

■ President Jimmy Carter's Inaugural Address

Date: January 20, 1977

Author: President Jimmy Carter

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

President Jimmy Carter's inaugural address in 1977 is considered notable for its expression of liberal ideals. In his speech, Carter emphasized themes of human rights, national unity, moral integrity, and social justice. He called for a government that is honest, transparent, and responsive to the needs of all Americans, and he expressed a commitment to addressing economic inequality, environmental concerns, and foreign policy issues through ethical leadership.

In a period of great political division, economic stagnation, and general uncertainty, newly elected president Jimmy Carter presented his inaugural address in a spirit of hope and reconciliation. Carter called for national unity and urged Americans to remain true to the fundamental principles on which the United States was founded. He asked the people to join him in promoting American ideals—such as religious and racial diversity as well as equal application of the law—both at home and abroad. If the United States kept these ideals in mind while offering bold solutions for the issues facing the country, he said, it would maintain its national and international strength.

Defining Moment

The decade between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s was a particularly tumultuous period in modern U.S. history. The country became involved in the Vietnam conflict at the beginning of the 1960s, and by the end of the decade, the war was impacting the American way of life back home. The images of this increasingly unpopular war—including film of American soldiers returning home in caskets—were splashed across Americans' television sets nightly. Stories of America's South Vietnamese allies committing war atrocities against civilians were also widely circulated. Despite leaders' frequent assurances that the American effort would prevail, the war dragged on seemingly without an end in sight.

Back home, American dissatisfaction with the war sparked a nationwide peace movement, with large-scale demonstrations occurring on a number of university campuses (including the infamous incident at Kent State University, during which Ohio National Guardsmen fired upon protesting students, killing four). The Vietnam conflict increasingly appeared to be unwinnable, despite heavy bombing campaigns



President Jimmy Carter. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

and a continued investment of American forces in the region. Amid growing public dissent over the war, the United States experienced a major political schism in the late 1960s.

When President Richard M. Nixon took office in 1969, he pledged to bring “peace with honor” to the Vietnam conflict, working to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the rival Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army while maintaining a U.S. presence in the country. Despite negotiations, the war continued as the American presence slowly dwindled. By the time a cease-fire was negotiated during the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, 58,000 Americans had been killed in action and over 150,000 had been wounded in the conflict.

Elevating Americans’ political skepticism was a bizarre incident in Washington, D.C. In June of 1972, five men were arrested breaking into and attempting to bug the Democratic National Committee’s offices at the Watergate Hotel. As Nixon sailed to a landslide reelection victory, the incident continued to unfold, involving more and more people, including those in Nixon’s inner circle. Over the course of several months into Nixon’s second term, several of his aides and appointees resigned over the scandal. Nationally televised Senate hearings on Watergate dominated American viewers’ attention. Under a growing call for his impeachment, Nixon was pressured to supply his office tapes, which, according to several former aides, contained conversations about the Watergate break-in.

In 1973, in a scandal unrelated to Watergate but still relevant to growing American distrust of the government, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned under suspicion of tax evasion and bribery. Nixon named U.S. representative Gerald Ford to be his new vice president. In 1974, Nixon resigned from office, leaving the unelected vice president Ford as his successor. Ford put forth a valiant effort as president—

particularly in the effort to fight inflation—but his pardon of Nixon and his inability to pacify a toxic political environment in Washington led to calls for a change of president.

In 1976, Ford faced a daunting election campaign, as Democrats chose a relative political outsider, Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. Carter ran on a platform of healing the political schism and restoring America’s standing in the world. Narrowly defeating Ford in the general election, Carter set about moving forward to address the myriad issues facing the United States.

Author Biography

James Earl “Jimmy” Carter Jr. was born in Plains, Georgia, on October 1, 1924. He attended Georgia Southwestern College and the Georgia Institute of Technology until 1942, when he applied for and was accepted to the U.S. Naval Academy. He served as a naval officer aboard a submarine until 1953. After retiring from the Navy, he returned to run his family farm. Carter was also heavily involved in the Plains community, both as a civic leader and a church deacon. In 1955, he ran successfully for the Sumter County Board of Education and then, in 1962, he won election to the Georgia state senate. In 1966, Carter ran for governor, but, as a pro-civil rights candidate, was soundly defeated by his conservative Democratic opponents. He ran again in 1970, winning by a narrow margin after appealing to the conservative base of his party. In 1976, Carter was elected president. One of his most notable successes as president was his work facilitating the Camp David Accords in 1978, which led to peace between Israel and Egypt. Defeated by Ronald Reagan in 1980, Carter continued to advocate for international peace. In honor of his efforts in this area, Carter received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. He continued to work into late life, and died at the age of 100 in 2024.



Historical Document

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For myself and for our Nation, I want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land.

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."

Here before me is the Bible used in the inauguration of our first President, in 1789, and I have just taken the oath of office on the Bible my mother gave me just a few years ago, opened to a timeless admonition from the ancient prophet Micah: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

This inauguration ceremony marks a new beginning, a new dedication within our Government, and a new spirit among us all. A President may sense and proclaim that new spirit, but only a people can provide it.

Two centuries ago, our Nation's birth was a milestone in the long quest for freedom. But the bold and brilliant dream which excited the founders of this Nation still awaits its consummation. I have no new dream to set forth today, but rather urge a fresh faith in the old dream.

Ours was the first society openly to define itself in terms of both spirituality and human liberty. It is that unique self-definition which has given us an exceptional appeal, but it also imposes on us a special obligation to take on those moral duties which, when assumed, seem invariably to be in our own best interests.

You have given me a great responsibility—to stay close to you, to be worthy of you, and to exemplify what you are. Let us create together a new national spirit of unity and trust. Your strength can compensate for my weakness, and your wisdom can help to minimize my mistakes.

Let us learn together and laugh together and work together and pray together, confident that in the end we will triumph together in the right.

The American dream endures. We must once again have full faith in our country—and in one another. I believe America can be better. We can be even stronger than before.

Let our recent mistakes bring a resurgent commitment to the basic principles of our Nation, for we know that if we despise our own government, we have no future. We recall in special times when we have stood briefly, but magnificently, united. In those times no prize was beyond our grasp.

But we cannot dwell upon remembered glory. We cannot afford to drift. We reject the prospect of failure or mediocrity or an inferior quality of life for any person. Our Government must at the same time be both competent and compassionate.

We have already found a high degree of personal liberty, and we are now struggling to enhance equality of opportunity. Our commitment to human rights must be absolute, our laws fair, our national beauty preserved; the powerful must not persecute the weak, and human dignity must be enhanced.

We have learned that more is not necessarily better, that even our great Nation has its recognized limits, and that we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems. We cannot afford to do everything, nor can we afford to lack boldness as we meet the future. So, together, in a spirit of individual sacrifice for the common good, we must simply do our best.

Our Nation can be strong abroad only if it is strong at home. And we know that the best way to enhance freedom in other lands is to demonstrate here that our democratic system is worthy of emulation.

To be true to ourselves, we must be true to others. We will not behave in foreign places so as to violate our rules and standards here at home, for we know that the trust which our Nation earns is essential to our strength.

The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving, and now demanding, their place in the sun—not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights.

The passion for freedom is on the rise. Tapping this new spirit, there can be no nobler nor more ambitious task for America to undertake on this day of a new beginning than to help shape a just and peaceful world that is truly humane.

We are a strong nation, and we will maintain strength so sufficient that it need not be proven in combat—a quiet strength based not merely on the size of an arsenal but on the nobility of ideas.

We will be ever vigilant and never vulnerable, and we will fight our wars against poverty, ignorance, and injustice, for those are the enemies against which our forces can be honorably marshaled.

We are a proudly idealistic nation, but let no one confuse our idealism with weakness.

Because we are free, we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clear-cut preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights. We do not seek to intimidate, but it is clear that a world which others can dominate with impunity would be inhospitable to decency and a threat to the well-being of all people.

The world is still engaged in a massive armaments race designed to ensure continuing equivalent strength among potential adversaries. We pledge perseverance and wisdom in our efforts to limit the world's armaments to those necessary for each nation's own domestic safety. And we will move this year a step toward our ultimate goal—the elimination of all nuclear weapons from this Earth. We urge all other people to join us, for success can mean life instead of death.

Within us, the people of the United States, there is evident a serious and purposeful rekindling of confidence. And I join in the hope that when my time as your President has ended, people might say this about our Nation:

—that we had remembered the words of Micah and renewed our search for humility, mercy, and justice;

—that we had torn down the barriers that separated those of different race and region and religion, and where there had been mistrust, built unity, with a respect for diversity;

—that we had found productive work for those able to perform it;

—that we had strengthened the American family, which is the basis of our society;

—that we had ensured respect for the law and equal treatment under the law, for the weak and the powerful, for the rich and the poor; and

—that we had enabled our people to be proud of their own Government once again.

I would hope that the nations of the world might say that we had built a lasting peace, based not on weapons of war but on international policies which reflect our own most precious values.

These are not just my goals—and they will not be my accomplishments—but the affirmation of our Nation's continuing moral strength and our belief in an undiminished, ever-expanding American dream.

Thank you very much.



Document Analysis

President Carter uses the occasion of his inaugural address to remind Americans of their values and traditions while seeking innovative and bold approaches to restoring the country's domestic and international strength. Carter emphasizes that the notions on which the country was founded could be used to strengthen the nation and its international status. He calls for the equal application of the law and respect for the country's racial, religious, and social diversity. Carter points to his admittedly idealistic goals for the nation and, although acknowledging that not all of his goals would be met during his tenure, hopes that he can at least lay the groundwork for the nation to meet those goals in the future.

Carter begins his speech by recognizing the inaugural ceremony in which he just participated. His oath of office and the traditions associated with it are centuries old, he said, providing a reminder of the fundamental principles on which the nation was founded in 1776. He says that the United States represents a bold "milestone"—a nation founded on personal liberty and spiritual values. These values remain in the present, Carter says, adding that if Americans restore their faith in those concepts, the American Dream will remain strong.

Acknowledging the mistakes of previous administrations, Carter stresses that dwelling on those missteps will only continue to keep the nation in the doldrums. He also urges Americans not to harp on the successes of the past. Such an obsession with the past, he warns, only leads to the nation remaining adrift. Instead, he says, the people's faith in their nation and in one another must be restored so that the country can pursue future success.

The key to future national glory, Carter argues, is embracing the fundamental ideals on which the nation was founded. The country must continue its tradition of respecting the diversity of its population, he states. He also reminds the people that the United States is dedicated to the equal application of the law to all citizens. Americans must remain true to those values and to one another, he adds. This practice must occur not just at home—where doing so has made the nation strong—but also on the international stage, he

says. Applying these concepts in both arenas strengthened American society and the country's status as a global leader, Carter says.

Carter admits that his goals for the country—healing racial divides, restoring full strength to the economy and promoting freedom and liberty abroad—are idealistic. However, he argues that idealism should not be confused with weakness. Carter's idealistic goals are reflective of a strong nation seeking to become stronger. Carter also acknowledges that the goals he set for his tenure were equally idealistic and perhaps not fully achievable during his presidency. Still, he says, when he leaves the White House, he hopes that he at least helped the country heal its racial wounds, start rebuilding its economy, and restore the people's faith in their government and their fellow citizens. After all, Carter said, these are the goals of all citizens who believe in the American Dream.

Essential Themes

Jimmy Carter used the occasion of his inauguration to remind Americans of the traditions, ideals, and principles on which the nation was founded. His idealism signified a sea change from the politics of the decade that preceded his election, a time in which the integrity of the political establishment was greatly undermined. Carter's idealism perhaps cost him reelection in 1980, but it remained one of the attributes that drove his post-presidential career in public service.

—Michael P. Auerbach, MA

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