



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 26: Inaugural Addresses

****Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.****

Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Stephen Browne
Theon Hill
John Murphy
Allison Prasch

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Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Hello, I'm Trevor Perry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association and I'm your host on *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. Thanks for joining us for today's episode.

CSPAN Audio clip - Joe Biden:

Chief Justice Roberts, Vice President Harris, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, Leader McConnell, Vice President Pence and my distinguished guests and my fellow Americans, this is America's day. This is democracy's day. A day of history and hope, of renewal and resolve. Through a crucible for the ages, America has been tested anew, and America has risen to the challenge.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Hi, listeners. Welcome again to *Communication Matters*. Just over a week ago, President Joe Biden—that's a shocking thing to say—but President Joe Biden delivered his inaugural address. And since George Washington's first inaugural address in 1789, these speeches have offered incoming presidents the opportunity to set the tone for their administration and to do a whole lot of other things. And today's episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*, addresses some of these historical inaugural addresses that some of us are familiar with and some of us may not know quite as well as well as President Biden's recent address and in a side note, Kamala Harris' historic swearing-in. So joining me today are four scholars of presidential rhetoric and four friends of the podcast and of NCA. And I'm so glad you all could join us today. Stephen Browne, Theon Hill, John Murphy, and Allison Prasch.



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Now before I begin let me tell you a little bit about our guests. Stephen Browne is a professor of communication, arts, and sciences at The Pennsylvania State University. Browne is a rhetorical critic with particular interests in public memory, social movements, and early America. Browne is the author of many books including *The Ides of War: George Washington and the Newberg Crisis*, *Jefferson's Call for Nationhood: The First Inaugural Address*, and most recently, *The First Inauguration: George Washington and the Invention of the Republic*. Browne has been named an NCA distinguished scholar and was the recipient of NCA's Diamond Anniversary Book Award and our Karl Wallace Memorial Award. Hi, Steve. Thanks for joining us today.

Stephen Brown:

Great to be here. Thank you.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Theon Hill is an associate professor of communication at Wheaton College. Hill's research explores African-American rhetoric, race and ethnicity, the Obama presidency, and political rhetoric, specifically the relationship between rhetoric and social change related to race, culture, and American politics. Dr. Hill has examined the role of radical rhetoric in the crucial form of civic engagement and public advocacy. He's also written on Barack Obama's 2007 campaign speech in Selma, Alabama as well as on Christian identity in the United States and American civil religion including a chapter in the edited volume, *The Rhetoric of American Civil Religion: Symbols, Sinners, and Saints*. Hi, Theon. Thanks for joining us today.

Theon Hill:

It's a blessing to be with you.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

John Murphy is professor of communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Murphy studies the history of American public address and political rhetoric and is the author of *John F. Kennedy and the Liberal Persuasion: A Critique of President Kennedy's Greatest Speeches and the Liberal Tradition*. Murphy studies the evolution of political language and has also written on Robert Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Martin Luther King, Jr., George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Murphy's commentary on the presidency presidential rhetoric regularly appears in media outlets such as *The Conversation*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*. He recently published a ranking of inaugural addresses in *The Hometown Paper in Urbana-Champaign*. Hi, John. Thanks for being on *Communication Matters*.

John Murphy:

Hi, Trevor. Very happy to be here.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

And Allison Prash is an assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Prash is a scholar of U.S. presidential rhetoric, foreign policy in the Cold War and has authored book chapters and journal articles analyzing the rhetoric of Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama. Currently, Prash is working on a book project titled *The Global Rhetorical Presidency: Cold War Rhetoric on the World Stage* which examines how U.S. presidents use their rhetoric overseas to extend the United States' global influence, expand the reach of presidential power and foreign affairs, and bolster their own image at home and abroad. An ambitious project to be sure. Hi, Allison. Welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Allison Prash:

Thank you so much for having me.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So Allison, we'll just start right in because you're at that point where you get to begin the conversation by talking a little bit about what inaugural addresses are supposed to do in the first place. Why do we have them? What do presidents generally hope to accomplish through them? And maybe in a Cold War sense, how have they changed? Why are we interested in inaugural addresses?

Allison Prash:

Well, historically, and one of the things that we've seen from the very beginning is this idea that the incoming president is able to use this moment to do a few things. And so traditionally, inaugural addresses will seek to unify or reunify the U.S. public after the election. It's an opportunity for the new president to remind us of shared values or inherited values in a national history. I mean it's also an opportunity for the new president to set forth specific policy proposals or things that they hope to accomplish in their new administration. And so depending on the moment in time and the context, these policies can look different. Sometimes during the Cold War, for example, oftentimes these inaugural addresses would focus a lot on the posture that the United States would take in the Cold War. But as we saw with Joe Biden, there's a lot of focus in his inaugural address in thinking about work that needs to be done at home with the U.S. public. And so that can differ depending obviously on the historical context.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Steve, I'm curious. Did Washington invent the inaugural address? I mean I'm curious historically. Why did Washington think it was necessary to give one?



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Stephen Brown:

It's a good question because it raises the prior question of why it is we have inaugural addresses to begin with. Article 2 of the United States Constitution says nothing about inaugural addresses. It does mandate what we now call State of the Union. But the short version of the answer is we have inaugural addresses because George Washington gave an inaugural address. He didn't invent them. They were provincial and colonial antecedents that come out of the English and British tradition. But it's really Washington who establishes the template. And he did it for reasons that Allison has already provided for us. I had the dubious opportunity in sitting down to write both the book on Jefferson's first inaugural and now Washington's, to sit down and read through all of the inaugurals. And to no one's surprise, but I thought it worth mentioning, that invariably, and they're going to be very different, of course, but one way or another, you're going to find at least four dimensions and all of these are sort of coded into the Washington address. And they almost follow in a predictable order. Early on, you'll see that inaugurals will include some sense that the office is greater than the person now occupying it. That's to greater or less degrees of convincingness, but it's usually there. Like Allison says, there'll always be an appeal to unity. That's often followed by a statement of quite general principles. They present themselves as nonpartisan. Wink, wink. They are, of course. But they're stated quite generally. And then usually, these inaugural addresses will conclude with an appeal to the divine. But again, it's really Washington who largely on his own decides that power needs to show itself. And I think that's one of the important legacies that we can take from this. That's a deeply republican principle that one way or another, power has to present itself to the people to whom it is accountable.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Washington didn't really like doing these things. I mean his second inaugural is still the shortest on record.

Stephen Brown:

Three sentences I think. No one would have ever mistaken Washington for Patrick Henry, and he never pretended to be. And indeed, as near as I can tell, and I'm pretty confident that the hand of James Madison is all over that first inaugural. It had gone through several drafts by others. Madison took one look at them and chucked them in the waste basket and said, I'll do this. And so it has a very strong Madisonian stamp. So the language itself is quite exquisite.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, last night during the inaugural—well, we're taping this the day after Inauguration Day just so everybody knows. So last night during the inaugural concert, President Biden gave a very short little set of remarks at the Lincoln Memorial in front of, I think in front of, maybe somebody else can correct me, but in front of the words from Lincoln's second inaugural address that are etched into the wall of the Lincoln Memorial. And I'm wondering if you all have any thoughts about



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Abraham Lincoln's inaugural address, and this unity theme that circulated with Washington and that now we're hearing renewed in 2021.

CSPAN Audio clip - Joe Biden:

Hello, all the participants at tonight's event. It's humbling to stand here in this place in front of these sacred words. Humbling out of respect to President Lincoln and the office we now share. And humbling because of you, the American people. As I said earlier today, we have learned again that democracy is precious. And because of you, democracy has prevailed. That's why Jill and I, Kamala and Doug wanted to make sure our inauguration was not about us but about you, the American people. This is a great nation. We're a good people. And to overcome the challenges in front of us requires the most elusive of all things in a democracy—unity.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

How did Lincoln handle that? How did Lincoln treat the South, for example, in his second inaugural address? Which I believe, John, you indicated was one of the top five inaugural addresses of American history. What do you think?

Stephen Brown:

I mean I think there's been some critical dispute about how Lincoln handled the South in the second inaugural address. Because we've always taken that as a unifying speech, but there have been some critics in recent years who have pointed out that throughout much of the speech, Lincoln is taking the Northern side, that he is narrating the origin and the development of the war in terms that very much indicate a Northern perspective. I think that's probably true, but I tend to think the flip side of that is Lincoln is tracing in that speech the development of the war in his audience's thought process. It's about how we have felt about the war, and he's taking us through that so that he can then resolve those feelings in the end with his famous statement about having malice toward none and charity for all. And so much as the North may have begun the war with anger, with hatred toward the South, he's going to work through those feelings so that by the end of the speech, they are not feeling malice. They are feeling charity and love. And that's what makes it such a powerful address, more like a prayer than a speech as many would say.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Also, last night in the inaugural concert, they featured quotations or clips from different inaugural addresses. Ronald Reagan's I think was cited, Ronald Reagan's first inaugural. And the young man who had the stutter I believe in New Hampshire that Joe Biden—

Stephen Brown:

Brayden Harrington.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. Had helped, gave the quotation from John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address and the famous line, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." And I thought that the young man did a great job. I mean—

Stephen Brown:

Yeah, big shout out to him. Good on him.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. He was really impressive. Why do we still remember Kennedy? How did Kennedy's make the cut, John, on the selection process by the Biden inaugural committee? And why do we keep going back to Kennedy's speech?

John Murphy:

In Biden's case, I think it's probably at least partly because he's the only other Irish Catholic to be elected to the presidency of the United States. But beyond that, I think like the other great inaugurals, Kennedy's address managed to be both timely and timeless. That is it spoke particularly to the issues of the time in a kind of modernist, eloquent language that is characteristic of the 1950s and 60s, in a kind of Lionel Trilling/Louis Menand, to name two literary critics, sort of language that people recognized and liked. And so he was very timely and spoke to the issues people felt in the moment. But there's also a strong sense of timelessness about it. It speaks to our desire to be one community, to sacrifice for our country. And that's why people still respond to that address over the years. And finally, I think in an analysis that Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson did, they pointed to the middle section of the speech where he talks about his political program and his principles as an extension of the oath of office so that the speech itself becomes a mutual covenant between all Americans, that together we pledge. Kennedy specifically said, "This much we pledge and more." And then goes on to all of the things that we pledge. And I thought of that yesterday because I think there are some real ways in which Biden too is asking—he isn't that explicit—but is asking a pledge of us to mutually covenant together, to listen to one another, to care about one another, to imagine ourselves in each other's shoes. And so I think that element of the Kennedy inaugural has carried over and strongly influenced Biden's inaugural.

Theon Hill:

John, I think especially in that point, like with the repetition around like here we stand, it's almost like summoning history to kind of guide us into the future. So—

Stephen Brown:

And I very much thought of Allison at that point obviously because he is pointing to all of the things around him so that we visualize it as we see it.



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Allison Prasch:

Well, and he's pointing, I mean in that address and also more broadly in the day of inauguration, so beyond Biden's address, one of the things that was striking to me is he begins the speech by talking about that this is democracy's moment. And to Steve's point, yes, it is an opportunity to showcase the powers of the presidency. And yet I think what Biden was doing was reminding us that no, it's an institution and not an individual because Biden is presenting himself as my inaugural address is one part of a larger inaugural moment. Because then you look at the remarkable breathtaking poem recited by Amanda Gorman, for example. You look at before the day of inauguration, that memorial to COVID victims on the National Mall. You look at him pointing to, you know, here we stand, referencing King, referencing women who were protesting for the right to vote prior to Wilson's inauguration in 1913. And then he talks about and here we stand two weeks ago in the shadow of this capital dome where a riotous mob attempted to undermine our democracy. And so I think one way we can read his speech is saying yes, it is this text but we have to consider maybe the inaugural address, this time at least, not just as a speech text but actually a longer moment that is encapsulated throughout this entire day that we could all witness as an audience.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And when you speak of witnessing and those sorts of dimensions to this inaugural day, as you say, I'm struck by the relevance of all of that to a sort of sense of American civil religion, that beginning the day with a mass at the Cathedral of Saint Matthew The Apostle I believe, which is by the way, as a side note, just across the street from the national office of NCA. We walk by it all the time. It's a wonderful place. But beginning there and then this sort of seamless transition into the places and spaces and themes of American civil religion. I know, Theon, this is a big interest of yours. There's an interesting contrast between Biden's use and sort of employment of a civil religion and civil religious themes in contrast to the appropriation of religious imagery during the insurrection on Capitol Hill on January 6th.

Theon Hill:

Well, no, I think we often talk about American civil religion, singular, and I often wonder in wake of what's happened these past weeks, should we talk about civil religions? Because these are hotly contested symbols. I mean you have folks walking into the capitol in this interaction with Jesus Saves and Pelosi is Satan flags. And so there's some interesting things going on there where I think what President Biden is trying to do is how can we reconstitute under a common understanding of the meaning of these symbols. But I think there's also another dimension that we have to add. Tight before the insurrection, we see a black preacher who's the pastor of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s spiritual home elected which really represents a resurgence of the black church and particularly, a black politic in U.S. politics after a decline in the 2016 election. So we see all of these concepts and terms being hotly contested. John already quoted Jamieson. And if we go



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back to, go way back to like *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, what is one of her arguments? Are we defining these terms? I think Allison has noted how we're talking about things like unity yesterday. And I think that's so important at this moment. But my question as I was listening to the inaugural address was what's the foundation for this unity? Like how are we going to bring all these people together? Otherwise, we talk about unity, but we still have half the country defining key terms like democracy, freedom, justice in not just different ways but in antithetical ways. And so that's the question I'm looking to be answered beyond just the inaugural speech which is why I think Allison's point about this being bigger than any one person or any one speech is so important here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And there was a lot of rhetoric that sought to do that yesterday it seemed to me at the inaugural day. Right? So you mentioned Gorman's poem. I thought that was an example of where a lot of those themes were articulated in different ways and in very eloquent ways.

CSPAN Audio clip - Amanda Gorman:

We, the successors of a country and a time where a skinny black girl, descended from slaves and raised by a single mother, can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It goes back to Steve's point about how inaugural addresses have always had this both, I think, this divine providence kind of notion and these ideas of appeals to American civil religion, American values, American national unity. I don't know. Steve, are you seeing some lineages here?

Stephen Brown:

It's more complex than I can get my head around frankly from April of '89 until the other day. But I will offer this, and I'm stumbling here because I'm still trying to figure it out. But I think in my working with Washington's first inaugural, I struggled with how to represent what continues to be a conspicuous and interesting feature of that address, and that is his appeal to, in his typically deistical language, to the divine author. Actually, it's a lot. There's a lot there. And it's symptomatic of an anxiety of not only Washington's but more generally of who exactly, like Theon was saying, who exactly is this 'we' here and what really is as it were the moral standing of this 'we'? And so one gets, I mean we're talking about sort of a complicated religiosity shall we say with Washington and Adams and Jefferson and that first generation. But that said, underwriting all of their inaugurals including Jefferson's who is routinely castigated as an atheist, to this sense of a divine authority that can give some sense of purpose and propulsion to the republican experiment.



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John Murphy:

I think the question of who we are, when I listened to Biden yesterday, it made me think of some of Steve's work on Jefferson. Because Jefferson famously said, we are all republicans, we are federalists. But as Steve nicely points out, by the time he gets done defining who Americans are, federalists are left kind of out in left field, hiding in the ivy in Wrigley Field, not readily visible to anybody else. His definition of unity made it pretty clear that only republicans need apply even as he's calling for it. And that's one of the tricks of covenant renewal discourse that we saw with Biden yesterday. He's arguing for a renewal of the covenant, but it is a renewal on his terms. It is a renewal—

Theon Hill:

Yes, yes.

John Murphy:

It is a renewal on the end of racial injustice. It is a renewal on calling out white supremacy. And Fox News pretty clearly caught this last night. Tucker honed right in on the white supremacy mentioned. He says Biden's going to seek to jail us all and all the melodrama. But they're not wrong. Biden is unifying the country on a set of principles that are on his side of the political spectrum, and to be American within that definition is to enlist in a culture of facts, is to enlist in a culture of tolerance, is to enlist in that culture. And so one of the great things about covenant renewal discourse is that it dresses up a progressive program in conservative clothing. This is in the name of our traditional values. And I expect, as Allison said, the next step will be the State of the Union address that he just gave principles here. So now in the State of the Union and in all of these executive orders, he starts to fill in the gaps that are left by the inaugural, and we'll start to see that to unify means to follow in this program.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It's interesting in his telling of some past instances of division, he talked about bridging those divisions when enough of us came together. It wasn't all of us. It was just enough of us.

Theon Hill:

He was very careful to say that, wasn't he?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right, right.

Theon Hill:

Enough of us. I assume that means you clear the filibuster threshold of 60. That's enough of us.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, that's interesting. Any other reactions to Biden's attempts to unify and bring us together? I think a lot of commentators and a lot of people were struck by the real stark contrast of the place, Allison, where all of this was happening and what had happened there just two weeks prior and how dramatically opposed all of that seemed. I don't know if any of you have any thoughts on all of that. I suppose we could go back to—what? There was an inauguration in 1817. I don't know if it happened on the steps of the Capitol after the burning by the British. But is there any sort of thoughts that anybody has about that contrast and Biden's attempts to wrestle with those divisions and all of the discord that you guys have mentioned and emphasized.

Allison Prash:

Well, I mean I think one of the—we can talk about it in a number of ways in these sharp contrasts. Obviously, it appears in the text of his speech where he directly references it. But obviously, we all experienced this Inauguration Day or the inaugural address in a virtual environment. Right? And so we're seeing the news coverage. We're seeing Tweets. The visual imagery is quite striking. Many journalists were posting two weeks ago this is the image of the capitol and then here it is two weeks later and the stark differences between those two things. But I also think we really need to pay attention to the juxtaposition of what type of bodies are there and are not. Because this kind of gets back to Theon's point, thinking about this unity and who is the 'we'. I mean I think you can read this in a number of levels. It is just striking to me that on Tuesday night at that COVID memorial that Biden spoke less than the three black women he surrounded himself with, the two individuals who sang and then at that point, Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris. Right? He really just said we're here to remember, and he shut up.

Yeah, yeah. Exactly. And then on Wednesday, obviously, he delivers this address, but we see the featuring of again, Amanda Gorman or Senator Amy Klobuchar. Who's not there? The sitting President of the United States Donald Trump who fled the city before Biden was inaugurated. And you see this repeated attempt all throughout the political appointees that we see being announced, prominent individuals who identify in various cultural or religious identities or you're thinking about transgender individuals, Pete Buttigieg is being confirmed or in the process of confirmation right now as Secretary of Transportation. So all of these visual cues to the audience are really powerful. And I think that in the definition of the 'we', it has to be in the text, but it also has to be in who we are seeing. Because let's be honest, a lot of people are going to see a two-minute news clip covering the day versus reading the full text of Biden's speech. I hope they'll read it, but they're also going to see who is representing the 'we'; of who do we define ourselves as.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, or else they're going to see it as a clip on their Facebook feed or on their Twitter feed. Yeah, that's interesting.

Theon Hill:

Can I jump in here?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Absolutely, absolutely.

Theon Hill:

One point of the speech that—I don't know if I want to say troubled me or it's just something that I'm reflecting on—was just the constant appeals to nostalgia and our collective memory. In the same way that I got deeply frustrated with Donald Trump's Make America Great Again as racist, xenophobic. We could go down the list of just the problems with the Make America Great Again. I wonder if in Biden's constant appeals to civic memory, if he's setting us up with expectations that can never be realized. We're looking to this memory to deliver us, but you can make an argument that it's this memory that got us in the situation in the first place. It's this history that's the problem. I think for many, as I think about like the black freedom struggle, this kind of felt like a moment in some of Biden's centrist approaches to things, it kind of felt like a moment like the Jimmy Carter/Ronald Reagan election of 1979-80 where Jimmy Baldwin is writing, I'm voting to buy time, not because I'm overly enthusiastic in a Carter presidency. And so as Biden is trying to navigate a progressive and a centrist wing, his wings in the Democratic Party, I'm wondering is he actually setting himself up to deliver change that's not going to be possible as he tries to balance these parties? John, I'm actually thinking about some of your work on Obama with his use of the exodus in places like Selma and Ebenezer Baptist Church with that comment.

John Murphy:

Yeah, I think along with having polarized visions of everything, we've also now got polarized visions of American history. And I think when Biden invokes this civic memory, he's really following the lead of Obama's second Selma speech or the bloody Sunday speech where he's going to tell the history of America differently, where the heroes become John Lewis and Fannie Lou Hamer and Mary Church Terrell and others. That it's going to be a different kind of American history than the ones we've told before. So we end up with the 1619 history and the 1776 history, and those come to characterize which, however, although that may put Biden in a better light in some ways, may also suggest how difficult unity is going to be to achieve. Because we don't even have the same view of what we have come through. And so civic memory becomes less of an inventional resource to achieve unity because we disagree so strongly about how the civic memory works. And I think that's a big part of what went on yesterday as well.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

It seems to me that whole question of civic memory is also at play in—again, I hate to keep carping on this—but the interaction of the 20th versus the 6th and the invocations of a whole lot of different aspects of civic memory by those who were storming the capital. I think they envisioned themselves as some sort of successor to the Boston Tea Party, and I mean that both literally and figuratively. Yeah, that's interesting, Theon. Do Presidents—I'm trying to remember. I most of them seem to have some kind of invocation of episodes in civic memory. I'm wondering if Biden is all that unique. That wasn't one of the four genre dimensions that that Browne kind of indicated here, Stephen, kind of indicated here. But—

Stephen Brown:

We keep in mind, let's go to Jefferson, for instance, if I may, because I kind of hang out in that. The country was only 12 years old. Public memory works to help glue together a narrative of a kind. It's only 12 years old. He's only the fourth president and darned if it only took that long for things for many to appear to be going to hell and a handbasket. Of course, it goes to Congress, this and that. They are seizing arsenals and so on. Right? It's a party politics, the first time you've seen that that kind of hubbub. What we've witnessed not only, of course, in the last week but in the last four years and all the way back is this relentless process of forging narratives and then observing them fractured. Forged and fractured, forged and fractured. It seems to be fundamental to the ritual function of inaugurals, however homely they most of them are. Believe me on this one. You know? They still do a kind of work for better and worse to suture back together narratives that have been fractured, and memory is, as it were, an available means of persuasion for doing that. Tomorrow, of course, you start hammering on that narrative again in ways that Theon has addressed.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right. So—

Theon Hill:

Trevor.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, go ahead.

Theon Hill:

The 2000 article with Sean on Bill Clinton at Church of God and Christ in Memphis, I mean he's clearly invoking memory in some of the ways that we're seeing from Biden. I mean I think Bill Clinton is speaking directly to the black community there. But I think this kind of ritual has been



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consistently used to get to your earlier question. So I don't think Biden is unique. I'm just questioning in this moment of upheaval over systemic injustice on a variety of fronts but most visibly maybe racial injustice, does that nostalgia of the past, does it align it all with the calls for overhaul?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, yeah. No, I think that's right. That's an interesting question. I also want to get everybody's take, Allison mentioned it a minute ago, but it seemed to me that the COVID context for all of this is kind of at odds and somehow very new. And Biden didn't tell a lot of memory stories of 1918. So how do you grapple with and situate all of this upheaval on a public health crisis in the context of an inaugural address that is trying to do a lot of other things? And what do you think about Biden's approach to all of that? Allison, you mentioned that we all were experiencing this virtually, and one of the commentators on CNN yesterday said, oh, I miss all the crowds. People can only see this parade virtually. And I'm like, you know what? Most people only ever see an inauguration virtually. I mean for vast majorities of Americans, you're never there. It's all virtual. But that's just an aside. I'm curious as your thoughts on how Biden and Harris and the whole inaugural event dealt with COVID and it's, I don't know, factor in our evolving national story.

Allison Prash:

Yeah, I mean I think you're absolutely right. I saw a similar commentary of saying, there was one photojournalist who was saying, I actually really don't miss having to put on a really expensive tux and go to multiple inaugural balls. Right? And in fact, I think it was really equalizing that the majority of us maybe get the image of some particular ball or talking about what someone's wearing, for example, versus actually seeing faces of ordinary people across the country. I mean think about the map that we saw that was displayed last night, and these lines that are taking us various places across the country. I think it's very reminiscent of a lot of what Biden and Harris did in the DNC address. But the other thing that I thought was really interesting about how Biden addressed it in the text of his address beyond the very clear visuals of not having a million people on the National Mall and having people in little chairs sitting alone, even down to Bernie Sanders alone in his mittens, was the fact that—which is just fantastic on so many levels. But in his speech, I think what Biden did that reminded me of what FDR did in 1933 is in that address, we know it so well, “For the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” But before FDR said that, he said it is incumbent upon me to speak the truth fully and frankly to you, and that is what I am required to do. And that's what Biden says towards the end of his speech is, I promise I'm going to be straight with you. I'm going to tell you the facts. We're going into what might be the most difficult and dangerous phase of this long dark winter in the pandemic, and I'm going to be honest with you about that. And you've seen that reflected in all the messaging coming out. And so I think this idea, and he talks about the difference between truth and lies in this speech and being really direct and saying, I'm going to be honest with you and you may not like what you're going to hear but at



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least I'm going to tell you the truth. And I think it speaks to more broadly what Biden and his administration are attempting to do to re-establish a culture, as John said, of facts, of evidence, of science. And that is something that the U.S. public should be able to expect.

John Murphy:

if I could pick up on a couple of things Allison said, I think what struck me yesterday is that it didn't seem that different. Because with inaugural coverage and so much, so much of the television coverage is close-ups anyway of the president delivering the speech, of doing that. And they filled the Mall with the flags, and they did other kinds of visual things that I think made it still seem like a full scene. So televisually, I'm not sure there was an inordinate difference except from Obama's first which is beyond all reckoning. But there wasn't an enormous difference from your sort of run-of-the-mill inaugural coverage that you saw which was interesting. And she also briefly mentioned the DNC. I keep thinking of the DNC roll call where they had all of the people at different places and doing things. And that's so clearly worked that that's what they've been doing since. And so the specials last night, when we tried to freeze poor Tom Hanks to death. But we would go to different parts of the country. John Bon Jovi would sing from Florida, and they would have other people in other places. So they really feel like that worked, and you're seeing sort of America being represented quote unquote in these ways that they did in the DNC roll call.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, I think that's right. And that DNC roll call was sort of an accident that worked out really well. I mean I don't think they expected the—

John Murphy:

It was great.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, it was really fun. I also want to give the inaugural committee a shout out to having Dolores Huerta reading the FDR passage that Allison mentioned in that quotation process.

John Murphy:

If there's one contradiction I could point out briefly?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, yeah.

John Murphy:

Allison mentioned this too. Biden several times uses the archetypal metaphor of winter which is also literal. We're in winter. And that sort of brings up the whole Sean Bean winter is coming. It's



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a warning about COVID that we're still in the worst of times and it's not going to get better very soon. But when you watched the special last night, it was all these songs like here comes the sun and the sunshine. Everybody was taking it as Spring, that my God, we're finally done with this. And so Biden's really trying to lower expectations with the winter metaphor whereas everybody else is saying woohoo, it's springtime, hooray! and I think the expectations game here is going to be kind of tough because everybody wants to say here comes the sun, and Biden is saying we got two more months of below zero temperatures, people.

Theon Hill:

Side note, that cover of Bill Withers "Lovely Day" was amazing though.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It really was. And other side note, this may be the first Game of Thrones reference in a *Communication Matters* podcast episode. So bully for us and thank you, John, for bringing that in. All right. Winter is coming. Here comes the sun. Maybe that's a good place to thank all of you for your participation today and your great discussion and insights about both the history and the current performance of inaugural addresses and the Biden inaugural. I really want to express my appreciation for all of you coming on *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Theon Hill:

Thank you for having us.

John Murphy:

Thank you.

Allison Prash:

Thanks so much.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And listeners, thank you for tuning in once again. And just in case you forget, be sure to subscribe to *Communication Matters* wherever you listen to your podcasts.

In NCA news, NCA recently released a public statement on the January 6th capital insurrection. The statement reads in part, "NCA especially condemns the implicit and overt expressions of white nationalism and white supremacy evident in the rhetoric and behaviors at the Capitol Hill insurrection of January 6th. The powerful articulations of white supremacy that were enacted should not be viewed as isolated acts, but rather are endemic of a long history of racial oppression which includes the long-standing suppression of voting and of free and responsible democratic



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communication.” You can read the full statement from NCA about the Capitol Hill insurrection at natcom.org/NCA-Statement-January-6. That's natcom.org/NCA-Statement-January-6.

Also in NCA news, members are invited to submit nominations for the awards from NCA to be presented at the 2021 NCA 107th annual convention in Seattle, Washington. Unless otherwise specified in the awards call, nominations must be submitted through the NCA website. The deadline for all nominations is May 15, 2021. And you can review the award calls on the NCA website for more information by visiting natcom.org/2021-NCA-Award-Call. That's natcom.org/2021-NCA-Award-Call.

Also in NCA news, NCA members are invited to participate in two virtual advocacy days that are hosted by partner organizations of the National Communication Association. First, the National Humanities Alliance annual meeting and Humanities Advocacy Day will be held virtually March, 8th through the 10th, 2021. You can visit the NHA website at nhalliance.org to learn more about this event. Also, you can plan to attend the Virtual Consortium of Social Science Associations or COSSA Social Science Advocacy Day on April 27th, 2021. Learn more at COSSA.org. Both events will provide the opportunity to advocate for federal support for the humanities and the social sciences and allow members to speak virtually with elected officials and their staffs. If you're interested in participating either in the National Humanities Alliance annual meeting and Humanities Advocacy Day or Social Science Advocacy Day, please contact us at NCA and let us know of your intent to participate.

Listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the next episode of *Communication Matters* on February 11th. The episode will feature a conversation with Reynaldo Anderson, an associate professor of communications and chair of the humanities department at Harris Stowe State University and Lonnie J. Avi Brooks, associate professor of communication at Cal State East Bay about Afrofuturism, including definitions of Afrofuturism, examples of Afrofuturism, and the importance of Afrofuturism for communication studies in today's Afrofuturistic world. So join us on February 11th for another exciting episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands



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from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA executive director Trevor Parry-Giles. The podcast, organized at the national office in downtown Washington DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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