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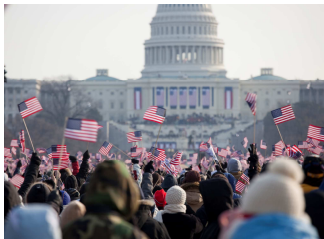
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## MONDAY WITNESS:

### Inauguration Day – January 20, 2009

Andrew Updegrove

*I ask you to share with me today the majesty of this moment. In the orderly transfer of power, we celebrate the unity that keeps us free. Each moment in history is a fleeting time, precious and unique. But some stand out as moments of beginning, in which courses are set that shape decades or centuries. This can be such a moment.*



When I was much younger, still in school, I was fortunate enough to receive a ticket to a Presidential inauguration. It was a good ticket, allowing me to stand not a hundred yards from the podium where the new president would stand as first he was sworn in, and then as he delivered his inaugural address.

Then, as now, it was a time of uncertainty, with wars both cold and hot raising tensions internationally and inflaming passions at home. The campaign just ended had been divisive, as had the primaries preceding it. There was much to weigh down the shoulders of a new president as he waited to take his oath of office, and many reasons to doubt his ability to deliver on the vision for the future that he would share.

The address that I heard that day was eloquent and high-minded. In it the new President asked:

*What kind of nation we will be, what kind of world we will live in, whether we shape the future in the image of our hopes, is ours to determine by our actions and our choices....If we succeed, generations to come will say of us now living that we mastered our moment, that we helped make the world safe for mankind. This is our summons to greatness. I believe the American people are ready to answer this call.*

As I recall it, the day was gray, with lowering clouds and a threat of rain, matching the national mood that it would be the new President's task to lift. Underscoring

the uncertainties of the day, platoons of armed National Guards stood at parade rest every fifty yards along the iron fence that surrounded us, as we faced the East Portico of the Capitol, where inaugurations were then held. At the same interval atop every building with a sight line of the podium stood a sharpshooter, scanning the crowd. Above, helicopters criss-crossed the sky.

It was, after all, a time not only a time of war abroad, but of unrest and assassinations at home. The President who spoke that day had promised to "bring us together," and the need to achieve that goal was great, both politically as well as socially. His predecessor had left office with abysmal approval ratings, dragged down by a war that had overshadowed all of the great hopes he had nurtured, and his successes as well. A substantial percentage of the electorate could not wait to witness his departure.

The electorate was, in a word, exhausted, and the need to restore unity great. Addressing this somber truth, this is what he said:

*The simple things are the ones most needed today if we are to surmount what divides us, and cement what unites us. To lower our voices would be a simple thing. In these difficult years, America has suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading. We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another—until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices.*

Then, as now, the contrasts that day were stark - between the opportunity for the new President to achieve grand results, and the certainty that, almost immediately, events and forces as yet unknown would inevitably work to thwart him. Would he be able to rise to the challenge? Would he have within him the force of character, the reserves of strength and dispassionate judgment to hold true to his purpose, and deliver upon the hopes of those that had elected him? Would he even remember those promises, and remain true to those hopes? Or would he allow himself to be distracted and seduced by the trappings of power? This is what he said:

*For its part, government will listen. We will strive to listen in new ways—to the voices of quiet anguish, the voices that speak without words, the voices of the heart—to the injured voices, the anxious voices, the voices that have despaired of being heard. Those who have been left out, we will try to bring in. Those left behind, we will help to catch up. For all of our people, we will set as our goal the decent order that makes progress possible and our lives secure.*

There was, of course, no way to tell that day whether these promises would be kept. Only the slow, day by day unwinding of a new administration would reveal whether this leader would rise to the challenge, and not succumb to the centripetal forces of politics that would constantly stand in the way of achieving these high ideal. Of course, he promised that he would stand fast:

*As we reach toward our hopes, our task is to build on what has gone before—not turning away from the old, but turning toward the new. In this past third of a century, government has passed more laws, spent more money, initiated more programs, than in all our previous history. In pursuing our goals of full employment, better housing, excellence in education; in rebuilding our cities and improving our rural areas; in protecting our environment and enhancing the quality of life—in all these and more, we will and must press urgently forward.*

As importantly, I wondered, would he be able to inspire the nation, to gather not only the political support of the electorate but also to recruit its active assistance in doing what needed to be done? Too many Americans had become jaded or cynical, too demoralized to even make their voices heard. To them, he said:

*Our greatest need now is to reach beyond government, and to enlist the legions of the concerned and the committed. What has to be done, has to be done by government and people together or it will not be done at all. The lesson of past agony is that without the people we can do nothing; with the people we can do everything.*

Of course, in those days, issues of domestic racial and social injustice were even more urgent. Most of the post World War II laws enacted and social programs deployed to address those concerns had either just been created or lay still in the future. The urgency to move forward in these areas was felt palpably by millions of Americans on a daily basis. Of this crisis, he said:

*This means black and white together, as one nation, not two. The laws have caught up with our conscience. What remains is to give life to what is in the law: to ensure at last that as all are born equal in dignity before God, all are born equal in dignity before man.*

Internationally, it was the age of the "Ugly American." In many quarters, the United States was regarded as arrogant and indifferent, too often concerned only with its own well being and self-interest. In the eyes of many in the first world and third world alike, we were insensitive to the cultures and callous to the concerns of others, unable to recognize or appreciate the realities of those different from ourselves. And locked in the embrace of an enduring Cold War, we viewed every nation not as a potential ally, but as yet another battleground upon which a proxy war for hearts and minds must be won in a global war of ideologies. That day, the new President pledged himself to bring change. He said:

*As we learn to go forward together at home, let us also seek to go forward together with all mankind. Let us take as our goal: where peace is unknown, make it welcome; where peace is fragile, make it strong; where peace is temporary, make it permanent. After a period of confrontation, we are entering an era of negotiation. Let all nations know that during this administration our lines of communication will be open. We seek an open world—open to ideas, open to the exchange of goods and people—a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation. We cannot*

*expect to make everyone our friend, but we can try to make no one our enemy....*

All of these concerns, and more, were in the air that inauguration day of so long ago. And all of the hopes of those both present and at home, both in this country and of many abroad, were, for that moment and on that day, invested in the man that stood at the podium, hand on bible, assuming the awesome duties of the U.S. presidency. He closed his inaugural address with these words:

*We have endured a long night of the American spirit. But as our eyes catch the dimness of the first rays of dawn, let us not curse the remaining dark. Let us gather the light. Our destiny offers, not the cup of despair, but the chalice of opportunity. So let us seize it, not in fear, but in gladness—and, "riders on the earth together," let us go forward, firm in our faith, steadfast in our purpose, cautious of the dangers; but sustained by our confidence in the will of God and the promise of man.*

To me, the inspiring words quoted above sound as if they could have been spoken by Barack Obama. I expect - and indeed hope - that what we hear today will be much the same. Sadly, though, the day that I attended the inauguration was January 20, 1969, exactly 40 years ago today. And the man that gave the speech was Richard M. Nixon, about to begin his first term in the White House.

On that gray and threatening day lay the prospect of both endless promise and depths of danger too awful to contemplate. Had Nixon been true to the vision he shared that day, had he been able to find within himself the strength of character and the clear and selfless vision that the tasks at hand demanded, all could have been so very different.

Like all Americans, as well as many people around the world, I will be listening to the inaugural speech of Barack Obama today with the greatest of anticipation and hope. Four decades ago, everyone hoped that Richard Nixon would succeed, but few that had followed his career were inspired to believe that day that he would succeed.

As then, our times today are dark, and the way ahead is unclear. But unlike those dark days of the 1960s, this is a time of true celebration and genuine inspiration. Not because the times are less troubling, but because the President elect is less troubled. Unlike the paranoid and conflicted Nixon, Barack Obama seems at ease with himself, and projects an ability to selflessly lead. Never before in my lifetime has there been such a wave of hope converging upon a single leader, nor such a confluence of goodwill from all sides.

When the crowds disperse from the Capitol today, the hopes and dreams of millions will be left on the slender shoulders of this largely untested President. He will carry those burdens every day of his presidency, and their weight will be great.

Whether Barack Obama will be able to maintain the clarity of vision and calmness of spirit that elevated him above the other candidates remains to be seen. Many of his most talented predecessors have allowed themselves to be dragged down by

events, enmired in crises, or embroiled in scandals. The odds against his success will be great as well.

But there is much about the man that promises well. During the difficult days that are sure to lie ahead, perhaps it will help Mr. Obama if he reads his own inaugural address from time to time. There he may find what it takes to keep his compass true, and his convictions strong.

Like so many others, my hopes and dreams and prayers for his success - and ours - will be with him.

*You can read the full text, and hear Nixon deliver his first inaugural address [here](#). A video of Obama's inaugural speech can be viewed and heard [here](#).*

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