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Examining the 2021 Inauguration

The peaceful transition of power in the United States is marked by the inauguration of a president every four years. This has been the case since the first president of the United States, George Washington. Though the date, location, and time have changed since then, the oath of office has remained the same. This past Wednesday America witnessed the inauguration of our 46th president, Joe Biden. However, the absence of his predecessor, the storming of the United States Capitol on January 6th, and the COVID pandemic made it an inauguration like no other.

Question 1: What typically happens with an inauguration?

Inaugurations serve as a rite of passage marking the peaceful transition of power from one president to another. They are considered to be an essential pillar of democracy. As soon as the new president is elected, they have two months to prepare for their administration and the transition of policies. Transfer-of-power rituals provide for both a legal and visual transition from one administration to the next. A peaceful transition of power has always, save for the 1869 inauguration, been seen as commonplace even after the most fierce presidential elections.

The transfer-of-power rituals involve the incoming and outgoing presidents, vice presidents, the spouses and other positions within each administration. Typically, the outgoing president welcomes the incoming president and then rides with them to the US Capitol building. This is done to convey unity. President Trump’s absence at this year’s inauguration is truly unique. After the Inauguration ceremony, the incoming president participates in a ceremonial wreath-laying at Arlington Cemetery and is accompanied by all former presidents who are still alive. Another ritual is that outgoing presidents leave the incoming president a letter typically with advice as well as good wishes for their administration.

First ladies are known to have traditions as well. It is customary for the outgoing first lady to welcome the incoming first lady through several acts. For example, they will often give a private tour of the presidential living quarters at the White House to the new first lady. It is also customary for outgoing positions, such as Vice President, or smaller positions such as, White House Photographer, to transition the incoming position by meeting with them to discuss the details of their duty while with the administration.

Question 2: What is different about Biden’s inauguration?

The recent events in the weeks leading up to the inauguration have been unprecedented. The riot disrupting the counting of the Electoral College votes left 5 dead and led to scores of arrests. Investigations are ongoing and it is expected many more will be indicted. The House of Representatives quickly voted to impeach President Trump with just days left in his term on the grounds that he incited the riot. Notably, Trump joined a very small list of outgoing presidents who refused to take part in their successor’s inauguration. Along with precautions due to the coronavirus epidemic, these events have affected this year’s inauguration in significant ways. To be sure, the Biden inauguration looked like no other.
One thing that was different in this inauguration was the presence of spectators. In lieu of spectators, 400,000 flags were placed at the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting pool in remembrance of the lives lost due to the coronavirus pandemic. It was a powerful image.

The level of security is another issue that was very different with this year’s inauguration. Thirteen metro stations were closed ahead of inauguration day, barricades were erected across the city, and tens of thousands of National Guard members made their presence felt in the nation’s capital.

A number of events were cancelled—including the traditional congressional luncheon and the many inaugural balls that typically occur late into the evening. Instead, many musical guests performed throughout the evening with many television stations broadcasting these performances directly into homes of Americans throughout the country. In the District of Columbia, businesses were hurt by the lack of tourism that would have typically occurred in tandem with the inauguration. Likewise, rather than having tourists come into their establishment, hotels are being used to house the increase in National Guard presence causing a decrease in revenue.

The 2021 inauguration also made history as Kamala Harris became the first female to become the vice-president of the United States.

**Question 3: What can we take away from Biden’s inaugural address?**

One of the key moments in any inauguration is the acceptance speech by the incoming president. After being sworn in as the 46th President of the United States by Chief Justice John Roberts President Biden gave his inaugural address on the same grounds that were overtaken by rioters just weeks before. Given the unprecedented events of the past few weeks along with an electorate that appear to be deeply divided, Biden focused on familiar topics from the campaign trail. And although Donald Trump did not attend and he was not named by Biden, his presence was felt throughout the speech.

Biden made the case that America needs to come together and unite to contend with the challenges ahead—most notably the fight against COVID-19. Biden warned that the winter ahead of us will be dark. He said “we face an attack on our democracy and on truth, a raging virus, growing inequity, the sting of systemic racism, a climate in crisis.” President Biden called on all Americans to rise to meet the severity of the situation. He said that “we must meet this moment as the United States of America. If we do that, I guarantee you we will not fail. We have never, ever, ever, ever failed in America when we’ve acted together.” Biden no doubt faces some significant challenges in promoting that unity with a closely divided House and Senate. Having an ex-president undergoing an impeachment trial in the Senate will further complicate matters given Biden’s call for unity.

**Parting Thoughts**

The Inauguration of Joseph R. Biden looked different than any previous inauguration. From the changes due to the pandemic to ensuring safety for all involved, to the refusal of the previous president to attend, the events of the day were unprecedented. Still, the transfer of power occurred and many members of the Republican party were in attendance and very welcoming to President Biden, suggesting a return to a more civil politics is possible.