

March 4, 1933

Franklin D. Roosevelt entered office at a time when fear and panic had paralyzed the nation. In a famous passage, historian Arthur Schlesinger described the nation's mood at FDR's 1933 Inauguration: "It was now a matter of seeing whether a representative democracy could conquer economic collapse. It was a matter of staving off violence -- even, some thought -- *revolution*."

FDR's natural air of confidence and optimism did much to reassure the nation. His Inauguration on March 4th occurred literally in the middle of a bank panic that was terrifying the nation.

In *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Day Triumph of Hope*, Jonathan Alter wrote:

"The morning of March 4, 1933 was cold and gray, not what the press called "Roosevelt Weather" a reference to the sunshine that had seemed to bless each of his campaign stops the previous fall.

"The official day began at 10:15 a.m. with a short private prayer at St. John's Episcopal Church, the small "Church of Presidents" across Lafayette Square from the White House.

"Shortly before 11:00 am, Franklin and Eleanor arrived at the North Portico of the White House, where they remained in their open touring car until greeted by the Hoovers.

"The outgoing and incoming presidents were seated side by side, a symbol for the world of the peaceful transfer of power that had prevailed for nearly 150 years. But this time the traditional ride to the Capitol was more than awkward."

In the months leading up to this day, the dislike between Hoover and Roosevelt had increased and the automobile ride they made to the Capitol building, with the two men seated next to each other, was mostly a quiet one. FDR acknowledged the crowds of people lining the street by waving his top hat at them while Hoover sat still.

Inaugural arrangements in 1933 were different from previous ceremonies. Traditionally, the custom was to hold it on the East Rotunda of the Capitol, with many steps to climb. The organizers knew that Roosevelt could not maneuver steps, so they had a series of ramps and wooden barriers constructed to create a private passageway to within thirty feet of the podium. To manage the last part of the way, Roosevelt was able "walk" with the assistance of his son James and great strength, to the podium. The handicap accessibility system made for FDR was a precursor of the accessibility systems of today.

As FDR sat inside the Capitol before the event started, he had time to review his speech and decided to rewrite the first sentence. What he planned to say, "I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the presidency I will address them

with a candor and decision which the present situation of our nation impels,” didn’t seem to convey the sanctity or incisiveness he wanted for the occasion. FDR thoughtfully then wrote the inspiring words we know today: “This is a day of consecration.”

Finally the ceremony began and FDR proceeded down the ramp and rose to make the slow, difficult “walk” to the podium. Watchers were amazed as FDR drew on what one eyewitness called “bottomless reserves of physical and mental strength to make the short journey to the rostrum and the Presidency.”

FDR then told the nation:

‘This is preeminently a time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive, and will prosper. So first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance....’

FDR’s main theme throughout his 1933 Inaugural speech was: **“This nation is asking for action, and action now.” “We must act, we must act quickly.” “The people want “direct, vigorous action.”**

“The action FDR proposed was: put people to work, raise farm prices, boost purchasing power, prevent foreclosures, national planning, strict supervision of all banking and credits and investment, and an end to speculation with other people’s money.”

“FDR knew that he would have to do more than urge action, however eloquently; he must act, and act soon.”

To read or listen to FDR’s first Inaugural speech in its entirety, please go to our website www.nps.gov/hofr and click *On With History*.