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A Tale of Two Inaugural Addresses

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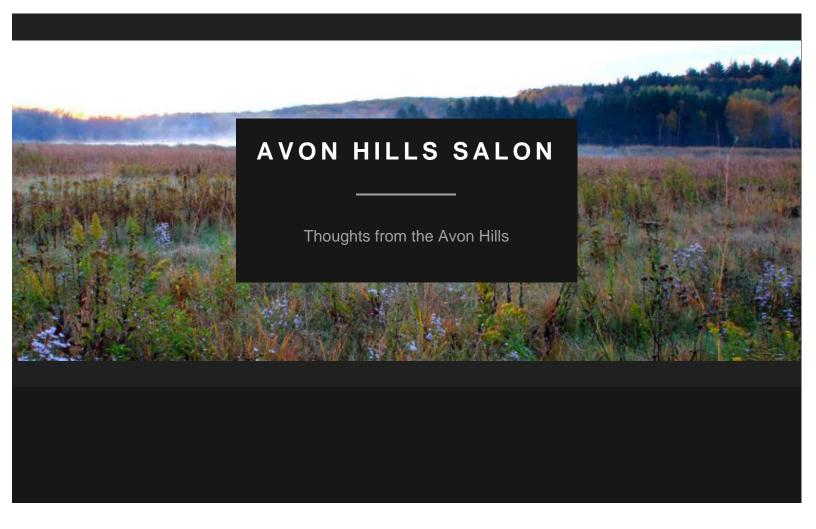*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*, jread@csbsju.edu

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Jim Read on "A Tale of Two Inaugural Addresses"

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I read presidential inaugural addresses carefully, and often assign them to my students. Inaugural addresses do not necessarily predict policy specifics, but they typically reveal the fundamental intellectual and emotional frames that determine how presidents filter facts and interpret events. For that reason, they enable us broadly to foresee how presidents will respond to the unpredictable.

It is especially revealing to compare Barack Obama's First Inaugural Address (January 20, 2009) with Donald Trump's Inaugural Address (January 20, 2017). Obama's address expresses a variable-sum view of political life, a belief that all stand to gain by cooperating and all stand to lose if they fail to cooperate. Trump's address, in contrast, lays out a zero-sum picture: every gain for one person or group (whether of power, wealth, status, or opportunity) necessarily entails a corresponding loss for another.

As a political theorist I have spent a good part of my life thinking and writing about the differences between the variable-sum and zero-sum world views and how those differences influence public policy. For example, one of the keys to understanding Nelson Mandela's

historic role in South Africa is that Mandela consistently saw the South African racial conflict in variable sum terms: South Africans of all races stood to gain by ending apartheid; South Africans of all races would lose horribly if the country descended into racial civil war.[1]

Barack Obama, like Mandela, expressed a variable-sum view of political life in his First Inaugural Address, both on the international stage and domestically. Obama assured the wider world that "America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity…With old friends and former foes, we will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat, and roll back the specter of a warming planet…To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

In his observations on American domestic politics, Obama likewise invoked the image of all gaining from cooperation and all losing if we fail to cooperate. Taking office under economic circumstances far worse than those he handed off to his successor, Obama attributed the economic crisis to "our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age." Yet America can replace collective failure with shared success if "We the People" remain "faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents" – a clear reference to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Our Founders, Obama reminds us, "faced with perils we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man." If they could work together under such great difficulties, we too can confront and overcome our common challenges. That is what a variable-sum view of the world looks like in practice.

Donald Trump's Inaugural Address, in contrast, lays out a radically zero-sum view – not only with respect to America's relations to the wider world, but domestically as well.

In contrast to modern economists (who regard both countries as gainers from foreign trade) Trump echoes the Mercantilist perspective of the 17th Century: the quantity of wealth in the world is fixed, and whatever one nation gains, another loses. "We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon…The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world." But from this day forward, Trump promises, "America will start winning again, winning like never before." It necessarily follows that America's win is loss for someone else, but that is fine, because "America First" must be the guiding principle.

There is little indication in Trump's address that nations of the world gain collectively by cooperating in the face of common threats or to achieve common goods. Only on one point does Trump indicate that international cooperation is appropriate. He promises that we will "unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth." Obama's inaugural address specifically invites the people of the Muslim world to join the United States in the fight against terrorism. Trump's address does not.

It might not be surprising that Trump sees international politics in zero-sum terms; that perspective has a long history. More surprising is the way in which Trump paints a similarly stark zero-sum picture of American domestic politics, one in which there is radical,

irreconcilable warfare between politicians and other elites on one hand, and ordinary people on the other, whom Trump calls "the forgotten men and women of our country."

Nearly every presidential inaugural address, regardless of the president's party affiliation, makes some appeal to the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution or both. These symbolize what is supposed to hold us together as a people despite our differences. Donald Trump's Inaugural Address makes no mention of either the Constitution or the ideals of the Declaration. Instead he presents his electoral victory as a radical break with the past, a revolution, "a historic movement the likes of which the world has never seen before."

In contrast to Obama, for whom America's economic ills were caused by generally good people who had failed to make difficult choices, Trump's address points the finger at a political establishment that positively celebrated the pain and suffering it was inflicting on 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. Washington flourished – but the people did not share its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land." The clear implication here is that the political establishment celebrated the fact that ordinary families were struggling.

There is no question that this deep-seated zero-sum perspective expresses Trump's political and personal core. But it would be wrong to classify it as a mere personal peculiarity. Instead his zero-sum view of domestic politics taps a deep vein of resentment in American life, one that helps to explain the overwhelming support he received in small towns and rural areas across the United States.

The most revealing book I have discovered for explaining Donald Trump's political success is one that does not mention his name at all. It is The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker (2016) by Katherine J. Cramer, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin who spent years talking with people who gathered in small-town cafes, convenience stores, and bars. The people she portrays do indeed see themselves as "forgotten men and women." They are convinced that the lion's share of their hard-earned tax dollars has been redistributed to Milwaukee, Madison, and state employees – people very different from themselves (with clear racial overtones). These city people, they believe, scorn everything small-town folk value and view them with contempt. The actual distribution of state expenditures does not support the claim that everything is going to the cities; in fact, per-capita state expenditures are higher in rural and small town Wisconsin. But the perception that city people are ripping them off appears unshakable.

This is the emotional vein Trump rode to the White House; it was Wisconsin that sealed his victory in the Electoral College. Whether his policies will actually improve the lives of the small-town dwellers who supported him is another question.

In Book One of Plato's Republic, we meet a character named Polemarchus who asserts that the definition of justice is helping one's friends and harming one's enemies. Socrates, of course, subjects this definition to searching critique. Among its problems are the fact that it is not always clear who is really our friend, and who is really our enemy. Donald Trump's view of the world is very much like that of Polemarchus, and he appears to know for certain who his friends and enemies are.

One of the advantages of a thoroughly zero-sum political perspective is that bypasses the complexities of making policy. If like Barack Obama, you believe we all gain from cooperation, then the details of policy matter, and getting the details right involves a lot of time and difficult negotiations. A zero-sum perspective makes policy much simpler. If your enemy's gain is your loss, and your gain his loss, then as long as those you consider your enemies – international or domestic – are suffering pain as a result of what you do, then you know you're on the right track. I believe this best predicts the pattern of policy making we can expect from Donald Trump's presidency.

[1] See for example James H. Read and Ian Shapiro, "Transforming Power Relationships: Leadership, Risk, and Hope," in The American Political Science Review Vol. 108, No. 1 (February 2014), 40-53.