

President Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address (1801)

Thomas Jefferson

Historical Background

Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address occurred at a pivotal moment: Jefferson's inauguration marked the first transfer of the presidency from one party to the other. Federalists and Democratic-Republicans offered very different visions of a future America, one commercial and based on a centralizing national government, the other decentralized and agrarian. In addition, the presidential election of 1800 was an especially acrimonious affair, featuring smear and rumor campaigns rivaling the worst 20 and 21st century elections. Compounding all these matters, the Democratic-Republican candidates for president and vice president ended up tied in the number of electoral votes they received due to a quirk of the Electoral College. The House of Representatives had to choose the president and did so only on the 36th ballot, choosing Jefferson over his running mate Aaron Burr.

Historical Significance

In this heated electoral landscape, Jefferson set the precedent for inaugural addresses that go far in attempting to reconcile the two contending parties and to reassure the nation that its electoral divisions are a strength that need not threaten their fundamental national unity. Jefferson went so far as to say that "all are republicans and that all are federalists." Modern politicians and presidents frequently reformulate this thought for their contemporary situation and emphasize the national unity of the United States despite vigorous and sometimes unseemly election campaigns. Jefferson's speech goes on to describe in general but comprehensive terms his vision of "good government." This vision, which came to be called Jeffersonian Democracy, would become increasingly popular and eventually the prevailing view of "good government" in the early decades of the 19th century.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: Jeffersonian Democracy; Federalists and Democratic-Republicans; Electoral College; inaugural addresses; republicanism; libertarianism

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- compare and contrast the platform of Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in the early republic;
- describe the Electoral College and how it is used to elect a president;
- describe change in the Electoral College over time;

- define and describe “Jeffersonian Democracy”;
- compare and contrast this speech with another president’s Inaugural Address.

Questions to Explore

To what extent is a rhetoric of national unity reconcilable with campaign rhetoric that argues that the country will fail should the other party succeed in capturing the White House?

Jefferson calls it a “sacred principle,” that “though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable.” Is this a good principle? Can it be applied as a constitutional or legal rule, and if not, how might it still be valuable for a leader or a country to affirm it?

Jefferson, a great champion of religious freedom, calls on his country to overcome political intolerance as they have overcome religious intolerance. How are the two problems similar and different? What does a proper degree of political tolerance look like? If we should not require all citizens to subscribe to a common religious creed, do we need a shared political creed? Are there political views that should not be tolerate in a democracy? How does Jefferson answer these questions?

Despite his advocacy of religious freedom, Jefferson is not indifferent to religion. How does he assess the religion of his fellow citizens?

Examine Jefferson’s sketch of “good government.” To what extent does it correspond to your view of what government should be? If it is missing anything, what else would you include?

President Jefferson a few short years later approved the Louisiana Purchase, in a sweeping assertion of national and presidential power. To what extent does this action agree or disagree with the philosophy he state in this address? How and to what extent should leaders adapt their philosophies to changing circumstances, and when is such change inappropriate?

Jefferson says that “when right [he] shall often be thought wrong by those whose positions will not command a view of the whole ground?” What do you think of the view that the president occupies a privileged position to see “a view of the whole ground” while others only see a partial facts and truths? What advantages and dangers does this fact or its assertion bring to the American government and its people?