

Appearance of military officers during Trump's inaugural address still unexplained

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A strange and disturbing sequence took place behind President Donald Trump as he delivered his inaugural address Friday, which has gone virtually without comment in the news media.

Early in his address, ten military officers walked up and stood behind the president so they would prominently appear with Trump in the camera shots beamed across the US and the world. After 45 seconds, a Marine officer prompts the sailors and soldiers to leave, and they walk away.

The unusual incident prompted two comments during the *New York Times* live blog of the address. Jon Meacham, a presidential historian and the current executive editor at publisher Random House wrote, “The military guard behind him seems unusual; am I right?”

Maggie Haberman, the *New York Times* White House correspondent, responded, “Yes, and they have dispersed, but was it because it was raining?”

Meacham is presumably a well-informed commentator on inaugural protocol, having written a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Andrew Jackson in 2009 and a 2012 biography of Thomas Jefferson. However, the *Times*, the *Washington Post* and other major dailies and news networks never commented on the event further. The only mention of it was in the celebrity gossip web site *TMZ* and in the *Daily Mail* in the United Kingdom.

The innocent explanation about protecting the president and his guests from the light drizzle does not seem credible. While the first Air Force officer comes down with an umbrella in hand at one minute into the speech, the other officers who appear 16 seconds later have nothing in their hands. What happened during that 16 seconds was not seen by most viewers because most networks cut away from Trump to view former

President Obama nod approvingly as Trump praises Barack and Michelle Obama for “their gracious aid during this transition.”

However, a more distant camera shot available on the web site of *USA Today* provides more detail. At one minute and 16 seconds into the speech, Trump turns around, at which point two marine sentries behind him open the doors of the west side of the capitol building to allow the group of 10 officers to walk down the steps to stand directly behind Trump.

The group, consisting of mostly junior officers along with captains and higher-ranking officers from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps, appeared just as Trump was saying, “Today’s ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another—but we are transferring power from Washington, DC, and giving it back to you, the American People.”

“For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost.”

At that point, the Marine officer tells the officers to disperse.

In its report, *TMZ* wrote, “Donald Trump’s inaugural speech did not go off without a hitch—there was a clear fumble by the military—but everyone’s clammed up.” It notes that the officers “stand motionless for 40 seconds when another man in uniform appears, clearly whispers something to the effect of, ‘We gotta get outta here STAT [as soon as possible],’ and they quickly leave.

“We’ve made a ton of calls to the military and no one’s giving us an answer. Several of the people we spoke with say it was clearly a misstep for the guys to come out, but they won’t say how it happened.

“One of the last people we spoke with simply said, “No one’s saying anything.””

The *Daily Mail* wrote, “The unprecedented move saw military soldiers suddenly walk up unannounced behind the recently-pronounced US President Donald Trump.

“The President had just begun his address when several members of the armed forces in uniform walked up behind him and stood there stoically. Viewers could have gotten the impression that all was going as planned, if not for the appearance of an extra man in uniform. That man seemed to tell the soldiers something, prompting them to leave before the end of the speech.

“Trump didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary and carried on with his address.”

One explanation is that the prominent presence of the military was meant as a signal to Trump’s political enemies—both within the state and more broadly among the masses of people in the US and around the world opposing him—that he has the Pentagon and US military machine at his disposal.

According to the *Huffington Post*, a member of Trump’s transition team wanted to have tanks and missile launchers in the inaugural parade. “They were legit thinking Red Square/North Korea-style parade,” a source involved in inaugural planning told the *Huffington Post*, referring to massive military parades in Moscow and Pyongyang, typically seen as an aggressive display of muscle-flexing.

The military turned down the request, the *Huffington Post* said, because “Some were concerned about the optics of having tanks and missile launchers rolling down Pennsylvania Avenue. But they also worried that the tanks, which often weigh over 100,000 pounds, would destroy the roads. ‘I could absolutely see structural support being a reason [not to use tanks],’ a Department of Defense official said. ‘D.C. is built on a swamp to begin with.’”

The ultranationalist and militarist speech—now broadly acknowledged to have been written by Trump’s fascistic chief strategist Steve Bannon and senior advisor Stephen Miller—included threats against “radical Islam” and virtually the entire world. He denounced those who had “depleted our military” and issued a chilling threat against political dissent, saying, “At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America, and through our

loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other.” He added, “There should be no fear... We will be protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement and, most importantly, we are protected by God.”

Trump has sought to build up support in the military ranks, bringing ex-generals into his cabinet and calling for a sharp expansion of military spending—to be paid for through slashing social spending—an expansion of troop levels and increase of the Navy fleet from its current 274 ships to 350.

Minutes after being sworn in at the Capitol, Trump went to the President’s Room to sign a series of papers, including legislation cleared by Congress last week that provides a waiver for General James N. Mattis from a legal requirement that military officers wait seven years before serving as defense secretary.



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