Washington's Inauguration

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The American colonies revolted against England's monarchic rule, declaring that governments exist to secure the equal rights of all men to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. By the consent of the governed, they established a republic—a representative democracy—where the people are sovereign and their leaders are held accountable to them. Yet the inauguration of George Washington—and those of other presidents since—is accompanied by ceremonies that might strike a democratic temperament as resembling kingly coronations. This account, written by clergyman, prolific essayist, and story-writer Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909), best known for his story "The Man without a Country,"[1] describes Washington's first inauguration, with special attention to some of its ceremonial features.

Do Washington's inaugural events seem appropriate for a democratically elected leader—a man whom we regard as, at most, first among equals? What about the reception in Trenton, with the triumphal arch and the verses sung by the young maidens? Why did Washington find that "the acclamations of the people filled my mind with sensations as painful as pleasing"? How important is "the etiquette" of the new administration, and why? Why does the form of address matter? It is reported that President Washington, ever mindful that he was establishing precedent, would, when receiving visitors, hold a hat in his left hand and keep his right hand atop a ceremonial sword at his side, to discourage anyone who might be tempted familiarly to shake his hand. Is such conduct fitting for a president of the democratic United States? If so, why?

On the fourth of March, 1789, Elbridge Gerry, who had been chosen to the Senate of the United States, wrote thus from New York to John Adams:

> My Dear Friend: I find, on inquiry, that you are elected Vice-President, having three or four times the number of votes of any other candidate. Maryland threw away their votes on Colonel Harrison, and South Carolina on Governor Rutledge, being, with some other states which were not unanimous for you, apprehensive that this was a necessary step to prevent your election to the chair. On this point they were mistaken,

[1] *Read Hale's "The Man without a Country" at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/the-man-without-a-country.*

> for the President, as I am informed from pretty good authority, has a unanimous vote. It is the universal wish of all that I have conferred with, and indeed their expectation, that both General Washington and yourself will accept; and should either refuse, it will have a very disagreeable effect. The members present met to-day in the City Hall, there being about eleven Senators and thirteen Representatives, and not constituting a quorum in either house, they adjourned till to-morrow.
>
> Mrs. Gerry and the ladies join me in sincere regards to yourself, your lady, Colonel and Mrs. Smith, and be assured I remain, etc.
>
> E. GERRY.

So slow was the movement of news in those days, and so doubtful, even after the election, were all men as to its results, Adams would not start from Braintree, his home, till he knew he was elected, nor Washington from Mt. Vernon. Charles Thompson, the Secretary of the old Congress, arrived at Mt. Vernon on the fourteenth of April and communicated to Washington the news of his election. No quorum of the House of Representatives had been formed until the first of April, nor of the Senate until the sixth. These bodies then counted the electoral vote, with the result predicted by Gerry in his letter written two days before.

Washington waited a day before starting to the seat of Government. On the sixteenth of April he started for New York. He writes in his diary:

> About ten o'clock I bade adieu to Mount Vernon, to private life and to domestic felicity; and with a mind oppressed with more anxious and painful sensations than I have words to express, set out for New York in company with Mr. Thompson and Colonel Humphries, with the best dispositions to render service to my country in obedience to its call, but with less hope of answering its expectations.

The journey began with a public dinner at Alexandria. Said the gentlemen of Alexandria in their address to him:

> Farewell! . . . Go! . . . and make a grateful people happy, a people who will be doubly grateful when they contemplate this recent sacrifice for their interest.

And Washington in his reply said:

> At my age, and in my circumstances, what prospects or advantages could I propose to myself, for embarking again on the tempestuous and uncertain ocean of public life?

The journey went on with similar interruptions. The rule so often laid down by the Virginians afterward that that is the best government which governs least, was certainly well kept until the thirteenth of April. To this hour the adventurous cyclist, stopping at some wayside inn to refresh himself, may find upon the wall the picture of the maidens and mothers of Trenton in New Jersey. Here Washington met a deputation sent to him by Congress. A triumphal arch had been erected, and a row of young girls dressed in white, a second row of ladies, and a third of their mothers, awaited him. As he passed, the girls scattered flowers, and sang the verses which Judge Marshall has preserved:

> Welcome, mighty chief, once more
> Welcome to this grateful shore;
> Now no mercenary foe
> Aims again the fatal blow—
> Aims at thee the fatal blow.
>
> Virgins fair and matrons grave,
> These thy conquering arm did save.
> Build for thee triumphal bowers,
> Strew, ye fair, his way with flowers—
> Strew your Hero's way with flowers.

His progress through New Jersey was everywhere accompanied by similar festivities—"festive illuminations, the ringing of bells, and the booming of cannon." He had written to Governor Clinton, that he hoped he might enter New York without ceremony; but this was hardly to be expected. A committee of both houses met him at Elizabethtown; he embarked in a splendid barge manned by thirteen pilots, masters of vessels, and commanded by Commodore Nicholson; other barges and boats fell in in the wake; and a nautical procession swept up the Bay of New York. On board two vessels were parties of ladies and gentlemen, who sang odes as Washington appeared. The ships in the harbor were dressed in colors and fired salutes as he passed. On landing at Murray's Wharf he was welcomed by Governor Clinton and General Knox. It is of the landing at this point that the anecdote is told that an officer asked Washington's orders, announcing himself as commanding his guard. Washington, with his ready presence of mind, begged him to follow any directions he had already received in the arrangements,

but said that for the future the affection of his fellow-citizens was all the guard that he required.

At the end of the day, in his diary, the sad man says:

> The acclamations of the people filled my mind with sensations as painful as pleasing.

It was some days before the formal inauguration. The two houses of Congress did not know by what title they should address him, and a committee had been appointed to discuss this subject. It was finally agreed that the address should be simply, "To the President of the United States"—a form which has remained to the present day.

The inauguration finally took place on the thirtieth of April.

On the thirtieth at last all things were ready, and the inauguration went forward. The place was at what they then called Federal Hall, in New York, and Chancellor Livingstone administered the oath:

> I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully administer and 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.

A salute of thirteen guns followed, amid the cheers of thousands of people. Washington then delivered his inaugural speech to both houses in the Senate Chamber. After this ceremony he walked to St. Paul's Church, where the Bishop of New York read prayers. Maclay, who was a Senator in the first Congress, says:

> He was agitated and embarrassed more than he ever was by the leveled cannon or pointed musket. He trembled and several times could scarce make out to read his speech, though it must be supposed he had often read it before.

Fisher Ames says:

> He addressed the two houses in the Senate Chamber. It was a very touching scene, and quite of a solemn kind. His aspect, grave almost to sadness, his modesty, actually shaking, his voice deep, a little tremulous, and so low as to call for close attention.

John Adams had taken his place as President of the Senate two day before. As he did not always in after life speak any too cordially of Washington, it is worth noting that at this critical period he said that he congratulated the people of America on "the prospect of an executive authority in the hands of one whose portrait I shall not pretend to draw. . . . Were I blessed with powers to do justice to his character, it would be impossible to increase the confidence, or affection of his country, or make the smallest addition to his glory. This can only be effected by a discharge of the present exalted trust on the same principles, with the same abilities and virtues which have uniformly appeared in all his former conduct, public or private. May I nevertheless be indulged to inquire, if we look over the catalogue of the first magistrates of nations, whether they have been denominated presidents or consuls, kings or princes, where shall we find one whose commanding talents and virtues, whose overruling good fortune, have so completely united all hearts and voices in his favor? who enjoyed the esteem and admiration of foreign nations and fellow-citizens with equal unanimity? Qualities so uncommon are no common blessings to the country that possesses them. By these great qualities and their benign effects has Providence marked out the head of this Nation, with a hand so distinctly visible as to have been seen by all men, and mistaken by none."

Whether on this occasion, there were too much ceremony was a question discussed at the time, in connection with the heated discussion as to the etiquette of the new Administration. There is a correspondence between Washington and an old friend, Stuart, of Virginia, who had told him that the people of that State accused him of "regal manners."

Washington's reply, with his usual good sense, answers a good many questions which are bruited to-day. Dr. Albert Shaw, in the *Review of Reviews*, once brought some of these questions forward. "How far is it right for the people of a free state to kill their magistrates by inches?" This is the question reduced to its simplest terms. It was generally understood, when the late Governor Greenhalge died in Massachusetts, that his career, invaluable to the people of that State and of the country, had been cut off untimely by a certain etiquette, which obtains in Massachusetts, that whenever there is a public dinner the Governor of the State must be present and make a speech. With reference to a somewhat similar notion, Washington says:

> Before the present custom was established I was unable to attend to any business whatever. Gentlemen, consulting their own convenience rather than mine, were calling from the time I rose from breakfast, often before, until I sat down to dinner.

To please everybody was impossible. I therefore adopted that line of conduct which combined public advantage with private convenience.

In another place he says:

Had I not adopted the principle of returning no visits, I should have been unable to have attended to any sort of business.

In contrast with the simple ceremonies at which a sensitive democracy took exception, we find now that a great nation considers no honors too profuse for the ceremonies which attend the inauguration of its chief magistrate.