Inaugurating the Presidency

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Abstract
The qualities making the presidential inaugural address a distinct rhetorical type are derived from its character as epideictic discourse and from the nature of the inauguration ceremony as a rite of investiture. Presidential inaugurals (1) unify the audiences by reconstituting it as “the people” who witness and ratify the ceremony; (2) rehearse shared values drawn from the past; (3) enunciate the political principles that will guide the new administration; (4) demonstrate that the President appreciates the requirements and limitations of executive power; and (5) achieve these ends through means appropriate to epideictic discourse, i.e., while urging contemplation not action, focusing on the present while incorporating past and future, and praising the institution of the Presidency and the form of government of which it is a part. These elements account for the recurrent and the variable in these addresses, explain the special functions of this speech, and illuminate the power of those inaugural addresses considered eloquent.

The presidential inaugural address is a discourse whose significance all recognize but few praise. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, acknowledges that, during inaugural addresses, “the nation listens for a moment as one people to the words of the man they have chosen for the highest office in the land,”¹ but he finds little merit in them: “even in the field of political oratory, the inaugural address is an inferior art form. It is rarely an occasion for original thought or stimulating reflection. The platitude quotient tends to be high, the rhetoric stately and self-serving, the ritual obsessive, and the surprises few.”²

Conceivably, inaugurals simply mirror the alleged mediocrity of American presidents. But, if so, why is this form of presidential rhetoric deprecated while others are praised? More plausibly, at least from a rhetorical perspective, presidential inaugurals are maligned because they are misunderstood. Resolving this misunderstanding requires addressing an issue in criticism: Can inaugural addresses be treated as a group? Are they a distinct type, a rhetorical genre?³

Conventional wisdom and ordinarily language treat them as a class. Critics have intuitively taken them to be a distinct rhetorical type, but generalizing about them has been difficult. Despite apparent dissimilarities among them, we hold that they form a distinct rhetorical category or genre, and in this essay we attempt to identify
the elements that constitute this genre. In so doing, we shall account for the recurrent and the variable in these speeches, explain the unique functions of the presidential inaugural, and illuminate the power of those inaugural addresses widely regarded as eloquent.

Inaugurals are a subspecies of the kind of discourse which Aristotle called epideictic, a form of rhetoric that praises or blames on ceremonial occasions, addresses an audience that evaluates the rhetor’s skill (1354b.2–4), recalls the past and speculates about the future while focusing on the present (1358b.18–20), employs a noble, dignified, literary style (1414a.15), and amplifies or rehearses admitted facts (1368a.27).

More recently, in a work on rhetoric in the Catholic Church, John O’Malley notes that epideictic rhetoric has a unique problem of invention, that is, a problem in discovering and developing appropriate lines of argument. Unlike forensic (courtroom) or deliberative (legislative) speeches which deal “with more immediate and pressing issues” for which “classical theory proposed topos or commonplaces, . . . [t]he occasional or ceremonial nature of epideictic often deprived it of obviously immediate issues.” As a result, memoria or recollection of a shared past is an exceptionally important resource for epideictic speeches. O’Malley also calls attention to the distincitively contemplative character of this genre when he remarks that “epideictic wants as far as possible to present us with works and deeds, . . . not for metaphysical analysis but quite literally for viewing . . . ‘to look,’ to ‘view,’ to ‘gaze upon,’ and to ‘contemplate,’ . . .” Harry Caplan adds that in epideictic rhetoric the speaker tries by means of his art simply “to impress his ideas upon [the audience], without action as a goal.”

Presidential inaugurals are epideictic speeches because they are delivered on ceremonial occasions, fuse past and future in present contemplation, affirm or praise the shared principles that will guide the incoming administration, ask the audience to “gaze upon” traditional values, employ an elegant, literary language, and rely on “heightening of effect,” that is, on amplification and reaffirmation of what is already known and believed. The special character of the presidential inaugural address is defined by these general epideictic features and by the nature of the inauguration ceremony. Inauguration is a rite of passage, a ritual of transition in which the newly-elected President is invested in the office of the Presidency. The fusion of epideictic features with the requirements of this rite of investiture creates the distinct rhetorical type that is the presidential inaugural address.

Investiture necessitates participation in a formal ceremony in which a duly constituted authority confers the right to play a certain role or to take a certain position before appropriate witnesses. The ceremony usually involves a demonstration by the candidate for investiture of her or his suitability for such elevation. In the inauguration ceremony, the President must swear an oath specified by the Constitution before “the people” as witnesses and demonstrate by rhetorical enactment his worthiness, his capacity to be the President. More specifically, the President must show that he understands the principles of a democratic-republican system of government and the limits it imposes on executive power, and he must manifest rhetorically his ability to lead and to be the symbolic head of state who is President of all the people.

The general qualities of epideictic rhetoric, modified by the nature of presidential investiture, generate a constellation of five interrelated elements which differentiate
the presidential inaugural address from other types of epideictic rhetoric.10 The presidential inaugural 1) unifies the audience by reconstituting its members as “the people” who can witness and ratify this ceremony; 2) rehearses communal values drawn from the past; 3) sets forth the political principles that will govern the new administration; 4) demonstrates that the President appreciates the requirements and limitations of his executive functions; and 5) achieves these ends through means appropriate to epideictic address, i.e., while urging contemplation not action, focusing on the present while incorporating past and future, and praising the institution of the Presidency and the values and form of the government of which it is a part.

Epideictic “timelessness” is the key element in the dynamic which constitutes the presidential inaugural. The time of the inaugurals is the eternal present, the mythic time that Mircea Eliade calls illud tempus, time out of time. Eliade writes: “Every ritual has the character of happening now, at this very moment. The time of the event that the ritual commemorates or re-enacts is made present, ‘re-presented’ so to speak, however far back it may have been in ordinary reckoning.”11 An illud tempus has two distinguishing characteristics. It represents a universe of eternally subsisting relations, here the relationship between the ruler and the people, and it has the potential to be re-enacted, to be made present. Unlike historical time, an illud tempus can be re-enacted, made present once again, at any moment. This special sense of the present is central to the generic character of the inaugural because the address is about an institution and form of government fashioned to transcend any given moment. The timelessness of the inaugural address affirms and ensures the continuity of the constitutional system, the immortality of the Presidency as an institution, and it is reflected in its contemplative tone and by the absence of calls to specific and immediate action.

In order to transcend the historical present, inaugurals reconstitute an existing community, rehearse the past, affirm traditional values, and articulate timely and timeless principles that will govern the administration of the incoming President. Inaugurals manifest their locus in the eternal present in their dignified, literary style which heightens experience, prompts contemplation, and speaks to “the people” through all time. The quality of epideictic timelessness to which inaugurals aspire is captured by Franklin Roosevelt in his 1941 inaugural: “to us there has come a time, in the midst of swift happenings, to pause for a moment and take stock—to recall what our place in history has been, and to rediscover what we are and what we may be...”12 Epideictic qualities inform the other elements which form the presidential inaugural address.

Reconstituting “the People”

Before the audience can witness and ratify the ascent to power, it must be unified and reconstituted as “the people.” John Adams illustrates the reconstituting power of historical re-enactment when he rehearses the founding of the nation: “In this dangerous crisis [under the Articles of Confederation] the people of America were not abandoned by their usual good sense, presence of mind, resolution, or integrity. Measures were pursued to concert a plan to form a more perfect union...” (10). Jefferson reveals his desire to construct a single people out of partisan division when he says: “We have called by different names brethren of the same principles. We are all Republicans. We are all Federalists” (16). More recently, after a close election and a divisive
campaign, Kennedy in 1961 begins: “We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom...” (269). As one would expect, explicit appeals for unity are most common in inaugural addresses that follow a divisive campaign or a contested electoral outcome.\(^{13}\)

Partisan politicking is not the only source of division. Occasionally a major crisis or war creates disharmony that must be set aside if the President is to govern all the people. Acknowledging the disunity created by the Civil War, in 1801 McKinley declares: “We are reunited. Sectionalism has disappeared. Division on public questions can no longer be traced by the war maps of 1861” (180). In 1917, in the face of U.S. entry into World War I, Wilson affirms the importance of unity: “it is imperative that we should stand together. We are being forged into a new unity amidst the fires that now blaze throughout the world” (205).

Once the audience has been united as “the people,” it can perform its role in the inaugural ceremony. The inaugural addresses themselves attest to the witnessing role of “the people.” For example, in 1889 Benjamin Harrison says:

There is no constitutional or legal requirement that the president shall take the oath of office in the presence of the people, but there is so manifest an appropriateness in the public induction to office of the chief executive of the nation that from the beginning of the Government the people, to whose service the official oath concentrates the officer, have been called to witness the solemn ceremonial (155).

Similar statements appear in many others. John Quincy Adams says: “I appear, my fellow citizens, in your presence and in that of heaven to bind myself...” (51). “In the presence of this vast assemblage of my countrymen,” says Cleveland, “I am about to supplement and seal by the oath which I have taken to manifestation of the will of a great and free people” (151). “I, too, am a witness,” notes Eisenhower, “today testifying in your name to the principles and purposes to which we, as a people, are pledged” (263).\(^{14}\)

Without the presence of “the people,” the rite of presidential investiture cannot be completed. The people ratify the president’s formal ascent to power by witnessing his enactment of his role, acknowledging his oath, and accepting the principles he lays down to guide his administration. Benjamin Harrison recognizes the interdependence of President and people in this inaugural act: “The oath taken in the presence of the people becomes a mutual covenant... My promise is spoken; yours unspoken, but not the less real and solemn. The people of every State have here their representatives. Surely I do not misinterpret the spirit of the occasion when I assume that the whole body of the people covenant with me and with each other today to support and defend the Constitution of the Union of the States, to yield willing obedience to all the laws and each to every other citizen his equal civil and political rights” (155).

That the inaugural address is an adjunct to or an extension of the oath of office is demonstrated dramatically in the shortest inaugural, Washington’s second. After describing himself as “called upon by the voice of my country” to “this distinguished honor,” Washington says: “Previous to the execution of any official act of the President the Constitution requires an oath of office. This oath I am now about to take,
and in your presence: That if it shall be found during my administration of the Government I have in any instance violated willingly or knowingly the injunctions thereof, I may (besides incurring constitutional punishment) be subject to the upbraidings of all who are now witnesses of the present solemn ceremony” (7). Although it consists entirely of a presidential affirmation of the constitutional oath, this inaugural also recognizes the witnessing role of the audience in the rite of investiture. That the inaugural address is an extension of the oath of office is certified by many of these speeches.15 However, one of the more eloquent inaugurals derives its power in part from its construction as an extension of the oath of office and its invitation to participate in a mutual covenant. In 1961 each assertion or promise articulated by Kennedy is phrased as a mutual pledge made by the leader and the people. His litany of mutual pledges culminates in the claim: “In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course” (271). Finally, he explicitly invites audience participation when he asks: “Will you join in that historic effort?” (271). By casting his speech as an extension of the oath of office and by inviting the audience to join him in making these pledges, Kennedy underscores the ritualistic character of the occasion.

The force of Lincoln's first inaugural also derives, in part, from its invitation to audience participation. Lincoln makes us peculiarly aware that contemplation is a precursor of action.16 After offering his interpretation of constitutional principles, Lincoln says:

That there are persons in one section or another who seek to destroy the Union at all events and are glad of any pretext to do it I will neither affirm nor deny; but if there be such, I need address no word to them. To those, however, who really love the Union may I not speak?

Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric, with all its benefits, its memories, and its hopes, would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it? Will you hazard so desperately a step while there is any possibility that any of the ills you fly from have no real existence? Will you, while the certain ills you fly to are greater than all the real ones you fly from, will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake? (120)

His conclusion draws participation from contemplation: “My countrymen, one and all, think calmly and well upon this whole subject” (122), and, in the line paraphrased by Kennedy, he says: “In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war” (122). One reason that Lincoln's first inaugural is a great address is that the audience is asked to participate actively in contemplating the meaning of the constitutional principles Lincoln has laid down and in judging whether those principles warrant secession.17

Each of the other elements forming the presidential inaugural facilitates the President's task of reconstituting his listeners as “the people.” The traditional values rehearsed by the President are selected and framed in ways that unify the audience. Thus, for example, following a campaign replete with charges that he was an atheist, Jefferson's inaugural consoles his former adversaries with assurances that he, too, recognizes the power of the deity, in his words, “acknowledging and adoring an overruling Provi-
dence. . .” (16) “that Infinite Power which rules the destinies of the universe . . .” (17). So, too, the founders are eulogized in early inaugurals but disappear as the Civil War approaches. Since Garrison and other abolitionists had widely publicized the slaveholding of the founders, public veneration of them would ally the President with those who favored slavery and invite the enmity of its opponents. Van Buren’s exceptional reference in 1837 to Washington and the other founders—“him who above all others contributed to establish it [the Republic] on the field of battle and those whose expanded intellect and patriotism constructed, improved, and perfected the inestimable institutions under which we live . . .” (65) can be explained by Van Buren’s explicitly pro-slavery stand. 18 When an appeal that was once a unifying recollection of past heroes interfered with the process of reconstituting the audience into a unified people, it was abandoned.

Just as recollection of the past and rehearsal of traditional values should be non-controversial and unifying, so, too, recommitment to constitutional principles unifies by assuring those who did not vote for this President that he will, nevertheless, scrupulously protect their rights. The need to unify the audience and to speak in the epideictic present also influence the language in which presidents articulate the principles that will govern their administrations.

**Rehearsing Traditional Values**

To demonstrate his qualifications for the office, the President must venerate the past and show that the traditions of the institution continue unbroken in him. He must affirm that he will transmit the institution of the Presidency intact to his successors. Consequently, the language of conservation, preservation, maintenance, and renewal pervades the inaugurals. What we conserve and renew is often sanctified as our “creed,” our “faith,” or our “sacred trust.” Cleveland’s statement in 1885 is illustrative: “On this auspicious occasion we may well renew the pledge of our devotion to the Constitution, which, launched by the founders of the republic and consecrated by their prayers and patriotic devotion, has for almost a century borne the hopes and aspirations of a great people through prosperity and peace and through the shock of foreign conflicts and the perils of domestic strife and vicissitudes” (151).

Presidential use of the principles, policies, and presidencies of the past suggest that, in the inaugural address, *memoria* (shared recollection of the past) is a key source of *inventio* (development of lines of argument). Lincoln’s final appeal in his first inaugural is illustrative of the rhetorical power and resources of the past: “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every leaving heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature” (123). Coolidge puts it more simply: “We cannot continue these brilliant successes in the future, unless we continue to learn from the past” (215). Such use of the past is also consistent with the ritualistic process of “re-presenting” beginnings, origins, and universal relationships.

The past is conserved by honoring past Presidents. Washington is praised by John and John Quincy Adams, Jefferson, Taylor, and Van Buren; Monroe and Jackson refer to their illustrious predecessors; Lincoln speaks of the distinguished citizens who have
administered the executive branch. The past is also conserved by reaffirming the wisdom of past policies. Cleveland, for example, praises policies of Washington, Jefferson, and Monroe (152); McKinley praises the policy of “keeping ourselves free from entanglement, either as allies or foes” (17).

The past is also used analogically to affirm that just as we overcame difficulties in the past, so, too, will we now. The venerated past assures us that the nation has a future. Thus, in 1932, in the face of severe economic problems, Franklin Roosevelt says: “Compared with the perils which our forefathers conquered because they believed and were not afraid, we have still much to be thankful for” (232), and in 1941 he reminds us of the difficult tasks that confronted Washington and Lincoln (243).

In the world of the inaugural address, we have inherited our character as a people; accordingly, veneration of the past not only unifies the audience but warrants present and future action, as recurring references to “no entangling alliances” illustrates. A more recent example is found in Ronald Reagan’s 1981 inaugural in which Reagan paraphrases a statement Jefferson made in 1801. Jefferson said: “Sometimes it is said that man can not be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others?” (16) Reagan said: “But if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?”

As Reagan’s use of Jefferson illustrates, a president must go beyond the rehearsal of traditional values and veneration of the past to enunciate a political philosophy that will inform the incoming administration. Because rhetorical scholars have focused on the specific political principles of individual inaugurals, they have failed to note that although these principles vary from inaugural to inaugural, all inaugurals not only lay down political principles but present and develop such principles in predictable ways.

**Enunciating Political Principles**

In numerous inaugurals, Presidents testify that they feel obliged to specify the principles that will govern their tenure in office. Jefferson’s 1801 statement exemplifies this: “About to enter, my fellow-citizens, on the exercise of duties which comprehend everything dear and valuable to you, it is proper you should understand what I deem the essential principles of our Government, and consequently those which ought to shape its Administration. . .” (16). In keeping with the epideictic character of inaugurals, when specific policies are proposed, it is for contemplation, not action. Policy proposals are not an end in themselves but illustrations of the political philosophy of the President. This contemplative, expository function differentiates policy proposals embedded in inaugurals from those in State of the Union addresses, where there is a call to immediate action.

So, for instance, in a relatively detailed address Polk discusses “our revenue laws and the levy of taxes,” but this discussion is an illustration of the principle that “no more money shall be collected than the necessities of an economical administration shall require” (93). Similarly, he airs his views on the national debt to illustrate the principle that: “Melancholy is the condition of that people whose government can be sustained only by a system which periodically transfers large amounts from the labor of the many to the coffers of the few. Such a system is incompatible with the ends for which our Republican Government was instituted” (93).
Because Taft conceives the inaugural address as a vehicle for articulating policy proposals, his speech provides a rigorous test of this claim. He says: "The office of an inaugural address is to give a summary outline of the main policies of the new administration, so far as they can be anticipated" (189). But his tedious list of recommendations functions not as a call for specific, immediate action, but as evidence of continuity and of loyalty to the Constitution. He says, for example, "I have had the honor to be one of the advisers of my distinguished predecessor, and as such, to hold up his hands in the reforms he has initiated. . . . To render the reforms lasting, however, . . . further legislative and executive action are needed" (189). Such reforms ("the suppression of the lawlessness and abuses of power of the great combinations of capital invested in railroads and in industrial enterprises carrying on interstate commerce") are defined as means of maintaining the democratic character of the government.

However, the rite of investiture demands that the President do more than rehearse traditional values and enunciate a political philosophy. He must also enact his role as President.

**Enacting the Presidency**

The audience, unified into "the people," witnesses the investiture of the President. To complete and ratify the President's ascent to power, the inaugural demonstrates rhetorically that this person can function as a leader within the constitutionally established limits of executive power and that he can perform the public, symbolic role of President of all the people.

The inaugural address is performative. It evinces presidential leadership by the very fact of its delivery. As President, the speaker appropriates the country's history and assumes the right to tell us what that history means; as President, the speaker asserts that some principles are more salient than others at this moment; as President, the speaker constitutes his hearers as "the people;" and as President, the speaker asks the audience to join him in a mutual covenant to commit themselves to the political philosophy he enunciates.

Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural dramatically underscores his role as leader and the need for executive action. He speaks of "a leadership of frankness and vigor" and says: "I am convinced that you will again give the support to leadership in these critical days" (231). "This Nation asks for action, and action now" (232). "Through this program of action we address ourselves to putting our own national house in order. . . ." (233). and "With this pledge taken, I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of our people. . . ." (233). However, Roosevelt is aware that he is testing the limits of executive power. He says: "It is to be hoped that the normal balance of executive and legislative authority may be wholly adequate to meet the unprecedented task before us. But it may be that an unprecedented demand and need for undelayed action may call for temporary departure from that normal balance of public procedure. I am prepared under my constitutional duty to recommend the measures that a stricken nation . . . may require. . . . I shall ask Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe" (234). What is crucial here is that his leadership is constitutional; special powers would be conferred by Congress; and those powers
would be analogous to the extraordinary powers exercised by previous Presidents in
similarly extreme circumstances.

An abiding fear of the misuse of executive power pervades our national history. For example, Washington's opponents accused him of wanting to be king; Jackson was called King Andrew\textsuperscript{21} and Van Buren King Martin; Teddy Roosevelt was attacked in cartoons captioned: "Theodore Roosevelt for ever and ever"; Lincoln's abolition of habeas corpus and Franklin Roosevelt's use of presidential power and his third and fourth terms were damned as monarchical, or worse, as despotic. The American Revolution was fought, as the Declaration of Independence reminds us, in reaction to "repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. . . ." To allay the fear that the President is a despot in democratic clothing, an incoming President must assure the citizenry that he does not covet power for its own sake and that he recognizes and respects constitutional limits on his authority.

There is a paradox in the generic requirement that the President demonstrate his capacity for effective leadership while acknowledging constitutional limitations. To the extent that he presents himself as a strong leader, he risks being seen as an incipient tyrant. By contrast, should he emphasize the limits on his power, he risks being seen as an inept or enfeebled leader. Eloquent presidents walk this tightrope with agility as Lincoln does in his first inaugural when he responds to the fear that he will use executive power to abolish slavery. He says: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the State where it exists" (117). He attests that this is a consistent position by citing statements from his campaign speeches and a plank from the Republican party platform, material he characterizes as "the most conclusive evidence of which the case is susceptible" (117–118). Addressing abolitionist revulsion against the fugitive slave law, he quotes Article 4 of the Constitution and avers that the law is merely an extension of that article, a part of the Constitution he has just sworn to uphold. He adds: "I take the official oath to-day with no mental reservations and with no purpose to construe the Constitution or Laws by any hypercritical rules" (118).

In recognizing the limits on executive power, inaugurals not only affirm the balance of powers and locate presidential power in the mandate of the people, they also offer evidence of humility. The new President humbly acknowledges his deficiencies, humbly accepts the burdens of office, and humbly invokes God's blessings. The precedent for evincing humility was set by Washington in his first inaugural when he said: "the magnitude and difficulty of the trust to which the voice of my country called me, being sufficient to awaken in the wisest and most experienced of her citizens a distrustful scrutiny into his qualifications, could not but overwhelm with despondence one who ought to be peculiarly conscious of his own deficiencies. . . ." (3). Washington's attitude is echoed in Carter's 1977 remark: "Your strength can compensate for my weakness, and your wisdom can help to minimize my mistakes."\textsuperscript{22}

Inaugurals typically place the President and the nation under God, and this, too, is part of the process of acknowledging limits. By calling upon God, the President subordinates himself to a higher power. References to God are not perfunctory. The God of the inaugurals is a personal God who is actively involved in affairs of state, an "Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations," in the words of
Madison (27), a God “who led our fathers,” in the words of Jefferson (22), a God who protects us, according to Monroe (38), a God revealed in our history, according to Cleveland (153), and a God who punishes us, according to Lincoln: “He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came . . .” (126). The President enacts the presidential role by placing himself and the nation in God's hands. It is only when the President is fully invested in office that he has the power and authority to place the nation “under God.” For this reason, prayers or prayerlike statements occur near or at the end of inauguralns. This explains why Eisenhower calls the prayer he delivers prior to his first inaugural “a private prayer.” Although he has taken the oath of office, he is not yet fully invested as the President and lacks the authority to represent the nation before God.

The placement of prayers or prayerlike statements is a subtle indication that the address is an integral part of the rite of investiture. However, some inaugurals articulate the notion that the President becomes the President through delivering the inaugural address. For example, William Henry Harrison concludes his 1841 speech this way: “Fellow citizens, being fully invested with that high office to which the partiality of my countrymen has called me, I now take affectionate leave of you” (86).

If delivery of the inaugural is to function as part of the investiture, the President must speak in his role as President. An inaugural would not fulfill this function if the address were preoccupied with the personality or personal history of the incoming President.24 When evidence is drawn from the President's personal past, it must reveal something about the Presidency or about the people or the nation. Personal narrative is inappropriate in a rhetorical genre designed for the formal display of the President as the President. The role of personal material in an inaugural differentiates it from campaign oratory in which a high level of self-disclosure and self-aggrandizement is not only appropriate but expected. It also distinguishes the inaugural address from other presidential rhetoric.25

The most dramatic example of inappropriate personal material appears in the final paragraph of Grant's second inaugural. Here is how he concludes: “Notwithstanding this, throughout the war, and from my candidacy for my present office in 1868 to the close of the last Presidential campaign, I have been the subject of abuse and slander scarcely ever equalled in political history, which to-day I feel that I can afford to disregard in view of your verdict, which I gratefully accept as my vindication” (135). Grant's statement was criticized by his contemporaries and has been criticized by historians for its unbecoming self-preoccupation. The statements tells us about Grant the person, not about the presidency or about Grant the President, and in so doing, the statement calls into question Grant's ability to fulfill the symbolic role of President of all the people.

By contrast, Franklin Roosevelt uses his personal past effectively. In his fourth inaugural in 1945, he says: “I remember that my old schoolmaster, Dr. Peabody, said, in days that seemed to us then to be secure and untroubled: ‘Things in life will not always run smoothly. Sometimes we will be rising toward the heights—then all will seem to reverse itself and start downward. The great fact to remember is that the trend of civilization itself is forever upward; that a line drawn through the peaks and valleys of the centuries always has an upward trend’” (247). It is wartime; this state-
ment brings hope out of tribulation and becomes the basis for Roosevelt’s claim that although the Constitution is a firm base, it is still a document open to improvement. The lesson of his mentor allows him to say something he could not have asserted directly as effectively.

By contrast, Carter’s use of a statement by his former high school teacher illustrates a potential pitfall in using personal material. Immediately after thanking Ford for all he had done to heal the divisions in the nation, Carter said: “In this outward and physical ceremony, we attest once again to the inner and spiritual strength of our Nation. As my high school teacher, Miss Julia Coleman, used to say, ‘We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles.’”26 As we have argued, the first duty of the President in an inaugural is to reconstitute his audience as “the people.” Carter is attempting here to forge an American community out of his listeners. However, only certain people have the standing to do that, and Miss Julia Coleman, however able she may have been as a high school teacher, is not one of them. Had Carter made her the voice of the people expressing a timeless truth, Coleman’s aphorism might have been appropriate later in the inaugural. Despite Coleman’s lack of authority, her adage might have fulfilled this requirement had it been an unusual, penetrating, immediately intelligible, vivid statement of the relationship between change and continuity. However, even such a claim is questionable. In Carter’s statement we have the rhetorical equivalent of what would have occurred had Kennedy said, “To paraphrase my old headmaster,27 ‘ask not what your country can do for you. . . .’”

The presidential inaugural address is part of the process by which the President is invested in office. As a result, the audience expects him to enact his role: to demonstrate his ability to lead, to recognize the limits of executive power, to speak and act in a presidential, rather than a personal role. As President, he can unify his audience as “the people” and lay down the principles that will guide his administration. Finally, the President must demonstrate an understanding of the epideictic demands of a ritualistic occasion.

**Fulfilling Epideictic Requirements**

The qualities Aristotle ascribes to epideictic discourse are rhetorical qualities appropriate to rituals or ceremonies. All presidential inaugural are speeches of display inviting the audience to evaluate the rhetor’s skill in enacting his role. All praise or blame, affirm traditional values, heighten what is known or believed, use elegant, noble language and focus on the eternal present. Great inaugurals heighten the nuances of the relationship between the people and the President and respond to situational exigencies in a fashion more subtle than their more pedestrian peers. Frequently praised inaugurals include Washington’s first, Jefferson’s first, Lincoln’s first and second, Franklin Roosevelt’s first, and that of Kennedy. Some add Theodore Roosevelt’s first, Wilson’s first, and Franklin Roosevelt’s second.28 These inaugurals share certain characteristics: (1) they reinvigorate as well as rehearse traditional values; (2) they create memorable phrases that tell us who we are as a people and what the presidency is as an institution; (3) they involve us actively in redefining the nation as embodied in the principles guiding the incoming administration; and (4) they ad-
dress timely questions timelessly, or, in the words of William Faulkner, their “griefs grieve on universal bones.”

Great inaugurals capture complex, situationally reasonant ideas in memorable phrases. We recall Jefferson’s “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none” (17), Lincoln’s “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations” (126). So, too, we remember Franklin Roosevelt’s “So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” (231), and Kennedy’s “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you: Ask what you can do for your country” (271). Such phrases illustrate a rhetorical genius in reinvigorating traditional values; in them, familiar ideas become fresh and take on new meaning.

Stylistically and structurally, great presidential inaugurals are suited to contemplation. Through the use of parallelism, for example, Kennedy revives our traditional commitment to defend freedom when he says, “we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty” (269). The memorable antithesis, “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate” (270), is a vivid restatement of our traditional relationship to foreign nations, a relationship based on independence and interdependence. Kennedy’s more famous antithesis asks us to contemplate a redefinition of who we are as a people, a redefinition based on sacrifice. By use of assonance, Kennedy underscores the nuclear peril when he speaks of “the steady spread of the deadly atom” (270). By arresting our attention, such literary devices invite us to ponder these ideas, ideas less suited to contemplation when stated in more mundane terms.

Inaugurals enable us to consider who and what we are as a people; great inaugurals invite us to see ourselves in a new light, to constitute ourselves as a people in a new way. In 1913, for example, Wilson says: “We have been proud of our industrial achievement, but we have not hitherto stopped thoughtfully enough to count the human cost. . . . We have come now to the sober second thought” (200). In 1865, Lincoln compels us to consider God’s view of the conflict between the North and the South when he says: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes” (125–26). In 1961, Kennedy speaks of “a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in, and year out, . . . ” (271) a call that suggests götterdämmerung and denies easy victory or inevitable triumph.

In a special and significant sense, the great inaugurals are timeless. They articulate a perspective that transcends the situation that parented them, and for this reason, they are often cited in subsequent inaugurals. For instance, although Lincoln’s first inaugural encompasses the situation of a nation poised on the brink of civil war, Lincoln's message speaks to all situations in which the rights of constituent units are seen to clash with the powers of a central body. Likewise, although Franklin Roosevelt's
first inaugural assures us that we, as a people led by Roosevelt, can surmount this economic crisis, it also assures us that Americans can surmount all material problems. Although Kennedy’s inaugural reflects the history of the cold war, it also expresses the resoluteness required to sustain a struggle against a menacing ideology. Finally, George Washington’s inaugural not only speaks to the immediate crisis but articulates what Arthur Schlesinger calls “a great strand that binds them [the inaugurals] together.” Washington said: “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps as deeply, as finally staked on the experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people” (4–5).

The great inaugurals not only “re-present” this fundamental idea, they re-enact the process by which the President and the people “form a more perfect union.” In recreating this mutual covenant, great inaugurals both reconstitute the audience as “the people” and they constitute us as a people in some new way: as those entrusted with the success or failure of the democratic experiment (Washington I), as members of a perpetual Union (Lincoln I), as a people whose spiritual strength can overcome material difficulties (Franklin Roosevelt I), as a people willing to sacrifice for an ideal (Kennedy), as a people capable of counting the costs of industrial development (Wilson I), as members of an international community (Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson II), as limited by the purposes of the Almighty (Lincoln II), as a nation dedicated to caring for all its citizens (Franklin Roosevelt II), as a people able to transcend political differences (Washington I, Jefferson I). Accordingly, the great inaugurals dramatically illustrate the processes of change within a continuous tradition. In them, the resources of epideictic ritual are yoked to political renewal.

We have identified five major elements that constitute the presidential inaugural. Our analysis suggests the processes by which a distinctive subspecies of epideictic discourse comes into being. Its broadest parameters are set by the general characteristics of epideictic rhetoric. A specific kind of ceremony or occasion refines the general further. In this case, the presidential inaugural is part of a rite of passage—investiture—a rite which establishes a special relationship between speaker and audience. The demands of investiture require a mutual covenant, a rehearsal of fundamental political values, an enunciation of political principles, and the enactment of the presidential persona.

The conventions of this rhetorical type also emerge because the Presidents we elect know the tradition and tend to study past inaugurals before presenting their own. So, for example, in 1809 in the sixth inaugural address, Madison says: “Unwilling to depart from examples of the most revered authority, I avail myself of the occasion now presented to express the profound impression made on me by the call of my country” (25). As a result, presidential inaugurals are frequently quoted, such as those of Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin Roosevelt. This process of rhetorical introversion also casts light on some remarkable coincidences. Harding and Carter, for example, quote the same verse from Micah. Franklin Roosevelt and Carter quote a former teacher, Franklin Roosevelt and Kennedy have a rendezvous with destiny, Reagan paraphrases Jefferson, Nixon paraphrases Kennedy, Kennedy echoes Lincoln, Polk rephrases Jackson, Reagan echoes Kennedy. In other words, presidents recognize, capitalize on, and are constrained by the inaugurals of their predecessors which, taken together, form a tradition.
Thus, presidential inaugurals are shaped by their epideictic character, by inauguration as a rite of investiture, and by the inaugural tradition. However, presidential inaugurals vary, but simply saying that they vary is not enough. What makes the presidential inaugural a genre is that the variation is of a certain sort. Circumstances vary, of course, as do the personalities of the presidents, but the variation among inaugurals is predictable.

Inaugural addresses vary substantially because presidents choose to rehearse those aspects of our tradition which are consistent with the party or political philosophy they represent. Such selective emphasis is illustrated in Franklin Roosevelt’s second inaugural, in which he says: “Instinctively we recognize a deeper need—the need to find through government the instrument of our united purpose to solve for the individual the everrising problems of a complex civilization. . . . In this we Americans were discovering no wholly new truth; we were writing a new chapter in our book of self-government. . . . The essential democracy of our Nation and the safety of our people depend not upon the absence of power, but upon lodging it with those whom the people can change or continue at stated intervals through an honest and free system of elections. . . . we have made the exercise of all power more democratic; for we have begun to bring private autocratic powers into their proper subordination to the people’s government. . . .” (237–38). Later, he adds: “Today we reconsecrate our country to long-cherished ideals in a suddenly changed civilization” (240). Similarly, in 1981, Ronald Reagan chose to emphasize facets of the system in order to affirm values consistent with his conservative political philosophy. He said: “Our government has no power except that granted it by the people. It is time to check and reverse the growth of government which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed.”

A major variation occurs in inaugurals delivered by incumbent Presidents. Because a covenant already exists between a re-elected President and “the people,” the need to reconstitute the community is less urgent. Because the country is familiar with a sitting President’s political philosophy, this requirement is also muted. Re-elected presidents tend to recommit themselves to principles articulated in their prior inaugurals or to highlight only those principles relevant to the agenda for the coming term. In this respect, subsequent inaugurals by the same President tend to be extensions, not replications, of earlier inaugurals.

The inaugural addresses themselves articulate the reason for this generic variation. For instance, although he is a President in the midst of the most serious of crises, Lincoln says: “At this second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement somewhat in detail of the course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented” (125). Some presidents use the occasion of a subsequent inaugural to review the trials and successes of their earlier terms. In so doing, they rehearse the immediate past, a move rarely made in first inaugurals. When subsequent inaugurals develop specific policies, these are usually described as continuations of policies initiated in the previous term, continuations presumably endorsed by the President’s re-election.
The special conditions faced by some Presidents cause some subsequent inaurals to resemble first inaurals. For example, in 1917 Wilson says: “This is not the time for retrospect. It is time rather to speak our thoughts and purposes concerning the present and the immediate future” (203). In the face of the events of World War I, he says: “We are provincials no longer. The tragic events of the thirty months of vital turmoil through which we have just passed have made us citizens of the world. There can be no turning back. Our own fortunes as a nation are involved whether we would have it so or not” (204). Circumstances constrain Wilson to constitute “the people” in a new way, as citizens of the world. Similarly, circumstances affect Franklin Roosevelt’s choices in 1941. He says: “In this day the task of the people is to save the Nation and its institutions from disruptions from without” (243), a sharp divergence from the principles emphasized in 1933 and 1937.

The variability in inaugural address is evidence of an identifiable cluster of elements that fuse to form the essential inaugural act. Each apparent variation is an emphasis on or a development of one or more of the key elements we have described. As noted, Washington’s second underscores the role of the audience as witnesses and the address as an extension of the oath of office. Jefferson’s first is a call to unity through the enunciation of political principles; Lincoln’s first is a dramatic appeal to the audience to join the mutual covenant between the President and the people; Lincoln’s second is an exploration of what it means to say that this nation is “under God”; Theodore Roosevelt explores the meaning of our “sacred trust” as it applies to a people with an international role; Franklin Roosevelt’s first explores the nature of executive leadership and the limits of executive power whereas his second constitutes the audience as a caring people; Wilson’s first explores the meaning of our industrial development. Finally, Kennedy’s address exploits the possibilities of the noble, dignified, literary language characteristic of the epideictic to such an extent that his address is sometimes attacked for stylistic excess.35

The presidential inaugural, then, must reconstitute “the people” as an audience which can witness the rite of investiture. The inaugural must rehearse communal values from the past, set forth the political principles that will guide the new administration, and demonstrate that the President can enact the presidential persona appropriately. Finally, the inaugural is an epideictic ritual which is formal, unifying, abstract, and eloquent, and at the core of this ritual lies epideictic timelessness—the fusion of the past and future of the nation in an eternal present in which we reaffirm what Franklin Roosevelt called “our covenant with ourselves” (247), that covenant between the executive and the nation that is the essence of democratic government.

Notes
3. We are concerned here exclusively with addresses delivered every four years following presidential elections. For an analysis of speeches by ascendant vice presidents, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson and


9. According to historian John McColister in his book So Help Me God (Bloomington, MN: Landmark Books, Inc., 1982), George Washington ad libbed the additional words “so help me God” in taking the oath of office although these words are not part of the oath specified in the Constitution, an addition which has become part of the convention of the ceremony. Cited by Francis X. Cline, “Presidents and Churchgoing, a Sensitive Subject,” New York Times, 23 March 1982, p. 12Y.


13. See, for example, Buchanan’s 1857 inaugural which followed an election held during the conflict between pro-and anti-slavery forces in “bloody Kansas” (111); Hayes’s inaugural of 1877 (140–41); Cleveland’s inaugural of 1885 (151); Benjamin Harrison’s address in 1889 (162); Cleveland’s speech in 1893 (168); and Nixon’s address in 1969 (280), in addition to those cited in the text.

14. See, for instance, Lincoln’s first (117), McKinley’s first (171), and many others.

15. Van Buren speaks of “an avowal of the principles that will guide me . . .” (65); Buchanan repeats the oath at the beginning of his address (111); Cleveland refers to his speech as a supplement to the oath of office (151); Eisenhower says: “We are called as a people to give testimony in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall belong to the free” (257); Lyndon Johnson says: “the oath I have taken before you and before God is not mine alone, but ours together” (275).

For discussion of another rhetorical covenant pertinent to presidential discourse, see Roderick P. Hart, The Political Pulpit (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1977), pp. 43–65.


17. Garfield makes a moving plea which echoes that in Lincoln’s first inaugural in 1861 when he says: “My countrymen, we do not now differ in our judgment concerning the controversies of past generations, and fifty years hence our children will not be divided in their opinion concerning our controversies. They will surely bless their fathers and their fathers’ God that the Union was preserved, that slavery was overthrown, and that both races were made equal before the law. We may hasten or we may retard, but we can not prevent, the final reconciliation. Is it not possible for us now to make a truce with time by anticipating and accepting its inevitable verdict?” (146).

In a footnote to his analysis of Nixon’s first inaugural, Robert L. Scott calls attention to Nixon’s excessive use of the pronoun “I.” Such personal references, discussed below, not only violate the presidential persona that the speaker should assume, as Scott notes, they also tend to preclude

18. The extent to which the founders, including George Washington, were identified with pro-slavery positions is illustrated by John C. Calhoun's speech in the Senate on March 4, 1850 in which he said: "Nor can the Union be saved by invoking the name of the illustrious Southerner whose mortal remains repose on the western bank of the Potomac. He was one of us—a slaveholder and a planter. We have studied his history, and find nothing in it to justify submission to wrong." Cited in *American Public Addresses, 1740–1952* ed. *A. Craig Baird* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1956), p. 83.


22. Carter's statement calls attention to the risks involved in confessing limitations, as this remark can be taken as evidence of an inability to lead forcefully.

23. In 1877, Rutherford Hayes expresses similar sentiments as he begins his address: "We have assemomed to repeat the public ceremonial, begun by Washington, observed by all my predecessors, and now a time-honored custom, which marks the commencement of a new term of the Presidential office" (137).

24. See material from Scott cited in note 17 above.

25. A computer analysis of 380 presidential speeches by Roderick P. Hart generated an 8.01 level of self-reference (all first-person pronouns are counted). By contrast, the nine inaugurals in this sample generate a 1.00 level of self-reference. See "Persuasion and the Presidency," a paper presented at the Fourth Annual Conference on Discourse Analysis, Temple University, March 1983. A further refinement of self-referencing is made by Dan Hahn who notes that in 1977 Carter used "we" forty-three times, "our" thirty-six times, but "I" only six times in his inaugural. See "The Power of Rhetorical Form," a paper presented at the Fourth Annual Conference on Discourse Analysis, Temple University, March 1983, p. 6.


27. The Rev. George St. John, headmaster of Choate, the prep school in Wallingford, Conn., attended by John Kennedy, used to say to his students, "Ask not what your school can do for you; ask what you can do for your school." ("Walter Scott's Personality Parade," *Parade*, 15 December 1968, p. 2.)


30. A number of other inaugurals include admonitions. See, for example, the inaugurals of Eisenhower in 1957 (264), Truman (252), and Harding (211).


32. Eight years later in 1817, Monroe says: "In commencing the duties of the chief executive office it has been the practice of the distinguished men who have gone before me to explain the principles which would govern them in their respective Administrations. In following their venerated example my attention is naturally drawn to the great causes which have contributed in a principle degree to produce the present happy condition of the United States" (33).


34. In 1805, Jefferson reports that his conscience tells him he has lived up to the principles he espoused four years earlier (19). In 1821, Monroe says: "If the person thus elected has served the preceding term, an opportunity is afforded him to review its principal occurrences and to give the explanation respecting them as in this judgment may be useful to his constituents" (41).