Overview

The Inauguration Day ceremonies are a culmination of constitutionally-mandated procedures, federal and state laws, as well as traditional events to celebrate the peaceful transfer of power from one President to another. In this lesson, students explore Inauguration Day from these various perspectives.

I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.

–Presidential Oath of Office, Constitution of the United States, Article II, § 1

The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the Republican model of Government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.

–President George Washington, First Inaugural Address, 1801

Critical Engagement Question

Why does the President take an oath to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States?”

Objectives

Students will

• Examine statements from past Presidents’ Inaugural Addresses
• Understand the constitutional processes for electing the President of the United States
• Analyze the oath of office taken by the new President on Inauguration Day
• Evaluate President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address

Standards

CCE (9-12): IIB1, IID2, IIIA1, IIB1, IIIB2
CCE (5-8): IIB1, IIIA1, IIIB1
NCSS: Strands 2 and 10
Background/Homework

Have students read and answer the questions on **Handout A: Test Your Knowledge of Inauguration Day**. You may choose to include the bottom half of the page as an answer bank. Students can use the following resources to complete the Handout:

- [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/inauguration/history.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/inauguration/history.html)
- [http://inaugural.senate.gov/history/factsandfirsts/](http://inaugural.senate.gov/history/factsandfirsts/)

**Warm-up**

20 minutes

A. Go over the short answer questions on **Handout A** as a large group and go over any questions students have. See the Answer Key for correct answers.

B. Discuss the critical thinking questions as a large group. See the Answer Key for suggested responses.

C. Explain that the Inaugural Address is the new President’s first opportunity to tell his fellow Americans about his agenda for the next four years. Use an overhead of **Handout B: Inaugural Addresses from History**, revealing and reading aloud one quotation at a time, to challenge students to identify the President speaking. See the Answer Key for correct answers.

**Activity**

20 minutes

A. Distribute copies of the Constitution of the United States. Have students highlight or underline sections which pertain to the presidential transfer of power. (*Article II, Section 1; Twelfth Amendment; Twentieth Amendment; Twenty-Fifth Amendment*) The Constitution can be accessed at [www.BillofRightsInstitute.org/teach/freeresources/foundingdocuments](http://www.BillofRightsInstitute.org/teach/freeresources/foundingdocuments).

B. As a large group, discuss the processes the Constitution puts in place. You may use an overhead or distribute copies of **Handout C: The Peaceful Transfer of Power**.

C. As a large group, discuss the following questions.

- Why do you think there are so many steps involved in electing the President? What were the Founders trying to ensure?
- Why do you think the United States has avoided the unrest and violence that many other countries have experienced upon the transfer of power?
Why does the oath of office require the President to swear (or affirm) "to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States"?

Why does the Constitution provide for the option of affirming, rather than swearing?

Are procedures such as counting electoral votes and the swearing-in ceremony mere formalities dictated by the Constitution, or are they something more?

Wrap-up 10 minutes

Once electoral votes are counted in Congress, the President-Elect does not automatically assume his office. He must first take the oath of office. Have students write a one paragraph journal entry answering the question: Why does the President take an oath to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States?"

Homework

A. Have students watch President Obama's Inaugural Address. After the speech, a transcript will be available at www.BillofRightsInstitute.org/Today. While they watch, students should complete Handout D: Inaugural Address Viewing Guide. They should use their copies of the Constitution to complete the chart and the critical thinking questions. See the Answer Key for suggested responses.

B. Have students create a poster in which they represent President Obama’s speech using words of differing sizes to emphasize their relative importance in the speech. For example, if President Obama uses a certain word or refers to certain idea multiple times, that word/phrase would appear much bigger than a word or idea he referred to infrequently or not at all.

C. Have students write a letter to a friend (real or imaginary) in another country which does not hold democratic elections to elect leaders. In their letters, they should describe some of the procedures that accompany the transfer of power in the US, including Inauguration Day ceremonies.

Extension

After analyzing President Obama’s Inaugural Address, have students select one other Inaugural Address from history to compare/contrast with Obama’s. Students can select a speech at: http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches. In a brief PowerPoint presentation, students should discuss how the two speeches compare with respect to:

- Topics discussed
- Constitution references
- Tone, e.g. somber, upbeat, pessimistic, cheerful
- Diction, e.g. sentence length, difficult of vocabulary
- Delivery—did most people read the speech in newspapers, or did they also listen and watch on radio/TV?
### Handout A

**Test Your Knowledge of Inauguration Day**

**Directions:** Fill in the blanks with the correct information.

1. The ___________________ administers the oath of office.
2. President ______________ was first to take the oath of office in Washington, D.C.
3. The President is sworn in on the steps of the ____________ building.
4. President ___________ started the tradition of walking from the Capitol to the White House.
5. The ___________ Amendment changed Inauguration Day from March 4 to January 20.
6. The longest inaugural address (90 minutes) in American history was given by President ________________, who died a month after giving the speech in wet, frigid weather.
7. The first official Inaugural Ball was held in honor of President _____________.
8. President ________________’s Inaugural Parade included cowboys, miners and his old Spanish-American war Calvary regiment, the Rough Riders, on horseback.
9. The first President who was not born a British subject was _________________.
10. African Americans first participated in an Inaugural Parade in _______; women first participated in _______.

**Answers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Office Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Madison</td>
<td>Martin Van Buren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Jefferson</td>
<td>Chief Justice of the Supreme Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865; 1917</td>
<td>William Henry Harrison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy Carter</td>
<td>Theodore Roosevelt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twentieth</td>
<td>U.S. Capitol</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Critical Thinking Questions**

1. Why is the Vice President sworn in before the President?
2. Why are the Vice President and President sworn in at noon?
3. Article II states that the President shall “take care that the laws be faithfully executed.” How does this relate to the oath of office?
4. Examine 1-10 above. Which of these are required by the Constitution? Which by federal law and/or state law? Which are not legally required, but traditional?
Directions: Read each quotation from an Inaugural Address and decide which President said it.

1. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate. …Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. …And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.

2. The propitious smiles of Heaven, can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained. …The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the Republican model of Government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.

3. We can not finance the country, we can not improve social conditions, through any system of injustice, even if we attempt to inflict it upon the rich. …The wise and correct course to follow in taxation and all other economic legislation is not to destroy those who have already secured success but to create conditions under which every one will have a better chance to be successful. …It is not property but the right to hold property, both great and small, which our Constitution guarantees.

4. With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

5. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

Possible Answers

A. Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933
B. John F. Kennedy, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961
C. Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865
D. Calvin Coolidge, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925
E. George Washington, First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789
THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF POWER

Countdown to Inauguration Day
The Inaugural Day activities are the culmination of procedures required by the Constitution, federal and state laws, and historical traditions.

November 4, 2008: General Election
With some states having held early voting, all states held elections for President and Vice President on this date. In their respective states, citizens voted for electors, who are pledged to vote for presidential candidates. (Some states have laws regarding faithless electors—visit http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/laws.html for more info.)

Mid November - December 15, 2008
Federal law requires that states send lists of their electors and numbers of votes cast to the federal register by December 15. Lists must be authenticated by the Governor’s signature and the State seal.

December 15, 2008
Electors met in their respective states to cast their votes. No constitutional provision or Federal law requires electors to vote in accordance with the popular vote in their States. Federal law does not permit the states to choose an alternate date for the meeting of electors - it must be held on December 15, 2008.

January 8, 2009
Congress meets in joint session to count the electoral votes. The President of the Senate (the Vice President of the United States) is the presiding officer. The President and Vice President must achieve a majority of electoral votes (270) to be elected. In the absence of a majority, the House selects the President, and the Senate selects the Vice President.

Congress changed the date of the electoral vote in Congress for 2009 from January 6 to January 8. This date change is effective only for this 2008 presidential election.

January 20, 2009
As required by the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution, the outgoing President’s term ends at noon and the new President is sworn in.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration
HANDOUT D

INAUGURAL ADDRESS VIEWING GUIDE

Directions: Watch President Obama’s Inaugural Address and tally each time the President mentions each of the following documents, ideas, constitutional principles, duties of the president, or branches of government.

_____ The Constitution
_____ The Declaration of Independence
_____ The Bill of Rights
_____ Freedom
_____ Liberty
_____ Equality
_____ Limited government
_____ Federalism (powers of the national government and powers of state governments)
_____ Republican government

_____ Opportunity
_____ Individual rights
_____ Congress
_____ The Supreme Court
_____ War
_____ Foreign policy
_____ Federal budget
_____ Taxes
_____ Change
_____ Promise

After the speech:
1. How long was the speech?
2. What types of topics did he address?
3. Did President Obama use long, difficult words and phrases or easier ones? Why do you think that is?
4. After watching the speech, read a written transcript. What, if anything, seems different about reading the speech versus hearing/seeing it?
5. The official theme of the 2009 Inauguration, as chosen by the Presidential Inaugural Committee, is “Renewing America’s Promise.” What does President Obama seem to believe is America’s promise? What do you think it is?
### Directions:
After examining the Constitution and watching President Obama's Inaugural Address, complete the chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constitutional Powers of the President</th>
<th>Did President Obama refer to these powers in his Inaugural Address? If so, give examples.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veto bills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commander in Chief of the military</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appoint Supreme Court Justices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead relations with other nations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforce the law</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommend measures to Congress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Critical Thinking Questions
1. What do you think are some of President Obama's best ideas?
2. Which ideas did you disagree with?
3. Do you think any of his proposals may raise questions of constitutionality?
4. What would you say to someone who argued that the Constitution is irrelevant, and that limits on the power of government shouldn’t apply in extraordinary circumstances?
Handout A

1. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court
2. Thomas Jefferson
3. U.S. Capitol
4. Jimmy Carter
5. Twentieth
6. William Henry Harrison
7. James Madison
8. Theodore Roosevelt
9. Martin Van Buren
10. 1865; 1917

Critical Thinking Questions
1. The Vice President officially takes office first so that someone is in place to assume the President's duties in case the President were to die or become incapacitated.
2. The Twentieth Amendment states that the President and Vice President's terms end at noon on January 20.
3. The Constitution is the supreme law of the land, so the President's chief duty as enforcer of the laws is to make sure the Constitution is upheld.
4. 1—tradition; 2—n/a; 3—tradition; 4—tradition; 5—Constitutional requirement; 6—n/a; 7—tradition; 8—n/a; 9—n/a; 10—tradition.

Handout B

1. B, John F. Kennedy, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961
2. E, George Washington, First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789
3. D, Calvin Coolidge, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925
4. C, Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865
5. A, Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933

Handout D

Critical Thinking Questions
1. Accept reasoned answers.
2. Accept reasoned answers.
3. Accept reasoned answers.
4. Some students will agree with the statement. Some students will argue that every time in history has presented its own “extraordinary circumstances” and the Constitution was written to endure even in challenging times. Others will say history has shown that governments almost never give up power after having been granted (or assuming) more. They may also point out that the proper way to bring about change is through the Constitution's amendment process. If, for example, a majority of people in 3/4s of the states believe a change is warranted, the Constitution can be changed.