

Washington Post

Trump Rattles the Establishment with a Populist Inaugural Address True to his Campaign

By Dan Balz

January 20, 2017

After a campaign unlike any other, President Trump delivered an inaugural address unlike virtually any other, a populist declaration aimed directly at the power structure of Washington along with a determined expression of the “America First” message that carried him to the White House.

With members of Congress — embodiments of the elite he ran against — sitting directly behind him, the new president put everyone in power on notice, Republicans and Democrats alike. He spoke not as the leader of his party or as a politician with a conventional ideological agenda. Instead he spoke as the outsider he is, a businessman-turned-politician who is now a president with the power to set his own agenda.

The last time there was this kind of brewing insurgency visited on Washington was when Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980. His victory ratified the ascendance of a new conservatism that had reached critical mass. In his inaugural address, Reagan, too, spoke of a country in crisis, an economy in disrepair and of the need for urgent action. His solution was to call for an assault on the size and scope of the federal government. “Government is not the solution,” he memorably declared. “Government is the problem.”

Trump did not attack government. Instead he attacked the establishment, those who he said had taken advantage of their power in government at the expense of the people. The priorities he highlighted on Friday were the same as those he championed during the campaign, some traditionally Republican but others that would challenge the orthodoxy of the party whose nomination he seized through a skillfully hostile takeover.

Republicans have been gleeful at the prospect of having full control of the executive and legislative branches of government and, therefore, the power to try to enact a conservative agenda that would undo as much of what President Barack Obama did as possible.

Perhaps they will get their wish, but Trump did not speak Friday as a conventional Republican. He spoke as Donald Trump, who defied conventions to capture the

Republican nomination and the White House. He promised a massive infrastructure program. He pledged policies on trade, taxes, immigration and foreign policy that would benefit American workers above all others. Notably, he did not mention nominating conservative justices to the Supreme Court or repealing the Affordable Care Act, the overriding priority of many Republicans and a goal that he and Vice President Pence have said they share.

[Trump's speech was a sharp break with the past]

The irony of Trump's message, of course, is that as he has begun to put his government together, he has leaned heavily on people who would seem to fit the mold of those he attacked, men and women of wealth and privilege, corporate chieftains and Wall Street figures — although some of those he has recruited hold views on issues such as trade that conform to those of the new president. The power struggle ahead will test both his convictions and his resolve.

Inaugural addresses are often vehicles for attempts at soaring rhetoric. Trump's was notable for the opposite. In the same direct and plain-spoken language he used from the day he first announced his candidacy, Trump put himself on the side of all those with a grievance toward Washington, who bear resentment toward the elites and who are looking to him to turn the capital on its head and the country inward.

The language of Trump's speech was stark and often dark, similar in tone to the address he delivered when he accepted the Republican nomination this past summer in Cleveland. He described a country of shuttered and rusted factories, rampant crime, neighborhoods infested with gangs and drugs. He decried the damage to middle-class families by policies that he said took their wealth and spread it abroad.

The speech probably will be remembered most for its tone and especially for two words that summed up the portrait of the nation Trump vowed to turn around: "American carnage." Trump said he would govern with all Americans in mind, but he directed his words mostly at the tens of millions of people who heard his call during the campaign and responded. His election, he said, means that "the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer. Everyone is listening to you now."

The biggest question ahead of Trump's speech was whether he would use the occasion as a way to bring a divided country together, to speak in the language of healing and reconciliation after one of the harshest and most negative campaigns in recent memory. He had sounded that theme on the night he won the presidency but only occasionally during the transition, seeming to prefer counterpunching against his rivals and critics with sharp-edged tweets rather than trying to reach out to them.

In his inaugural address, there were words and phrases that spoke to the need to unify a divided country. He quoted the Bible: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live in unity.” He said that a renewal of patriotism will encourage “loyalty to one another.” He said, “We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny.” He said the oath he had taken on the Capitol’s West Front was meant as an “allegiance to all Americans.”

[The world watches, listens to Trump and responds with dismay]

As with all new presidents, he was gracious to his predecessor. He thanked Obama and former first lady Michelle Obama for being “magnificent” through the transition.

Hillary Clinton, who sat with her husband, former president Bill Clinton, only a few feet from Trump, looked solemn as her former rival took the reins of power, a moment that she and most of her followers never believed could happen. The demonstrations on the streets of Washington on Friday, the women’s march scheduled for Saturday and the relatively smaller crowd on the Mall all underscored the continuing divisions and the resistance he faces as he begins to govern.

His remarks about foreign policy were rather briefer than those in some previous inaugural addresses and notable for the tone he struck. He said throughout the campaign that Americans had been played for suckers by other nations and repeated that assessment Friday. “We’ve made other countries rich while the wealth, strength and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon,” he said.

He laid out a bill of particulars: policies that he said had enriched foreign industries at the expense of American companies, that subsidized armies around the world at the expense of the U.S. military, that defended borders around the world “while refusing to defend our own.”

Some of what he said was more opaque and only will become clearer in time. The speech seemed to suggest that the kind of leadership long expected of the United States by other nations would not necessarily guide his decision-making. His priority, he said, would be to take care of problems at home, not to solve the world’s ills.

All countries, he said, should be free to act in their own interests, and he made clear that his interest could result in a more insular approach than many of his predecessors. Was that a description of his America First approach or a signal to others — beginning with Russia — that the United States would not intercede in disputes elsewhere?

He pledged to reinforce old alliances, despite repeated denigrations of NATO over many months, but he also pledged to form new ones with the goal of destroying the Islamic State. That, too, appeared to be aimed at the Russians, who already have invited his administration to take part in upcoming talks on Syria.

The conundrum with the new president is that words don't always matter. He can talk one way one day and a different way another. Only when he begins to take action will it become apparent how faithful his policies are to the rhetoric of his inaugural address.

The other unknown is how effective he will be in leveraging the power of the presidency to get his way. He will meet resistance from many places, from Democrats on much of what he wants to do, from Republicans on some of his priorities that counteract conservative principles, and from a significant swath of the public that has yet to accept him as their president. But the message of his inaugural address was clear: If he begins to get his way, Washington and much else will change and change dramatically.

Source: washingtonpost.com