

■ President Grant's First Inaugural Address

Date: March 4, 1869

Author: Ulysses S. Grant

Genre: Speech

Summary Overview

Ulysses S. Grant was elected president of the United States in November 1868 and took office on March 4, 1869. In his inaugural address, he did not lay out any detailed plans for his administration, but promised to do his best in meeting the responsibilities of the office. Most of his address focused on three major problems. One was the need to pay off the enormous debt incurred by fighting the Civil War. Secondly, during the Civil War, the government had issued paper currency and suspended the practice of redeeming paper money in gold, and Grant believed the government must resume the redemption of paper money with gold coins as soon as possible. Grant expressed concern about “the original occupants of the land”—the Native Americans and promised to support policies aimed at their “civilization” and making them citizens of the United States. He also addressed the restoration of civil law in the former states of the Confederacy, including the issue of voting rights for the freed slaves.

Defining Moment

When Ulysses Grant became president in March 1869, it was less than four years since the Civil War had ended. The impact of the war was still being felt in the struggle over race relations and the civil rights of the freed slaves in the South, and in the enormous debt the federal government had incurred to conduct the war. Additionally, while the Republican Party had controlled the White House and both houses of Congress since Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, the party was in serious disarray by 1869. When Lincoln had run for re-election in 1864, the Republicans had put Andrew Johnson, a former Democrat, on the ticket as a show of national support for the Union war effort. Johnson had been a U.S. senator from Tennessee before the Civil War, but had opposed secession. But to the dismay of the Republican Party, when Johnson succeeded to the presidency upon Lincoln's death, he pursued a very lenient policy toward

the former Confederate states and seemed determined to block any attempt to guarantee the rights of the freed slaves. An attempt to remove Johnson from office by impeachment had failed by a narrow vote, and Johnson had, in fact, tried unsuccessfully to secure the Democratic nomination for president in 1868.

Although speculation about Grant as a presidential candidate had started during the Civil War, Grant was not an automatic choice for the Republican Party in 1868. Before the Civil War, he had seemed to lean toward the Democrats in politics, and for a time, he had identified with Johnson's repudiated Reconstruction policies. His chief opponent for the Republican nomination was Salmon P. Chase, who had served as Secretary of the Treasury in Lincoln's cabinet and was the current Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. But during Johnson's impeachment trial, Republicans came to believe that Chase favored acquittal of the president, and this cost him support in the 1868 convention. In a vote that followed sectional lines, except for Southern blacks voting Republican in areas where they were allowed to vote, Grant had defeated the Democratic candidate, Horatio Seymour, a former governor of New York. Grant won by a 400,000-vote margin in the popular vote, out of roughly 5.7 million votes cast; but in the Electoral College, his victory margin was more than 134 votes. As Grant took office, he knew two major problems facing the nation were the treatment of the freed slaves in the South—especially the right to vote for adult black males—and the tremendous federal debt caused by the Civil War. In his inaugural address, he promised to address both of these issues.

Author Biography

Ulysses S. Grant was the eighteenth president of the United States, but he had first risen to fame as the preeminent Union general in the American Civil War. He was born in Point Pleasant, Ohio on April 27, 1822. He

graduated from West Point in 1843. Grant served with distinction in the U.S. war with Mexico (1846 to 1848), but after the war, personal troubles led him to resign from the army in 1854. When the Civil War broke out, Grant became an officer in the Illinois volunteer troops. Due to his success as a commander, he rose steadily through the ranks. In the spring of 1864, Grant was promoted to the newly revived rank of lieutenant general and made the general-in-chief of the Union Army. He was elected

president of the United States in November 1868, and re-elected in November 1872. Grant's presidency was marked by corruption and scandal, although it does not appear he was part of any of the scandals. After leaving the presidency, a bad business investment left Grant impoverished. He wrote his Personal Memoirs while dying of throat cancer, hoping to leave a legacy to provide financially for his family. He died at his family home near Saratoga, NY, on July 23, 1885.



First inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant, Capitol building steps, March 4, 1869 by Mathew Brady(U.S. National Archives and Records Administration)

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Your suffrages having elected me to the office of President of the United States, I have, in conformity to the Constitution of our country, taken the oath of office prescribed therein. I have taken this oath without mental reservation and with the determination to do to the best of my ability all that is required of me. The responsibilities of the position I feel, but accept them without fear. The office has come to me unsought; I commence its duties untrammelled. I bring to it a conscious desire and determination to fill it to the best of my ability to the satisfaction of the people.

On all leading questions agitating the public mind I will always express my views to Congress and urge them according to my judgment, and when I think it advisable will exercise the constitutional privilege of interposing a veto to defeat measures which I oppose; but all laws will be faithfully executed, whether they meet my approval or not.

I shall on all subjects have a policy to recommend, but none to enforce against the will of the people. Laws are to govern all alike—those opposed as well as those who favor them. I know no method to secure the repeal of bad or obnoxious laws so effective as their stringent execution.

The country having just emerged from a great rebellion, many questions will come before it for settlement in the next four years which preceding Administrations have never had to deal with. In meeting these it is desirable that they should be approached calmly, without prejudice, hate, or sectional pride, remembering that the greatest good to the greatest number is the object to be attained.

This requires security of person, property, and free religious and political opinion in every part of our common country, without regard to local prejudice. All laws to secure these ends will receive my best efforts for their enforcement.

A great debt has been contracted in securing to us and our posterity the Union. The payment of this, principal and interest, as well as the return to a specie basis as soon as it can be accomplished without material detriment to the debtor class or to the country at large, must be provided for. To protect the national honor, every dollar of

Government indebtedness should be paid in gold, unless otherwise expressly stipulated in the contract. Let it be understood that no repudiator of one farthing of our public debt will be trusted in public place, and it will go far toward strengthening a credit which ought to be the best in the world, and will ultimately enable us to replace the debt with bonds bearing less interest than we now pay. To this should be added a faithful collection of the revenue, a strict accountability to the Treasury for every dollar collected, and the greatest practicable retrenchment in expenditure in every department of Government.

When we compare the paying capacity of the country now, with the ten States in poverty from the effects of war, but soon to emerge, I trust, into greater prosperity than ever before, with its paying capacity twenty-five years ago, and calculate what it probably will be twenty-five years hence, who can doubt the feasibility of paying every dollar then with more ease than we now pay for useless luxuries? Why, it looks as though Providence had bestowed upon us a strong box in the precious metals locked up in the sterile mountains of the far West, and which we are now forging the key to unlock, to meet the very contingency that is now upon us.

Ultimately it may be necessary to insure the facilities to reach these riches and it may be necessary also that the General Government should give its aid to secure this access; but that should only be when a dollar of obligation to pay secures precisely the same sort of dollar to use now, and not before. Whilst the question of specie payments is in abeyance the prudent business man is careful about contracting debts payable in the distant future. The nation should follow the same rule. A prostrate commerce is to be rebuilt and all industries encouraged.

The young men of the country—those who from their age must be its rulers twenty-five years hence—have a peculiar interest in maintaining the national honor. A moment's reflection as to what will be our commanding influence among the nations of the earth in their day, if they are only true to themselves, should inspire them with national pride. All divisions—geographical, political, and religious—can join in this common sentiment. How the public debt is to be paid or specie payments resumed is not so important as that a plan should be

adopted and acquiesced in. A united determination to do is worth more than divided counsels upon the method of doing. Legislation upon this subject may not be necessary now, or even advisable, but it will be when the civil law is more fully restored in all parts of the country and trade resumes its wonted channels.

It will be my endeavor to execute all laws in good faith, to collect all revenues assessed, and to have them properly accounted for and economically disbursed. I will to the best of my ability appoint to office those only who will carry out this design.

In regard to foreign policy, I would deal with nations as equitable law requires individuals to deal with each other, and I would protect the law-abiding citizen, whether of native or foreign birth, wherever his rights are jeopardized or the flag of our country floats. I would respect the rights of all nations, demanding equal respect for our own. If others depart from this rule in their deal-

ings with us, we may be compelled to follow their precedent.

The proper treatment of the original occupants of this land, the Indians, is one deserving of careful study. I will favor any course toward them which tends to their civilization and ultimate citizenship.

The question of suffrage is one which is likely to agitate the public so long as a portion of the citizens of the nation are excluded from its privileges in any State. It seems to me very desirable that this question should be settled now, and I entertain the hope and express the desire that it may be by the ratification of the fifteenth article of amendment to the Constitution.

In conclusion I ask patient forbearance one toward another throughout the land, and a determined effort on the part of every citizen to do his share toward cementing a happy union; and I ask the prayers of the nation to Almighty God in behalf of this consummation.

GLOSSARY

abeyance: lapse or temporary suspension; undetermined

civilization: in this case, assimilation or enculturation

sectional pride: geographical or regional bias—particularly, in this case, North versus South

specie: coin money, as against paper; gold as the basis for paper currency

suffrages: votes

wonted: likely, preferred, or most common

Document Analysis

Grant began his inaugural address noting that, although he had not sought the presidency, he was entering the office ready to fulfill the responsibilities it entailed. He did not lay out any detailed policy objectives, but promised to express his views on issues before Congress, to urge legislation in line with his views, and to use the presidential veto over laws that he opposed.

The bulk of Grant's address deals with the need to address financial and monetary issues resulting from the Civil War. The federal government had borrowed roughly three billion dollars to finance the war effort. Also, in December 1861, the U.S. Treasury had suspended the policy of redeeming paper currency for gold, and early the

following year, began printing paper money. Grant believed that the debt had to be repaid, but did not lay out any plan for how to do this, and even said the particular method was not as important as simply the determination to do so and getting the process started. Grant also called for the resumption of "specie redemption" as soon as possible—that is, the practice of the U.S. Treasury redeeming paper money with gold coin. Grant believed that addressing these two problems would restore both the credit-worthiness of the nation and the confidence of the business community.

Grant commented briefly on foreign affairs, promising to treat foreign nations fairly and also to protect the rights of American citizens overseas. He warned that the

United States might respond in kind if any nation failed to respect our rights.

Grant also mentioned his concern for the American Indians, who he referred to as “the original occupants of this land.” Since spending time on the West Coast in the Army, after the Mexican War, Grant had been impressed with the needs of the Indians. He favored policies that would tend to their “civilization,” meaning their assimilation into the general American culture, and he also supported extending U.S. citizenship to the Indians.

Problems involving Reconstruction issues in the former Confederate states received little notice in this address. Grant specifically addressed “suffrage”—the right to vote. Many Southern states were trying to restrict the rights of the freed slaves to vote. Grant believed this issue must be settled quickly, and he hoped it soon would be by the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, which forbade any state from using “race, color, or previous condition of servitude” as a basis for denying the right to vote.

Essential Themes

A major emphasis in Grant's inaugural address was the financial responsibility of the federal government, and related to this, the question of what kind of money the nation should use. Throughout early U.S. history, it was generally assumed that the nation should incur debt only in emergency situations, and once the emergency was passed, the debt should be paid off as quickly as possible. Grant believed that the debt incurred fighting the Civil War must be addressed immediately. He also believed that the nation should, as soon as possible, resume the practice of redeeming paper money with gold coins—meaning that people could turn paper money in at the U.S. Treasury and receive gold coinage in return. The government had issued the “greenbacks” during the Civil

War as an emergency measure, and many who believed in a “sound money” policy would have agreed with Grant that a return to using only money made from (or clearly backed by) precious metal should be a first priority. Grant believed that the future credit-worthiness of the nation, and the confidence of the business community, required immediate steps to address the debt issue and the resumption of currency redemption. Monetary policy would be a political issue for the next thirty years, as the Greenbacker Party in the 1870s called for continued use of paper money, and the Populist Party in the 1890s demanded the coinage of silver dollars to expand the money supply.

Grant also addressed the issue of civil disorder in the former Confederate states, and the right to vote of the freed slaves. He hoped that the Fifteenth Amendment would soon be adopted. That amendment would prohibit any use of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude” as grounds for denying the right to vote. The Fifteenth Amendment was passed by Congress in March 1869 and ratified in February 1870. The record of Grant's two presidential administrations on Reconstruction and the civil rights of African Americans was mixed. At times, strong action was taken to protect these rights, but in general, the commitment of the Republican Party and Northern voters generally to Reconstruction issues was waning during the 1870s.

—Mark S. Joy, PhD

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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