



## FROM REAGAN TO BIDEN: DOCUMENTS SHOWING THE HISTORY OF INAUGURATIONS

By Carter Hirschhorn

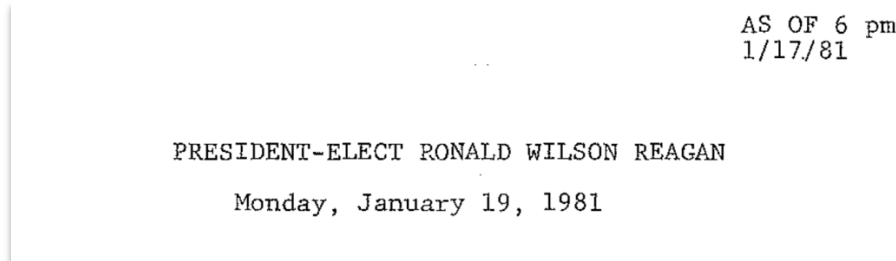


Figure 1. Reagan's pre-inaugural schedule provides insight into the events that make up the historic day.

Every four years, Inauguration Day has served as a symbol of the country's commitment to democracy and a smooth transfer of power. Since George Washington was inaugurated in 1789, the [list of traditions](#) surrounding this monumental day has grown. This year, President-elect Joe Biden will be sworn in on the West Front Terrace of the Capitol, a tradition started 30 years ago by President Ronald Reagan.

This year's inauguration will take place during a difficult period. The violent and destructive insurrection that took place at the Capitol on Jan. 6 prompted a [thorough reexamination](#) of security protocols and safety guidelines. An extraordinary law enforcement and military presence will now protect the inauguration ceremonies and locations throughout Washington, D.C. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements will [alter](#) traditional festivities: a [virtual parade](#) will replace the traditional inaugural parade from the Capitol to the White House; all in-person balls and the [inaugural luncheon](#) have been canceled; and a lighting [ceremony](#) at the Lincoln Memorial will honor COVID-19 victims.

While this year's ceremonies will be very different, some events will still resemble customs that originated several decades ago. The Center for Presidential Transition has compiled unique documents related to previous transitions – available in its [publication and resource library](#) – that offer insight into the recent history of inaugurations.

11:45 am	Swearing-in ceremony
12:15 pm	President <del>Elect</del> and Mrs. Reagan conclude and proceed to Capitol for luncheon
:45 pm	President and Mrs. Reagan proceed on foot to White House via parade route
2:07 pm	President <del>Elect</del> and Mrs. Reagan arrive White House and enter viewing box for review of parade
3:30 pm	President and Mrs. Reagan conclude
4:15 pm	President Reagan presides over Cabinet Meeting in White House Cabinet Room
5:00 pm	President Reagan concludes

Figure 2. A snapshot of Reagan's inauguration schedule from Jan. 20, 1981. Schedule planners mistakenly referenced Reagan as "President-elect" in this copy.

### The schedule of Reagan’s first inauguration

Many current traditions originated in 1981 during Reagan’s inauguration.

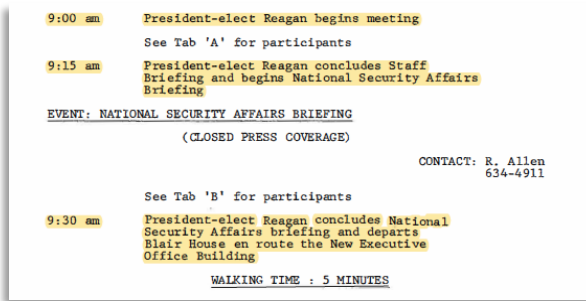


Figure 3. Reagan's Jan. 19 schedule outlines briefings held the day before inauguration.

One of Reagan’s [schedules](#) lists the president’s activities from Jan. 15 to Inauguration Day. Another [schedule](#) from Jan. 19 outlines the president’s packed itinerary the day before the swearing-in ceremony. Reagan began his day at 9 a.m. with a staff briefing, a national security briefing and an economic planning briefing. These briefings are [customary](#) for a president-elect.

The 1981 inauguration differed from those before because Reagan, a Hollywood star turned politician, planned the public events with a Hollywood-level production.

For example, the [schedule](#) for the night before the inauguration indicated that at 7:50 p.m., “President-elect and Mrs. Reagan [were] met by Frank Sinatra.” The meeting signaled the opening of ABC’s *All-Star Inaugural Gala*, which Sinatra had also planned for President John F. Kennedy in [1961](#). In Sinatra’s own [words](#), Reagan’s gala was “the greatest collection of talent America could offer to any audience.”

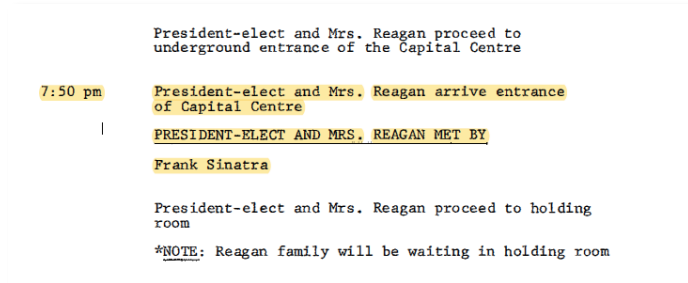


Figure 4. Reagan and his wife met with Frank Sinatra, who planned the All-Star Inaugural Gala.

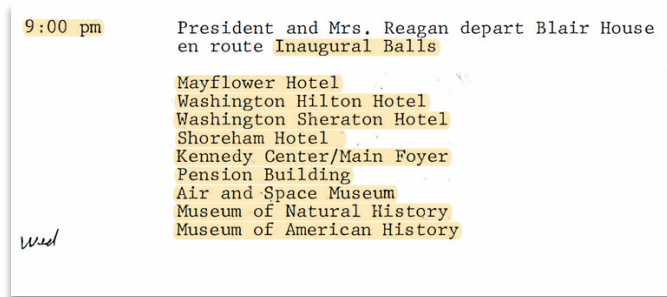


Figure 5. Reagan's inauguration featured nine inaugural balls, a practice that became customary until this year due to the pandemic.

The morning after the gala, The Washington Post [suggested](#) “The wall-to-wall value of the clothes worn last night might wipe out the national debt.” The Inauguration Day evening included nine inaugural balls – a [tradition](#) started in 1809 by James Madison. Reagan [joked](#), “If we get in and out of each one of the parties in 10 minutes, it will only take us 4 1/2 hours.”

Reagan’s festivities cost \$16 million and at the time was the [most expensive](#) in history. While President-elect Biden will avoid the crowds traditional of the day’s festivities, he will still enjoy the [star power](#) that is now custom at inaugural events. Tom Hanks, Justin Timberlake and Jon Bon Jovi are several of the stars featured in the president-elect’s “Celebrating America” virtual event.

**Dress**

**Day:** Men's Dark Business Suit  
Ladies' Afternoon Dress

**Evening :** Black Tie  
Ladies' Cocktail Dress

**Expected Weather**

Mid 20's

10% Chance of Precipitation

Figures 6 and 7. Reagan's schedule outlines the president-elect's and Mrs. Reagan's dress code for the day and night. It also shows the cold temperatures expected on Jan. 19.

**Planning inaugurations**

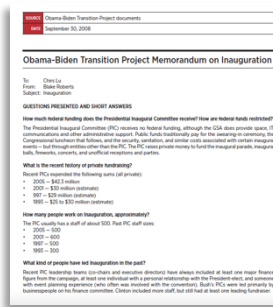


Figure 7 Blake Roberts, assistant to Chris Lu, identified answers to key questions about inauguration planning.

How are the inaugural events planned and funded? A [2008 memo](#) written by Blake Roberts, assistant to Chris Lu, the executive director of Barack Obama's transition team, described details regarding the planning and funding of previous inaugurations.

The two main organizing bodies of inaugurations are the [Presidential Inaugural Committee](#) and [Joint Congressional Committee on the Inauguration](#). Both groups receive federal support from the General Services Administration's Inaugural Support Team and various law enforcement agencies.

The presidential inaugural committee is a nonprofit whose staff is chosen by the incoming administration and coordinates most of the planning and execution of inaugural activities including parades, fireworks and inaugural balls. The joint congressional committee leads the planning and execution of the [events](#) that make up the official Inaugural Day ceremony, including the swearing-in and subsequent luncheon.

Today, the joint congressional committee is comprised of three senators and three House members selected by the president of the Senate and the speaker of the House, respectively. The House, however, was not always involved in planning the inauguration and the [history of its involvement](#) goes back many years. In the 19th century, House members were frequently relegated to the back of the inauguration platform. In 1885, frustrated by these unfair arrangements, House members began petitioning the Senate for greater involvement in the planning process. In 1901, after more than a decade of lobbying, the House was finally included in the planning process, creating the modern joint inaugural committee.

**Funding inaugurations**

Inaugurations are funded through a combination of taxpayer money, private donations, and ticket and merchandise sales. This year, virtual viewing and lower ticket allowances have [changed](#) the benefits companies and individuals will receive for their donations.

Private donors and taxpayers make up the majority of the funding. The presidential committee does not receive federal funding and is financed by private donors, ticket and merchandise sales.

Inauguration packages for VIPs are a large source of this funding, with tickets that can range between \$25,000 to \$1 million.

The following are the [Presidential Inaugural Committee](#) donation totals from previous inaugurations:

- Ronald Reagan's 1981 committee: \$19 million.
- George H.W. Bush's 1989 committee: \$30 million.
- Bill Clinton's 1997 committee: \$33 million.
- George W. Bush's 2001 committee: \$40 million.
- Barack Obama's 2009 committee: \$53 million.
- Donald J. Trump's 2016 committee: \$100 million.

Legally, the Presidential Inaugural Committee must report any donation of \$200 or more to the Federal Election Commission within 90 days after the inauguration. The Presidential Inaugural Committee has already [published](#) a preliminary list of this year's donors. Individual presidents-elect have imposed [different restrictions](#). The Biden-Harris team, for instance, [has banned contributions](#) from the fossil fuel industry and registered lobbyists.

Taxpayer funds also play a role. The joint congressional committee for the 2021 inauguration received \$1.5 million through the [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2019](#), which covers the inauguration ceremony and the traditional luncheon which has been canceled this year because of the coronavirus pandemic. Congress also appropriated funding to reimburse state and local governments that contribute security, planning and sanitation support.

We know that this year's inauguration will be different from those that came before it. President Trump will become only the [fourth president](#) in history not [to attend](#) his successor's inauguration and many other traditions have been cancelled or significantly altered. However, this year's unique challenges offer an opportunity for innovations to the historic day's events and ceremonies. The various sources of funding, along with the careful planning by Congress and the president-elect's team, will undoubtedly help make the 2021 Inauguration Day a day to remember.

*The Center for Presidential Transition would like to thank IBM for making this post possible. IBM's AI-based document understanding technology allows the Center to analyze key historical documents and is critical for creating accurate, detailed and timely resources. The primary documents found in this blog are located in the Center's [publication and resource library](#).*