

# Biden's inaugural address: Banality and empty abstractions to cover over reality

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President Joseph Biden's inaugural address yesterday was significant above all for its banality. Amidst an unprecedented political, social and economic crisis of the entire capitalist order, Biden delivered remarks filled with clichés, incoherent non sequiturs and the emptiest of abstractions.

One would not, of course, expect Biden to deliver a socialist speech. He is a capitalist politician assuming the position of "commander-in-chief" of the most powerful imperialist country. However, in the tradition of American politics, the inaugural address of the incoming president used to be an occasion for speaking in some form to the political situation and the policy of the incoming administration.

Over the past half century, the content of the ritual has been increasingly hollowed out. Biden yesterday took this tendency to a new level—or, rather, to new depths.

Let us consider some passages, in sequential order:

Today we celebrate the triumph, not of a candidate, but of a cause, the cause of democracy. The people, the will of the people, has been heard, and the will of the people has been heeded. We've learned again that democracy is precious. Democracy is fragile. And at this hour, my friends: Democracy has prevailed! So now, on this hallowed ground, where just a few days ago violence sought to shake the Capitol's very foundation, we come together as one nation, under God, indivisible, to carry out the peaceful transfer of power as we have for more than two centuries.

Here, Biden acknowledged, in the most oblique way possible, that the entire political system in the United States came close to being overthrown two weeks ago. Trump, whom Biden did not name once in the entire speech, had been engaged in a systematic campaign to repudiate the results of the election and overthrow the Constitution. This culminated in the storming of the US Capitol building by a mob of fascists, incited by the president, aimed at blocking the certification of Biden's Electoral College victory.

Who was responsible for this insurrection, what were its aims, and what lessons must be drawn? Biden did not pose, let alone answer, these questions.

Biden transformed the attempted coup into the abstract operation of disembodied "violence." It was, according to Biden, "violence" that stormed the Capitol. But "violence" did not storm the Capitol, people did, and they had the political backing and support of other people.

Indeed, many of those who "came together" in the inauguration

ceremony itself, including Senator Mitch McConnell, who was Senate majority leader under Trump, and other top leaders of the Republican Party provided the political justification for the attempted coup by promoting the lie that the outcome of the election was in doubt, even rigged. These individuals, Biden's "Republican colleagues," were included among his honored guests.

Few people in our nation's history have been more challenged or found a time more challenging or difficult than the time we're in now. Once-in-a-century virus that silently stalks the country. It's taken as many lives in one year as America lost in all of World War II. Millions of jobs have been lost, hundreds of thousands of businesses closed...

Similarly, Biden presents the pandemic entirely in terms of a virus that is "silently" stalking the country. How is it, however, that the United States has been so catastrophically incapable of stopping its spread and saving lives? What are the policies that prevented the containment of the disease, and who is responsible for implementing them? Rather than attempting to address these questions, Biden offered nothing more than what seemed to be a hastily improvised moment of silence.

Biden did not even suggest that the previous administration, let alone broader social forces, bore any responsibility for the disaster. He did not note that the principal demand of the fascists mobilized to overturn the election was a rejection of any restraints on the spread of the disease. He did not call attention to the fact that these same forces, financed and encouraged by factions of the financial oligarchy, sought to kidnap and execute the Democratic governors of Michigan and other states for imposing limited lockdown measures.

To overcome these challenges, to restore the soul and secure the future of America, requires so much more than words. It requires the most elusive of all things in a democracy: unity. Unity. In another January, on New Year's Day in 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. When he put pen to paper, the president said, and I quote, "If my name ever goes down into history, it'll be for this act, and my whole soul is in it."

Now we arrive at the central empty abstraction of Biden's entire

speech, “unity.” Who is being united? And on what basis and policy? “To overcome these challenges,” including the pandemic, would logically require implementing a policy different from what has been implemented over the past year. This would require not “unity,” but conflict. Those responsible for implementing the policy would have to be opposed and defeated.

As for the reference to Lincoln, it is nonsensical. Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation as part of a monumental struggle to vanquish the power of the Southern slavocracy through force of arms. The abolition of slavery was achieved not through unity, but through a bloody civil war.

Today, on this January day, my whole soul is in this: bringing America together, uniting our people, uniting our nation. And I ask every American to join me in this cause. Uniting to fight the foes we face: anger, resentment and hatred, extremism, lawlessness, violence, disease, joblessness and hopelessness.

As in the case of “violence” storming the Capitol, Biden here reduces all problems to concepts devoid of social content. Everything is jumbled together—“hatred,” which is a subjective emotion, with “joblessness,” a socio-economic condition, and “disease,” a specific biological phenomenon. None of these “foes” are connected to any individuals or socio-economic entities and interests. Where does “extremism” come from? Why are people angry? Who and what is responsible for joblessness?

Everything supposedly takes place in the realm of the spirit, the movement of disembodied forces. Because no one is responsible, because the “foes” have no social content, it is possible for everyone to unite in a struggle against them. Since the problems are abstract and without content, the solution requires no change in policy. All that is required is “unity.”

History, faith, and reason show the way, the way of unity. We can see each other, not as adversaries, but as neighbors. We can treat each other with dignity and respect. We can join forces, stop the shouting, and lower the temperature.

In his drive to find the “way of unity,” Biden even manages to form a union out of two contradictory approaches to the world, faith and reason. The former is based on unquestioned acceptance of dogma, and the latter on scientific investigation. Nevertheless, with their assistance, along with “history,” everyone will be able to live in peace and harmony, the billionaires and the poor, Wall Street speculators and the unemployed.

There is currently a strike underway in New York City, pitting 1,400 Hunts Point warehouse workers against a company that has rejected their demand for a \$1 per hour increase in wages, as they continue to work amidst the raging pandemic. How does this factor into Biden’s “way of unity”?

What emerges from this and other passages in the speech is that Biden’s remarks are not addressed to the American people. He is speaking to those who were with him at the ceremony, in particular, the Republican Party and its leaders. The fifty-year veteran of the

Senate lives in this universe. The “unity” he wants is a unity of the state, of the representatives of the ruling class as it confronts a series of catastrophic problems, above all, the growth of social anger and opposition from below.

Finally, Biden concludes his remarks:

My fellow Americans, I close the day where I began, with a sacred oath before God and all of you. I give you my word, I will always level with you. I will defend the Constitution. I’ll defend our democracy. I’ll defend America. And I’ll give all, all of you, keep everything I do in your service, thinking not of power but of possibilities, not of personal injuries but the public good. And together, we shall write an American story of hope, not fear. Of unity, not division. Of light, not darkness. A story of decency and dignity, love and healing, greatness and goodness.

The conclusion of the speech brings together in a grand finale all of Biden’s empty abstractions, which are placed in conflict in a Manichean religious struggle. Through “hope,” “light” and, above all “unity,” evil will be vanquished and goodness and love will triumph.

The poverty of Biden’s remarks is not just an intellectual failure. He knows full well that any hint at a significant shift in policy would spark a sell-off on the markets. As it was, the markets rose during his speech. In the minds of the political establishment and the media, this is the main factor in concluding that the speech was a great success. They were all somewhat richer at its conclusion than at its beginning.

Moreover, the political representatives of the ruling class, and particularly the Democratic Party, are acutely aware of the fact that any serious examination of reality—including the political and social forces behind the rise of fascism in America and the bipartisan policies that have produced the catastrophic spread of the pandemic—risks a social and political explosion that will threaten the entire capitalist order.

Biden’s appeal to “unity” is, ultimately, a desperate effort to cover over a massive social chasm. This chasm does not separate the Democrats from the Republicans, who, whatever their differences, both represent the same oligarchy. It is the unbridgeable division between the capitalist ruling elite, on the one hand, and the working class, on the other. It is the fear of the open eruption of this conflict that drives Biden to his abstractions.



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