradition that the Constitution only gives the words of the oath, and by the way, it does not say, so help me God in the Constitution. Washington, as he did in so many ways, established the practice. He was inaugurated on April 30, 1789 in New York and gave a short and very elegant statement about his intentions, his feelings of the honor being bestowed upon him. And it was a wonderful unifying experience. It showed a president speaking somewhat differently to the audience, including the members of Congress, but also showing initiative, just speaking, even though no one had exactly asked for that. And the way our history unspooled after that, Washington gave a very short inaugural address for his second inaugural. And then Adams and Jefferson and everyone afterwards followed the tradition. And sometimes, as with Jefferson, it was very important because Jefferson, having defeated Adams, needed to talk about what that meant to

follow a president whom you had defeated in an election and his soothing words in 1801, we are all Federalists, we are all Republicans, went a long way to keep the experiment going forward.

[00:03:21.5] Jeffrey Rosen: Superb. You convey all that so well in the intro and that's just a great introduction to the topic. A version of the same question to you next Kate Masur, distinguished historian of Reconstruction and of the presidency. You've now seen all the inaugural addresses under one volume. What broad lessons can we take from all of them?

[00:03:45.6] Kate Masur: Thanks so much. And yeah, it is really fun to see this volume in print. I don't know about other people. I'm gonna hold it up, but I was asked to write an essay for this volume in the depths of the pandemic, and I wrote mine is about President Biden's inaugural address and I'm sure we'll get to that. But I sort of didn't know how it was all going to come together. And now seeing the volume, it's really interesting. And it's really interesting of course, Ted wrote a terrific introduction about presidential inaugurals. One thing that came to mind for me is this is in the category of sort of presidential rhetoric. So one thing we see in these inaugural addresses is, I mean, there are certain refrains that Ted mentions in his introduction. The president, incoming president, will say, usually they'll say, thanks to my predecessor. They might tout something about the peaceful transition of power. They'll talk about the American economy, the state of the economy, and the state of foreign relations. They sort of run through a bunch of different topics pretty typically. But one thing you notice when you read a bunch of the inaugural addresses together is that presidents are often saying things that they aren't necessarily going to deliver on, or they'll say something that is a broad sort of platitude about American life, but you know that they didn't necessarily run on that and they don't necessarily believe it later.

[00:05:10.9] Kate Masur: So there's an aspect of these that are sort of formulaic and a little bit rhetorical, and I find that interesting. So what you're seeing in presidential inaugural addresses are, as Peter Onuf, I think, wrote in his essay on Jefferson, they're displaying a political persona. They're displaying something, they're projecting something that they want people to think about their presidency. And so it's less of a sort of policy statement or a set of things I'm gonna do, although sometimes they're pitched that way, but more of the projection of a persona. And I will just add that I think that is actually really important. I'm not trying to diminish that, actually, because how a president presents himself to the American public on a very important day like an inauguration really matters for setting a tone for a presidency. So I think it's really significant even if it's not necessarily super much of a representation of what they're going to do as president.

[00:06:07.6] Jeffrey Rosen: That idea of a presidential persona is so important. And also citing Ted's encapsulation of what the standard form of an address is. I'm glad you invoked it, Kate, but just quoting Ted, one, I'm not worthy of this great honor. Two, I congratulate the people that they elected me. Three, we must all come together. I won't go all the way to nine, but its democracy

of strength equals America. It's just a great distillation of the essence of it. But then, Kate, as you say, each president conveys a persona by making that format his own. Michael Gerhardt, you wrote a wonderful and really invaluable book on forgotten presidents and their constitutional legacy. And I was struck in reading your introduction to Van Buren's inaugural address, how constitutionally substantive it was. He was, as you say, not a good writer and kind of evasive about slavery, but clearly stated his position and then defended the success of the new republic and the new party system and pledges his allegiance to the Constitution. What can we learn about the president's attitudes toward the Constitution throughout history?

[00:07:21.4] Michael Gerhardt: Well, I also wanna just express my thanks for being part of this great group to join Kate and Ted, whose comments I sort of agree with a lot. And I think the book is terrific in spite of that chapter on Martin Van Buren. But I'll pick it up there. I think that one of the things about presidential inaugural addresses is that, as has been pointed out, is that they do operate according to a template or are formulaic. And that is true for a number, that's true for almost all the presidents who've taken the oath of office and delivered inaugural addresses. But it is not true of Donald Trump. Donald Trump, I think, can best be understood from two different perspectives. One is as the non-politician he is and has claimed to be, and the other is as a politician. So if we cast back and look at the different presidential addresses, they've all been delivered by politicians of one kind or another, with the possible exception of Jackson, although Jackson was very much sort of interested in politics and involved with politics and had run for the presidency before he eventually won it. Jackson then tries to demonstrate that he really belongs to the politician class by following much of that formulaic sort of outline, expression of humility, expression of the limitations of his own power.

[00:09:00.0] Michael Gerhardt: But contrast that, as we will, with Martin Van Buren, who I think was bending over backwards not just to sound presidential, but to express his constitutional vision, which he thought was also in alignment with Jackson's. But all of that contrasts with Trump to begin with, because as a non-politician I think Trump didn't want to thank his predecessor, didn't want to engage in that sort of formulaic rhetoric. And instead, what you'll find in both the first and second are things like no acknowledgement of the sort of predecessor's accomplishments, a lip service to the idea of unity. Notice how most presidents, including Van Buren, talk about the importance of unity less important to Trump. Also, there are a certain degree of falsehoods or misleading statements with Trump that are less true of a lot of other inaugural addresses. But that's okay as far as Trump is concerned because he's all about perceptions. So the perception is no defense whatsoever to the wildfires out west, though we know as a matter of fact, there have been. I'm here in North Carolina where our governor, among others, has attempted strenuously to support people out west in our state fighting the ravages of a hurricane.

[00:10:18.7] Michael Gerhardt: But Trump talks about us as having been, in a sense, kind of set adrift, no help. So that all comes from the non-politician side of Trump. Then I think when we look at the politician's side, and I'll just wrap this up very quickly, the question becomes where does he kind of place himself? Well, he's taking some lead from McKinley, who is notable for his tariff and also acquisition of territory. But I think he doesn't acknowledge but I think it's important to recognize that Trump is also, I think, playing against a backdrop in which Ronald Reagan is a very important figure. Reagan was the great communicator. Reagan was all about perception. And Reagan's address is very different from Trump's in that Reagan was trying to unify, like Jefferson at least tried to do in that first inaugural. But the effort to unify isn't part of Trump's agenda. It is, I think, to play to his constituents. And that kind of runs throughout all of his comments that can be characterized as those of a politician being inaugurated as president.

[00:11:28.8] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you very much for that and thank you for identifying both some possible analogs or predecessors for President Trump. William McKinley, who he mentioned yesterday, as well as Ronald Reagan in the idea of a new golden age. And also in suggesting that in your view, President Trump deviates from the model in not thanking his predecessor and not engaging in some of the tropes of other inaugural addresses. Let's now go back to the beginning or nearly. And Ted Widmer, maybe, I don't know if you wanna begin by talking about the model that Washington established and where that template that you discussed came from. And then perhaps if you wanna take us up there to Jackson, who Trump invoked in his first inaugural address as a predecessor. It's striking that in the introduction to Jackson's second inaugural address, Thomas Combs in the volume says that Jackson took the oath of office for the second time in the Capitol hall of Representatives because it was supposed to be on the East Portico, but a recent snowfall and sub freezing temperatures forced the event indoors. So maybe tell us to what degree Jackson's second inaugural does and doesn't do.

[00:12:51.1] Ted Widmer: Well, I wanna begin by saying it's very important that Michael and I never be in the same room together because it would be devastating to the world of Van Buren studies if anything's gonna happen to us.

[00:13:01.8] Michael Gerhardt: Absolutely right.

[00:13:03.0] Ted Widmer: There are only about three Van Buren specialists on Earth. We've got two of them.

[00:13:07.2] Jeffrey Rosen: Should never be on an airplane together.

[00:13:09.0] Michael Gerhardt: I would say it's a very small world.

[00:13:10.5] Ted Widmer: Yes. Well, so as I said a few minutes ago, it begins with Washington's spontaneous decision to speak after taking the oath in Federal hall in New York City in 1789. And then he repeated it barely. I mean, his second inaugural is only about one paragraph. It's very, very brief. But he kept the tradition going. And then Adams gave a pretty long one before his only inaugural. But when we get to the Jefferson speech, it's the beginning of the 19th century. But also it's just so important that Jefferson calmed things down. Politics were quite raw at the end of the Adams administration. By the way, we got a very unusual glimpse of the Adams administration in the speech yesterday with the Alien Enemies Act of 1798. But feelings were high between the Federalists and Republicans. They didn't like each other's policies. There was also a feeling, not unlike 2020, that there was something fishy about the election itself. So it was important for Jefferson to bring Americans together. And he did that very, very well. And we know what a gifted writer, the author of the Declaration of Independence was. One of the better stories in our history is the story of how far apart Adams and Jefferson were, how much acrimony there was around the time of their contest, and then how they came back together as correspondents and real friends.

[00:14:49.3] Ted Widmer: And then of course they die on July 4, 1826. And that was one of the many ways in which Americans felt special. And there was a strong note of American exceptionalism in a lot of those addresses. And actually we got, I mean, in many ways Trump is ahistorical or even anti historical. He doesn't seem to like history all that much. But we got McKinley as you said, and John Adams as I said. But we got a whole lot of American exceptionalism in the speech yesterday, more than in some time I would say. I wouldn't strongly recommend to your viewers that they go through all of the early speeches of the 19th century. There's a lot of repetition of themes in there. But Jackson, well, John Quincy Adams gave a very interesting one filled with ideas like building lighthouses and observatories of the heavens and science, I mean, science was on his mind and he was only a one term president like his father but I've always had a soft spot for him just because sometimes we're afraid of our own intellectual ideas and John Quincy Adams was not. And the contrast between him and Jackson was pretty stark in that regard.

[00:16:14.3] Ted Widmer: And again, when Jackson lost in 1824, there were feelings of tampered election, the corrupt bargain. So when Jackson came in, not unlike Trump, there were feelings of triumphalism and acrimony. But when I reread Jackson's first inaugural, it really was pretty subdued. Like Jefferson, it called on Americans to come together. And at the end he was very modest about his own achievements. He uses the word diffidence to talk about whether he deserves to be the president. I think he strongly felt that he did deserve it. But in the speech itself he softened all the tensions in a way that was quite different from what we heard yesterday.

[00:17:03.2] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much for that. Thank you for the shout out to the heroic John Quincy Adams and his lighthouses of the sky. And thank you for setting up Jackson

so well. And as you said, his first inaugural shows diffidence and modesty. And the second focuses on two themes, states rights and union. And as Kate Masur, you've noted, the address takes place in the middle of the nullification controversy. And it's not clear whether or not South Carolina will accede to Jackson's demands that the union be preserved in his efforts to fight nullification, which as you note, Kate, in your discussion of President Biden remarkably presages his inauguration, which takes place right after January 6th. Kate Masur, tell us, take us to Jackson, what's going on in his first and second inaugural addresses and what can they teach us about the present moment?

[00:18:07.5] Kate Masur: Thanks. Thanks for that question. So I was just looking at Jackson's second inaugural address. And it is really interesting to see. I actually was thinking about it in relation to Lincoln's first inaugural, and I'll kind of pass on Biden, although I also wanted to say something about Trump's vision of history, but we can kind of mix everything together. But so Jackson in his second inaugural address, he warns against disunion. And I actually hadn't read this inaugural address before, and this is not the period I generally specialize in so I found it really interesting where he says, without union, our independence and liberty would never have been achieved. Without Union, they could never be maintained, divided into 24 or even a smaller number of separate communities like the states. We shall see our internal trade burdened with numerous restraints and exactions, communication between distant points and sections obstructed or cut off. Our sons made soldiers to deluge with blood the fields they now till in peace the mass of our people born down and impoverished by taxes to support armies and navies and military leaders at the head of their victorious legions, becoming our lawgivers and judges. He's warning against what a disaster it would be to have the United States break apart into states.

[00:19:32.3] Kate Masur: That it would be bad for, obviously, the idea of the nation and the Union, but also terrible for the economy, terrible for the lives lost, terrible for democracy if we end up being governed by military leaders. And some of that is really echoed by Lincoln. It makes me wonder if Lincoln had actually read that address by Jackson, because Lincoln, in his first inaugural address, when the nation is on the cusp of civil war, after several states had already seceded, says very similar things about the disaster of secession and civil war that could happen. And he says, we cannot separate. We can't draw a line in this country because we have all this trade, we have all this communication. We are one people. And, obviously Lincoln's pleas in 1861 to stop secession and stop the formation or the attempted formation of a Confederate nation didn't work out. And that is what, that is the Civil War. But it's interesting to see how in Jackson's case, obviously, in 1833, it doesn't come to that. And the nation doesn't end up descending into a war at that time, but some two and a half decades later, that actually comes to pass.

[00:20:53.7] Jeffrey Rosen: Such a fascinating connection between Jackson to Lincoln and Michael Gerhardt you're just the person to help amplify that with your great book on Lincoln's

mentors as well as your Studies of Van Buren. I was recently looking for the source of the famous end of the Gettysburg Address of the people, by the people, for the people. I learned, as many of you have written, that it was Theodore Parker's 1850 pamphlet, a Unitarian minister who defined democracy as the government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people. But that phrase, one people, as best as I could reconstruct it, comes first from John Jay in the Federalist Papers, then John Marshall in Cohens v. Virginia, then Daniel Webster picks it up, and then it goes to Parker and Lincoln. But, Michael Gerhardt, help us understand the evolution from Jackson's second inaugural through Van Buren to Lincoln and the evolving sense of one people and the Union.

[00:21:56.8] Michael Gerhardt: Well, I'll do my best in a relatively brief answer. Obviously, that was a very important period of our history between Jackson and Lincoln. And there are a few aspects of it that may be worth sort of emphasizing at this point, especially given our focus on presidential inaugurals. So, to begin with, Jackson makes history of a certain kind. He is arguably the first populist ever elected president. He makes no bones about it. The party that opposed him thinks he is a tyrant in waiting. And the party that opposed him also think that he's gonna bring the mob into power. It's gonna become a mobocracy, one of the terms used at the time. Abraham Lincoln, for much of his life, actually sided against Democrats. He of course was, as he put it, a Clay man, a follower of Henry Clay, who was one of Andrew Jackson's great nemesis. Clay believed in a stronger federal government and one that actually provided a number of different services. Clay also believed in something called the American system, which was aimed at sort of improvements that would help unify the country. So when Abraham Lincoln becomes president, he's thinking a lot about Clay's agenda and trying to figure out ways to unify the country.

[00:23:32.6] Michael Gerhardt: He's gonna eventually authorize the transcontinental railroad. There are gonna be things he does that certainly are what Clay would have wanted. But Lincoln is also quite aware of the debt he owes Jackson. And this is something that I think is extremely important to keep in mind that what Lincoln is doing, in part, and some presidents do this, he's trying to move from being the partisan to the president. Not an easy move. And one of the ways he tries to do that is when he writes that first inaugural, he only asked for four documents as guidelines, one of which is Jackson's order against secession, the proclamation Jackson makes against secession. Jackson had become the only president before Lincoln to oppose the constitutionality of secession. Lincoln uses that in his first inaugural. He also has a portrait of Jackson in the White House office that he uses to his own political benefit. Recall as well that Lincoln grew up among Jacksonians, so he knew how to talk to them. And so while Lincoln is the president during wartime, his ultimate objective is to unify the country. And by not dissing Jackson and by using Jackson to some extent as his model, Lincoln is able to kind of create a bridge that nobody ever thought could be built between Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson.

[00:25:09.7] Michael Gerhardt: And Lincoln tries to do that. The other thing I just would point out is that one thing that distinguishes Trump is of course, the fact that Trump was elected to two non consecutive terms. So I don't think we should leave out of this equation the possible relevance of Grover Cleveland, the only other person to have won two non consecutive terms. And one thing I would note about each of their inaugural addresses is that their second addresses can't do what a lot of other reelected presidents' second addresses do, and that is a kind of boast about how great things are. So Cleveland in fact refers to the menace. He wants the American people to focus on the menace that exists to integrity and usefulness of their government. Where is that menace coming from? The other party? Trump obviously refers basically to the Biden administration as not really having accomplished anything. America is in decline, he says. And so I think Cleveland may also be an interesting model here, too to keep in mind. But Cleveland, unlike Lincoln, didn't serve two consecutive terms. And Cleveland also comes into the second term a very different guy than he had been in the first term. And I think we can expect perhaps something similar with Trump in the sense that he's gonna be much more aggressive about trying to get done what he wants to get done, just like Cleveland was trying to do in his second term.

[00:26:45.0] Jeffrey Rosen: So interesting to call our attention to Cleveland's second inaugural address. I'm reading from it here, and dealing with our present embarrassing situation as related to the subject will be wise if we temper our confidence and faith in our national strength and resources with the frank concession that even these will not permit us to defy with impunity the inexorable laws of finance and trade. Back to Lincoln, if we may, and we may want a full beat here. Ted Widmer, you of course identify Lincoln's speeches as among the handful of the greatest in history. Why? What was Lincoln trying to accomplish and how did he do it?

[00:27:25.9] Ted Widmer: Well, they're both great, the first and the second. I think Most of us would include those two in a list of the five best by all presidents. But I find the second even more extraordinary than the first. It's a moment of triumph for Lincoln. It's only a few weeks from the end of the war, but there is no triumphalism in it. He ends it with this very elegant and modest request that Americans show malice to none, charity for all. There's poetry in it. There's a sentence, I don't wanna say it wrong, but there are internal rhymes that are very interesting. There's brilliant and I would say, somewhat radical use of religion in that speech. There's a lot of certainty in other presidential inaugurals, and we probably had the most extreme example ever yesterday when Donald Trump said, "God spared my life so that I can make America great." And what Lincoln is doing, that really is I think he brings a radical modesty, not a radical certainty. He wonders if either side really can understand what God wants for Americans. And this echoes some earlier very interesting writings of his own. He would write down his own religious doubts on pieces of paper and then give this long quote from the Bible and wonders if Americans will need to suffer in proportion to the suffering they have already caused to African Americans, which is really a daring thing to say.

[00:29:21.5] Ted Widmer: And it's a very short speech. Lincoln as he aged and as the tragedy of war and his own personal tragedies accumulated, he wrote very searchingly about religion, as I said, but also kept breaking down these complex thoughts into very simple words. So, like the Gettysburg Address, a lot of the words are short words, and the overall effect is overpowering. I reread it over and over again, and I always see something new.

[00:29:58.6] Jeffrey Rosen: So incredibly powerful. And you analyze it so sensitively and thoughtfully in your introduction. Kate Masur, you're a preeminent historian of the Civil War and Reconstruction. What was Lincoln trying to achieve in his inaugural addresses? How did he achieve it? And then how did his immediate predecessors fare? We learned from the volume that James Garfield, among the best of all educated presidents. According to John Hay, Lincoln's secretary, he knew more about history than any president since John Quincy Adams. Has total writer's block, can't write anything, has a nightmare before Inauguration Day, and then makes an eloquent defense of African American suffrage. So tell us about some of those immediate Reconstruction presidents as well.

[00:30:49.3] Kate Masur: Well, I was interested to see. Well, first, I guess I wanna make a comment on Lincoln, and this doesn't, I'm not contradicting anything that's already been said, but Just one thing that I also would emphasize is that many times people emphasize when they're talking about both of Lincoln's inaugural addresses, his kind of concluding comments in both, where he talks about forgiveness and reconciliation or conciliation. In the first inaugural, of course, he ends, "I'm loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends, we must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." He concludes with, the better angels hopefully will be touched by the better angels of our nature. And then in the second, as Ted just said, he concludes with malice toward none, with charity for all and so forth. However, Lincoln in both is also very, has a kind of certainty and a kind of spine that I think sometimes goes unrecognized. So in the first inaugural address, he is hoping that the states that the slave holding states that have not already seceded will not secede. And he is hoping that white Southerners who are not on board with the expansion of slavery or going to war to protect slavery will decide not to support secession.

[00:32:13.7] Kate Masur: And so he's trying to persuade people who don't necessarily support Lincoln that it would be a very bad idea to secede or to support secession, while at the same time he's also saying, I'm taking an oath to enforce the Constitution. And that means that we are going to continue to hold the forts and the federal property in the slave states. We are gonna continue to deliver the mail, we are going to continue to do the jobs that are under the sort of power of the federal government, however limited it was at that time. And he says, the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. He's very certain about that. So there's a firmness to him. He has already decided that he is not going to make certain kinds of compromises about the extension of slavery which is what the Southern kind of people on the far end of Southern

politics want. So, Lincoln is really firm in the speech, even as he's conciliatory. And in the second address, he says he's not sure that Americans understand what God really has in mind for Americans, but he speculates that God may be punishing the whole United States for the sin of slavery.

[00:33:25.5] Kate Masur: And he says, "If this war has to continue until we've kind of expiated that sin of slavery, let it continue. I will pursue it to the very end." And so this is somebody who has become, if he wasn't in 1861 by 1865, totally convinced of the kind of moral righteousness of the cause of abolishing slavery, even if by military force and even at the cost of many lives. So I think, I always like to emphasize Lincoln's real firmness and commitment to certain principles that transcended for him these, the kind of sentiments of reconciliation and friendship across political differences. One thing that struck me about Grant's first inaugural is how short it is. A lot of people were very wary about having a person who was best known to be a general become president. And Grant won election in 1868 quite handily. But his first inaugural address is very brief. It's mostly about, interestingly enough, mostly about economic policy. It's mostly about the debt that has been incurred as a result of the war and how the United States was gonna grapple with it. At the very end of the speech, he actually mentions relations with native nations, which I found interesting because most of the presidential inaugural addresses, as far as I could tell, do not mention Native Americans and in fact, tend to represent the United States or the land as kind of uninhabited and free for the taking.

[00:35:02.6] Kate Masur: And so the fact that the policy, US government policies toward Native Americans is mentioned in this address shows how important that issue was in 1868 and 1869 when Grant became president. And, it just sort of puts on the table that, yes, I as president, know that this is something that I'm going to be addressing. And then Grant also expresses at the end of his first inaugural address, support for the 15th amendment. So the last of the three constitutional amendments that were adopted during Reconstruction hadn't, I think it hadn't quite passed. If I'm not mistaken, it had not yet passed Congress in March of 1869, and it would pass very soon. And of course, that is the constitutional amendment that bars discrimination based on race and the right to vote. So Grant is dealing with questions associated with the abolition of slavery in that part of the address. But most of the address is calling for some kind of peace in the United States, but the main focus is on economic questions.

[00:36:06.7] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much for all of that, for noting Grant's short inaugural address. Ted Widmer, in his great introduction, says that Grant weeds out needless adjectives like so many Confederate sharpshooters. It's great. And after discussing Reconstruction, Ted quotes Grant, "This is wrong and should be corrected. What else is there to say?" He also notes that halfway through the speech, Grant's young daughter, Nellie, came up to the podium to hold his hand while speaking. Great detail.

[00:36:36.7] Ted Widmer: I love that detail.

[00:36:38.0] Jeffrey Rosen: Great. And you also note that some of those other post Reconstruction presidents have surprisingly good speeches. Who knew you asked that Benjamin Harrison, another Republican beard, was a sensitive writer. Michael Gerhardt, your book on the forgotten presidents, including Van Buren, Harrison and Cleveland, all the way up to Jimmy Carter is invaluable. This chronological approach is helpful. So take us up from those post Reconstruction presidents, Garfield and Harrison, and then land us at FDR. And you've written such an important book on FDR's mentors. And why was FDR's first inaugural one of the greatest in history?

[00:37:22.4] Michael Gerhardt: Well, I'm gonna try and really kind of shorten the historical overview of that period, but it's a very important period, as you suggest Jeff. So one thing that's happening during that period between Garfield and eventually Roosevelt is the Gilded Age. And there's a convergence of a number of different sorts of developments during that time period. It's not just the industrial age, but it's also an age of what they call the robber barons, very powerful financial sources and people who will try and sort of corrupt government and certainly try and get around any sort of governmental constraints. One thing that coincides with sort of the Gilded Age is also economic downturns. And they may well be related, but I'll try not to go down that tangent. All of that is going to help sort of characterize and influence the inaugural addresses and the visions of the different presidents that served during that period. The Gilded Age doesn't really begin to end until the second term of McKinley's begins. McKinley, unfortunately, is killed just within months of his inauguration. That brings Teddy Roosevelt into the presidency. And Roosevelt is gonna pick up on something that McKinley had begun to talk about, even Garfield had begun to talk about, and that was civil service reform.

[00:39:07.1] Michael Gerhardt: And civil service reform was really a response to Andrew Jackson's bringing into politics what we call the spoils system. Jackson even talks in his first inaugural about rotation in office and the need to sort of get out the partisans, bring in expertise and people we can trust. Those people, by the way, turn out to be Jacksonians. And it turns out that even beneficiaries of the spoils system, like Garfield and later McKinley are going to champion civil service reform, which will also be supported by Chester Arthur, a man known for almost nothing else but the fact that as a beneficiary of the spoils system, he's going to sign into law civil service reform. And all these different developments are going to help Teddy Roosevelt when he starts reorienting the government towards going after big business. And that in itself is gonna signal a very important development, which will be followed by Woodrow Wilson. There's gonna be another economic downturn, as we all know, followed by Franklin Roosevelt becoming the first Democrat after Wilson to be elected president. And Wilson and FDR understand something. Wilson even told FDR at one point, I'm paraphrasing, that the only way Democrats are gonna get back into power is if the economy goes down downhill.

[00:40:40.6] Michael Gerhardt: So Roosevelt's waiting for that. Needless to say, it happens. And when Roosevelt is sworn into the presidency, one of the things he's gonna really try to champion is the role of government in trying to not just ensure greater fairness and equality, but the role of government in reinvigorating the economy. So as the Gilded Age ends toward the early 1900s, we get more and more attention paid to civil service reform and ultimately to a different role for the federal government in addressing economic downturns. That will be, of course, a big hallmark of FDR's presidency. But FDR, I think, along with some of these other presidents, delivers an inaugural address at a very dark time but it is optimistic. And that is one of the great achievements I think FDR accomplished which is to try and reshape Americans' spirit and thinking about the future. And so he wants to introduce this idea of optimism of a government that can solve problems, not just be the problem. And of course, that's the presidency he then undertakes. We then have to fast forward a number of years before, as Reagan says, government becomes the problem. And I think as far as Donald Trump is concerned, it's the government that is the problem.

[00:42:14.9] Michael Gerhardt: He insinuates the California government is failing. There are other failures too the government has had. And while Trump is rather vague about how American decline will actually be ultimately stopped and the new golden age will begin, he's not unclear Trump about who the enemy is. It's the other party, the enemy within. That's a different kind of message for a president to deliver. Notice FDR didn't do that. And other presidents like Lincoln that we talked about before are very careful about how they characterize the other side. Lincoln goes out of his way, I think, to try and avoid lambasting the other side, with one big exception, and that is he makes clear in his first inaugural that if there's gonna be a war, it's going to be caused by the Southern forces, not by, Lincoln's not going to fire the first shot. That's the only time he really sort of goes out of his way, so to speak, to put down the other side or at least challenge the other side. But we are coming a long way by the time we get to Reagan, who although he's hardly happy with the Democratic presidency that preceded him, Jimmy Carter's, he's also trying to unify Americans. And by the time you get to the second inaugural and it's morning in America, he's trying to sort of pick up on the optimism that he thinks needs to sort of be re-embraced by the American people to ensure that they could go forward.

[00:43:55.7] Jeffrey Rosen: Wonderful. That was just a superb tour from the Gilded Age through Reagan, which is just what we needed. Rooting our study of American history in the primary text of the inaugural address is so great, which is why this program is such a privilege. And although you don't have to read all the addresses, friends go to the primary sources. Barbara Sweet notes that you can find them all online at the Avalon Project. You can also find them at the American Presidency Project and of course, in this great book that we're talking about today and there's nothing like returning to the primary text. All right, we've got 10 minutes left to complete this important conversation. And Ted Widmer, we're now all the way up to the age of

Reagan. In your introduction, you say that in the top five inaugural addresses, Kennedy deserves to be recognized. Why? And what can we learn from the post war inaugural addresses from Reagan up to President Trump, about President Trump's talk yesterday?

[00:45:08.2] Ted Widmer: Thank you, Jeff. And Michael really helped me just now to understand the Trump Jackson parallel, which I've always understood there was a fair amount of anger inside Jackson against his enemies that Trump found attractive. And Trump placed a portrait of Jackson in his Oval Office. But the spoils system rhetoric is also very similar. Jackson didn't use the phrase deep state, but it was kind of the same thought. So thank you, Michael. Well, Kennedy's was extraordinarily memorable for a lot of reasons. He was so young and attractive, the youngest president ever elected, although Theodore Roosevelt was younger when he became president, when McKinley was assassinated. But Kennedy gave a very exciting dynamic speech. Part of it was the beauty of the backdrop. The snow had fallen the night before 1961, and it was very, very cold. And it should be noted that it was about 20 degrees colder the day JFK was inaugurated than it was yesterday. But you never heard JFK say, we have to cancel it. He went ahead and did it. And that was in keeping, I think, with his message, which was, we are tough people, we have tough adversaries, but we are also tough.

[00:46:32.3] Ted Widmer: We will bear any burden and et cetera. And then the famous line, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country. Kennedy understood soundbite's work in a TV era and then immediately had, like FDR, a lot of initiatives very early on in his presidency. We may be seeing a lot of executive actions today, tomorrow too. So it's somewhat reminiscent of FDR in 1933 with just a lot of new directions for the government all beginning today. We only got one JFK inaugural, of course, so it's too bad we can't consider what he might have said a second time around. There's a feeling even among pro JFK people, including me, that some of his rhetoric about bearing any burden and being willing to contest the Cold War anywhere put him in a bit of a box, because as things were getting worse in Southeast Asia and Vietnam, he felt he had to live up to his rhetoric. So Kennedy escalated the number of American troops from I think about 1,000 under Eisenhower to about 16,000, still way less than Lyndon Johnson, who had more than half a million American soldiers by the mid '60s.

[00:48:02.7] Ted Widmer: Most of these speeches are very full of confidence and they somewhat glibly predict for yesterday, that a golden age is apparently beginning. Although having heard Michael, I think a gilded age might be a better phrase because of all the rich people coming into Washington. But it's good to understand, as I think Lincoln did better than most, that there are limits to presidential power and to the power of the United States. And I remember one not too many years ago, well, 20 years ago, George W. Bush's second committed the United States to eradicate tyranny anywhere on earth. And there is a lot of tyranny on this planet. And while we can and should do what we can in modest ways to reduce tyranny and to help, maybe a

better way of saying it would be to promote happiness or to promote health and to fight hunger and disease. We wanna do those things because we can and we should. But to over commit ourselves, to solve every problem on earth and to be in a kind of perpetual war is obviously not a wise policy. And I'm no supporter of Donald Trump, but I did like it when he said maybe one of the best policies a president can do in regards to war is to not get in a war in the first place. I thought that was a pretty Good line.

[00:49:37.4] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely, indeed and thanks for a great distillation of the essence of the lessons from Kennedy through Reagan to President Trump. Kate Masur, in your discussion of President Biden's inaugural address, you both note that he delivered it in the wake of January 6th, that you say he met the moment by stressing unity, empathy, and invoking American history. And you note that President Biden's speech, like President Trump's yesterday, was a debate about the meaning of history. You note that President Trump at Mount Rushmore in South Dakota on July 4 had claimed that a new far left fascism was overtaking the nation's schools and our children are taught to hate their own country. He deplored the tendency to tear down monuments of Thomas Jefferson and others and insisted on the importance of defending history. Whereas you say that President Biden was debating the proper meaning of American history. And you say the vision that he offered in his inaugural address was more truthful and more consistent with what historians have come to understand about the past. This is a final intervention, but it also answered a question in the chat. Compare President Biden and President Trump's two inaugural addresses, and what can we learn from the contrast?

[00:51:00.4] Kate Masur: Well, thanks for that. And it's a good segue 'cause I wanted to circle back to sort of how Trump represented history. Sometimes in these addresses, we see a kind of gloss or narrative on history or greatest hits of history. Somebody will say, as Washington established or as the Civil War taught us. And you're right. So while Trump was still president in the summer of 2020, he had established this 1776 Commission, which was designed to ostensibly teach American history in the way that he thought it should be taught. And he alluded yesterday to the notion, or his claim that students in American schools are taught to hate their country, which I think is absolutely not true. But I wanted to, yeah, I mean, so Biden's inaugural contained a vision of American history that was about uplift, about kind of inclusiveness. He talked openly about an ongoing struggle for racial justice. He called out directly his vice president, Kamala Harris, saying that she was the first woman and the first person of color to hold that office of vice president. And he said at one point after that, don't tell me things don't change, emphasizing that the kind of narrative that we are on a trajectory toward a kind of more perfect union in terms of racial inequality, gender inequality, a type of theme that actually Barack Obama often also talked about.

[00:52:34.6] Kate Masur: And I wanted to highlight in Trump's address from yesterday, his vision of history, he said, our country was forged and built by the generations of patriots who

gave everything. Farmers and soldiers, cowboys and factory workers, steel workers and coal miners, police officers and pioneers who pushed onward. It's not atypical to have a kind of historical vision of progress like that. But what I think is very striking is that he did not mention a single occupation or role that is typically for women. He did not mention nurses, social workers, teachers, mothers. And it's really interesting that the masculinity of this, which is, of course, a hallmark of Trump's campaign and of his sort of political attitude, his political persona, and that it was so non inclusive in that vision of history and the historical roles that have made America what it is, that it didn't even have any roles for women.

[00:53:32.3] Kate Masur: And going back to Ronald Reagan in 1981 where, which is actually really interesting to look at in relation to Trump's speech yesterday, he actually had a similar list, but he said that this country is made up of men and women who raise our food, patrol our streets, man our minds and our factories, teach our children, keep our homes, and heal us when we are sick. So even Reagan, who was kind of very critical of the Jimmy Carter administration in his speech, like Trump was saying, we're turning over a new leaf. Change starts now with me. But Reagan had a more open, more inclusive vision of the kinds of people who make up America, certainly, than Trump does.

[00:54:16.8] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you very much for that, Michael Gerhardt, last word in this superb discussion is to you. We are on time, so I'll ask you to keep it tight. But concluding reflections on what presidential inaugural addresses throughout history can teach us about President Trump's inaugural address yesterday.

[00:54:35.4] Michael Gerhardt: Well, I think they can obviously teach us a lot. I won't go down the entire list, but I think some of the things to think about and maybe explore further, or to begin with, that these addresses serve political functions. There's a political agenda presidents have, and that agenda includes getting their presidency off to a good start. And the inauguration or inaugural address is one way to help do that by articulating the vision for the presidency, articulating what's important to the presidency, and also articulating a vision of the country for the future. What is this nation gonna look like down the road? And a second thing I think that we can learn from presidential inaugurations is that they're not terribly prescient. Oftentimes what will happen or what has happened is we get a president whose focus is one place during the inauguration. But then life or politics deals a whole different hand. McKinley, for example, in his first inaugural, doesn't talk about foreign policy much at all. He certainly doesn't talk about the territorial expansion that turns out to be one of the hallmarks of his presidency. So it's interesting to note that he's not really thinking about territorial expansion, at least in that early part of his first term.

[00:56:12.8] Michael Gerhardt: I think a third thing to think about has to do with vision to come back to that. Personally, I think elections, presidential elections are oftentimes determined

by vision, not by the resume of the different people running. So that's gonna take us back to Trump's vision. And I don't think Trump held back either in his first inaugural or his second, in providing what has sometimes been described as a dystopian vision for the future. It's not entirely clear what has to happen in order for American greatness to be restored, but I think we're beginning to see some glimmers of what Trump thinks has to happen. One of them is, I think, restoring a certain degree of masculinity to American leadership to sort of take off on Kate's point. It's a vision that is grounded in part on understanding that there are winners and losers, and Trump is with the winners, and Biden and the Democrats are losers. Another big part of the vision for Trump is that this is going to require stopping America into decline, and is going to require, interesting enough, a different sort of approach in foreign policy. It's not as bellicose as one might expect Trump to be, but he talks about, as has been noted, the fact that perhaps presidents need to keep in mind what wars they avoided.

[00:57:47.8] Michael Gerhardt: That is an interesting development for Trump. Now we'll have to see to what extent he can follow it. Last but not least, I think what presidential inaugurals are aimed to try to do is they're aimed in part to contribute to the American narrative. There's an American story. Jeff and the National Constitution center have done a fabulous job over the years of demonstrating, talking about how we the people have expanded over time. Now, Trump didn't do that. Some presidents have talked about how we the people become a more collective entity. But I think that the other thing to think about is how will these inaugural addresses, particularly the most recent one, fit into the broader narrative of our country's history and trajectory. That remains to be seen, which I'm sure will be discussed in all these great programs in the future at the NCC. And I am grateful to have been part of this one. Thank you.

[00:58:36.2] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much, Michael Gerhardt, Kate Masur, and Ted Widmer for a wonderful discussion of inaugural addresses throughout history and Dear NCC friends, thank you for taking an hour out of your day to engage with the primary texts of American history. And it is urgently important in these challenging times that we go back to the primary text and you read them yourself and make up your own mind. And your homework, which is a gift, is to read the inaugural addresses. It's so interesting. It's so illuminating. We all learn so much together just by reading the words and discussing them. So you can find them in this great new book on presidential inaugural addresses throughout history. You can find them online. We live in the most marvelous age when all of these documents are often free and online. All we need is the focus and commitment to read them. And I know that that's exactly what you're going to do. Kate Masur, Michael Gerhardt, Ted Widmer, thank you so much. This episode was produced by Tanaya Tauber, Lana Ulrich, Samson Mostashari and Bill Pollock. It was engineered by Kevin Kilbourne and Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Samson Mostashari and Gyuha Lee.

[00:59:53.1] Jeffrey Rosen: Please recommend the show to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional debate. Check out the new Constitution 101 course that the NCC launched in partnership with Khan Academy. You can find it at constitutioncenter.org/con101 sign up for the newsletter at constitutioncenter.org/connect and always remember in your waking and sleeping moments that the NCC is a private nonprofit. Despite that inspiring mission statement that I always read and recite before I sleep and at the beginning of the podcast, we don't get much, if any, government money. We are a private nonprofit. We rely on your generosity, engagement, passion and support. Please consider supporting us by donating today @constitutioncenter.org/donate
On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.