

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

Who Invited God to the Inauguration?

'Pious gratitude' has been a part of the ceremony since Washington.

By **MEIR SOLOVEICHIK**

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This Inauguration Day couldn't seem more different from the first presidential inauguration, held nearly 228 years ago. America is now deeply divided, while George Washington was chosen by the Electoral College unanimously. Washington's first inauguration was held in April, in New York. Today his successors take the oath of office in front of the U.S. Capitol.

But in truth, every presidential inauguration is a re-creation of Washington's. The first president's words and deeds that day helped set the stage for a civic ritual celebrating the democratic idea within a religious context. This arguably cannot be found in another polity today.



The Bible that Abraham Lincoln used when sworn in as president. PHOTO: KAREN BLEIER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

There were aspects of the 1789 ceremony that might seem appropriate for a coronation rather than an elected leader's inauguration. Arriving at Manhattan's Federal Hall in a magnificent carriage pulled by six white horses, Washington strode into the Senate

chamber wearing white silk stockings and a ceremonial sword. He was then escorted to a balcony overlooking an ecstatic crowd. Many present “were heard to say that they should now die contented” having seen the savior of the nation, according to one newspaper report. New York Chancellor Robert Livingston, who administered the oath of office, exclaimed: “Long live George Washington, president of the United States!”

Perhaps most noteworthy was the religious nature of the occasion. Though the Constitution makes no mention of the divine, much of the trappings and oratory at Washington’s inaugural were profoundly religious. Washington may not have added the phrase “so help me God” to the constitutionally mandated oath, but he likely kissed with reverence the Bible on which he had sworn it.

Washington’s inaugural address emphasized the miraculous nature of the American Revolution. He stressed, “No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States.” He added that some “token of providential agency” seemed to play a role in the country’s independence.

The religion on display was inclusive and reflected America’s denominational diversity. Washington’s speech, written in collaboration with James Madison, refrained from doctrinal assertions. The inaugural procession featured 14 clergymen from New York—13 Christians, and my predecessor at Shearith Israel, Gershom Mendes Seixas. This was possibly the first time a Jewish religious figure had played a ceremonial role in the installation of a head of state since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Washington’s inauguration celebrated the cohesiveness of the country while simultaneously emphasizing Americans’ freedoms. His address suggested that the recent ratification of the Constitution, which peacefully unified Americans across the country without eliding their differences, was itself a miracle. “The tranquil deliberations and voluntary consent of so many distinct communities,” he explained, “cannot be compared with the means by which most Governments have been established, without some return of pious gratitude.”

To really appreciate the uniqueness of this ritual, consider a foreigner’s views of the inauguration. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who is British, has often marveled at how the religious nature of American civic culture compares with Europe’s. He notes that “the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant,” a biblical compact in which a nation dedicates itself to a series of principles in the presence of God. The American inaugural, Rabbi Sacks suggests, is often a moment of American covenant renewal, a rededication to founding ideals.

Washington’s first inauguration was the only time Americans were essentially united behind a new president. Since then, the start of a new administration means that millions of Americans are unhappy with the electorate’s decision. Yet Washington showed that an American inauguration, unlike a monarch’s coronation, is less a celebration of the new head of state than of the U.S. system of government and the divine blessings bestowed upon it.

Washington was right: “Pious gratitude” for the Constitution is an appropriate response at every inaugural. It is a time to reflect on the unique nature of the American republic—and to marvel at the miracle of the founding, the Constitution and this country.

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