

WOLFGANG MIEDER

Department of German and Russian, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont

"THERE IS ALWAYS A BETTER TOMORROW": PROVERBIAL RHETORIC IN INAUGURAL ADDRESSES BY AMERICAN PRESIDENTS DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

As a special rhetorical genre, the fourteen inaugural addresses by the ten American presidents of the second half of the 20th century represent a unique body of speeches. They are meant to be both timely and timeless, and they are crafted with much attention to elegant literary style. Yet, both Bible and folk proverbs play a major role in these messages by new presidents, who wish to communicate their political programs in an accessible fashion. Wanting their words to be remembered, presidents have also attempted to structure their memorable phrases on common proverbs, literally assuring that some utterances have become sententious or even proverbial.

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After yet another American presidential election in which the political rhetoric of the two principal candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush seemed rather uninspired, trite and void of colorful metaphors, it might be of general interest to take a glance at the verbal prowess of previous American presidents. Modern presidents, certainly since Harry S. Truman, are relying ever more on speech writers and advisors who put words into their mouths that lack emotional vigor and instead are replete with statistics and factual information. It is, however, to be hoped that presidents of this large nation will at least continue to labor on their own inaugural addresses as relatively short public speeches that attempt to set the stage for the new presidency.

Obviously every president in his turn has delivered more influential and significant addresses than that at the beginning of his presidential years in office, but choosing the inaugural speeches as the corpus of this investigation makes it possible to investigate the use and function of

proverbial language in one precise type of address. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, in their informative book *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (1990), have convincingly shown that inaugural addresses are a distinct rhetorical genre: "Presidential inaugurals are epideictic rhetoric because they are delivered on ceremonial occasions, link past and future in present contemplation, affirm or praise the shared principles that will guide the incoming administration, ask the audience to gaze upon traditional values, employ elegant, literary language, and rely on heightening of effect by amplification and reaffirmation of what is already known and believed" (Campbell & Jamieson 1990:15).¹ Regarding the special language of the "epideictic timelessness" (see Campbell & Jamieson 1990:36) of these addresses, the two authors also observe that "the language of great inaugurals captures complex, resonant ideas in memorable phrases" (Campbell & Jamieson 1990:28).² This is true, of course, but it should be noted that some of these "memorable phrases" have in fact become American proverbs. Furthermore, and perhaps even more importantly, the inaugural speeches do not only use "elegant, literary language" but rather to a noticeable extent proverbial expressions as well as Biblical and folk proverbs. As the new presidents wish to communicate with *all* the American people, the common language and wisdom of proverbs is perfectly suitable for effective rhetoric at these inaugural rites of passage. No note has hitherto been taken of this significant proverbial aspect of the special rhetoric at presidential inaugurations.

In order to show what role traditional proverbial language has played in inaugural addresses, the fourteen ceremonial speeches by the ten presidents (Gerald Ford as the eleventh president did not deliver an inaugural address) of the second half of the twentieth century have been carefully studied for the present investigation. Rather than citing the references from the inaugural speeches from the published papers of the individual presidents, this study makes use of John Gabriel Hunt's edited volume on *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents* (New York: Gramercy, 1997). Had one of the two presidential candidates used at least some proverbs during the most recent campaign, they might well have scored a few points just because of the expressiveness of this folk wisdom. Instead they talked and argued in platitudes and bureaucratic jargon that lacked any sign of proverbial insight into the seriousness and humor of the people. Yet in the inaugural addresses since George Washington's first speech of April 30, 1789, American presidents have paid at least some attention to proverbial rhetoric, with Franklin Delano Roosevelt being

¹ This book includes a chapter on "Inaugural Addresses" (pp. 14-36 and pp. 227-229 [notes]) which was earlier published in more or less identical form by both authors as "Inaugurating the Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 15 (1985), 394-411.

² See also Burt Solomon (2001:85): "Many phrases from past inaugural addresses have made their way into *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and have accurately described the spirit of the ensuing Administration". I owe this reference to my colleague Prof. John Burke.

particularly skillful in employing proverbial language during his emotional four inaugural addresses before and during the second World War.

Harry S. Truman as the thirty-third president of the United States continued Roosevelt's policies, but he himself deserves the credit for the Marshall Plan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the start of the United Nations. Although his inaugural speech of January 20, 1949, does not show it, Truman delighted in using proverbs and proverbial expressions in his speeches, news conferences and many books (see Mieder & Bryan 1997). In fact, he was proud of his plain speaking. He also knew his American history extremely well and wrote essays on former American presidents. It is not surprising then that he includes Thomas Jefferson's sentence turned proverb "All men are created equal" in his inaugural speech:

The American people stand firm in the faith which has inspired this nation from the beginning. We believe that all men have a right to equal justice under law and equal opportunity to share in the common good. We believe that all men have the right to freedom of thought and expression. We believe that all men are created equal because they are created in the image of God. From this faith we will not be moved. The American people desire, and are determined to work for, a world in which all nations and all peoples are free to govern themselves as they see fit and to achieve a decent and satisfying life. Above all else, our people desire, and are determined to work for, peace on earth — a just and lasting peace — based on genuine agreement freely arrived at by equals (402-403).

With characteristic optimism he puts the country back on a course towards prosperity. He does this deliberately, basing his step-by-step policy on the proverb "Slowly but surely" when it comes to national and international concerns: "If we are to be successful in carrying out these policies, it is clear that we must have continued prosperity in this country and we must keep ourselves strong. Slowly but surely we are weaving a world fabric of international security and growing prosperity. We are aided by all who wish to live in freedom from fear" (408).

As the thirty-fourth president, Dwight D. Eisenhower fades in rhetorical abilities in comparison to Harry Truman. In his first inaugural speech of January 20, 1953, he speaks of "our faith in the deathless dignity of man, governed by eternal moral and natural laws. This faith defines our full view of life. It establishes, beyond debate, those gifts of the Creator that are man's inalienable rights, and that make all men equal in His sight" (413). Just like Truman before him, Eisenhower clearly alludes to Jefferson's proverb "All men are created equal" in this passage. Later in the speech Eisenhower outlines several guiding principles for world peace. In one of the paragraphs it is the old general speaking: "Realizing that common sense and common decency alike dictate the futility of appeasement, we shall never try to placate an aggressor by the false and

wicked bargain of trading honor for security. Americans, indeed all free men, remember that in the final choice a soldier's pack is not so heavy a burden as a prisoner's chains" (416). The last sentence has a proverbial ring to it, but it has hitherto not been registered in proverb or quotation dictionaries.

Eisenhower's second inaugural speech of January 21, 1957, takes place in an atmosphere of Cold War politics and propaganda. The President speaks rather generally of these international concerns and couches his call for peace in the three proverbial expressions "The winds of change," "To turn the back on someone," and "To pay the price." These metaphors give his speech some emotional fervor, but there is not the youthful vigor that was to characterize the inaugural speech of his successor John F. Kennedy. But here are Eisenhower's words:

Thus across all the globe there harshly blow the winds of change. And, we — though fortunate be our lot — know that we can never turn our back to them. We look upon this shaken earth, and we declare our firm and fixed purpose — the building of a peace with justice in a world where moral law prevails. The building of such a peace is a bold and solemn purpose. To proclaim it is easy. To serve it will be hard. And to attain it, we must be aware of its full meaning — and ready to pay its full price. We know clearly what we seek, and why. We seek peace, knowing that peace is the climate of freedom. And now, as in no other age, we seek it because we have been warned, by the power of modern weapons, that peace may be the only climate possible for human life itself (421).

When the youthful and vigorous John F. Kennedy was sworn in on January 20, 1961 (see Corbett 1965), as the thirty-fifth president, he might well be referring to this paragraph by Eisenhower in the first part of his memorable inaugural address: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty" (428). Kennedy, just as Eisenhower, is ready to pay any price, proverbially speaking, to guarantee liberty in this country.

This is a definite pledge by Kennedy, and he adds a few others to this fundamental claim. Two of these pledges integrate, if somewhat indirectly, a basic proverb, thus giving each short paragraph an additional expressive effectiveness. In the first of these pledges, Kennedy must have had the following limerick in mind: "There was a young lady of Niger / Who smiled as she rode on a tiger; / They returned from the ride / With the lady inside, / And the smile on the face of the tiger" (Newton Lott 1961:270),³ but he might also have alluded to the proverb "He who rides the tiger can never dismount":

³ Donald L. Wolfarth (1961:132) speaks of this proverbial metaphor as a "picturesque admonition," while Edward P. J. Corbett (1984:514) refers to it as a "folksy adage."

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our words that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far greater iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom — and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside (428).

The second pledge seems to center around the proverb "God helps those who help themselves:

To those people in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required — not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich (429).

But there are, to be sure, two memorable and quotable statements in this refreshing inaugural speech. Clearly Kennedy and his sophisticated speech writers (primarily Theodore C. Sorenson) formulated them by adopting the parallel structure of so many proverbs.⁴ Speaking of the danger of the Cold War with its arms race, Kennedy calls upon both sides to remember "that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. *Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate*" (430). The last sentence has found its way into John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* (Bartlett 1992:741),⁵ but it would probably go too far to assign a proverbial character to it.

This leads us to the antithetical phrase "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country"⁶ towards the end of the speech:

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility — I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it — and the glow from that fire can truly light the world. *And so, my*

⁴ It is, however, generally believed and accepted that John F. Kennedy wrote his inaugural speech primarily by himself; see Sam Meyer (1982:240-241).

⁵ See also the small book by Lewis & Rhodes (1967).

⁶ See also Edward P. J. Corbett (1965:512): "And the most memorable line of the speech is cast in the form of an antithesis: '... Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.' Most of these antitheses of thought are laid out in parallel grammatical structure. The recurring parallelism is appropriate here because although the President is pointing up opposites by his antitheses he wants to suggest that these opposites can be reconciled. Opposites can be reconciled only if they are co-ordinate, and one way to emphasize the co-ordinate value of opposites is to juxtapose them in a parallel grammatical structure." But Corbett fails to see that this parallel (and also proverbial!) structure helped the memorability of this sentence along.

fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: Ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man (431).

As one would expect, the proverb-like utterance "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" has made it into Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* as well. In fact, this reliable resource cites the following statement from an address delivered on May 30, 1884, by Oliver Wendell Holmes as a possible source: "For, stripped of the temporary associations which gave rise to it, it is now the moment when by common consent we pause to become conscious of our national life and to rejoice in it, to recall what our country has done for each of us, and to ask ourselves what we can do for our country in return" (Bartlett 1992:741, note 1). It is hard to imagine that Kennedy's famous civic slogan was not taken from this speech by Oliver Wendell Holmes. But be that as it may, it has now in the precise wording by John F. Kennedy become a sententious remark and is well along to become an American proverb as well.

Lyndon Baines Johnson served out Kennedy's term as the thirty-sixth president and after having been elected president in his own right presented his inaugural address on January 20, 1965. He continued Kennedy's social agenda, but he also became ever more entangled in the civil war in Vietnam. But at his inauguration, he declared sententiously that "For every generation, there is a destiny" (436)⁷ and then spoke proverbially of this country where one can be one's own man (person):

⁷ For President Johnson's sententious rhetoric see the chapter on "Quotes and LBJ" in Paul F. Boller (1967).

Our destiny in the midst of change will rest on the unchanged character of our people, and on our faith. They came here — the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened — to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish (436).

Choosing the proverbial phrases "To work shoulder to shoulder" and "To reopen old wounds," Johnson continued to call for serious commitment to social progress:

No longer need capitalist and worker, farmer and clerk, city and countryside, struggle to divide our bounty. By working shoulder to shoulder, together we can increase the bounty of all. We have discovered that every child who learns, every man who finds work, every sick body that is made whole — like a candle added to an altar — brightens the hope of all the faithful. So let us reject any among us who seek to reopen old wounds and to rekindle old hatreds. They stand in the way of a seeking nation. Let us now join the reason to faith and action to experience, to transform our unity of interest into a unity of purpose (438).

President Johnson wanted to build a great nation of social fairness, but the war in Vietnam discouraged him to the point that he did not seek reelection. When Richard Milhous Nixon as the thirty-seventh president gave his first inaugural address on January 20, 1969, he picked up on this general theme of greatness. He had informed himself well on what earlier presidents said at their inaugurations. In fact, he studied all of their speeches in preparation of his own address (see Harris 1970:233). So Nixon begins with an allusion to the proverb "Nothing is more simple than greatness" and also warns proverbially against promising more than one can deliver:

Greatness comes in simple trappings. The simple things are the ones most needed today if we are to surmount what divides us, and cement what unites us. To lower our voices would be a simple thing. In these difficult years [referring indirectly to the Vietnam controversy], America has suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading. We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another — until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices (445-446).

One might recall here that Leo Tolstoy wrote in his epic novel *War and Peace* (1865-1869) that "There is no greatness where there is not simplicity, goodness, and truth" (cited from Bartlett 1992:510, no. 8),⁸ but

⁸ For Tolstoy's use of proverbs see Donskov (1998). Other studies are listed in Mieder & Bryan (1996:262).

most likely Nixon's statement is based on Ralph Waldo Emerson's observation that "Nothing is more simple than greatness; indeed, to be simple is to be great" in his essay on *Literary Ethics* (1840) (cited from Stevenson 1948:2115, no. 14).⁹

In an exceedingly negative analysis of this speech as "Rhetoric that Postures," Robert L. Scott claims that "The noise of the speech was not that of blustering, impotent fury but that of verbal posturing in the face of well-recognized perils. Into the strained fissures from which hell itself threatens to boil forth, the President plunked clichés made all the more hollow by the tincture of old, oratorical bombast" (Scott 1970:47). The few examples that Scott cites, and he quotes particularly the paragraph that follows below, do not strike us as banal and clichéd as Scott argues, especially in light of the fact that all inaugural speeches follow more or less a set of expected rhetorical steps. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have shown so convincingly, "In order to be invested, presidents must demonstrate their qualifications for office by venerating the past and showing that the traditions of the institution [of the Presidency] continue unbroken in them. They must affirm that they will transmit the institution intact to their successors. Consequently, the language of conservation, preservation, maintenance, and renewal pervades these speeches" (Campbell & Jamieson 1990:21-22). It is then not surprising, but rather to be expected, that Nixon returns once again to Jefferson's proverbial declaration that "All men are created equal" in his admittedly not very eloquent speech:

As we measure what can be done, we shall promise only what we know we can produce, but as we chart our goals we shall be lifted by our dreams. No man can be fully free while his neighbor is not. To go forward at all is to go forward together. This means black and white together, as one nation, not two. The laws have caught up with our conscience. What remains is to give life to what is in the law: to ensure at last that as all are born equal in dignity before God, all are born equal in dignity before man. As we learn to go forward together at home, let us seek to go forward together with all mankind. Let us take as our goal: where peace is unknown, make it welcome; where peace is fragile, make it strong; where peace is temporary, make it permanent (447).

In his second inaugural speech of January 20, 1973, Richard Nixon in his role as a Republican president emphasizes the need for less government, especially a smaller emphasis on the power of Washington as the all too powerful center of the United States. It certainly was a rhetorical stroke of genius to argue against the pervasive paternalism of the central government by altering the appropriate proverb "Father knows best" to a satirically interpreted "Washington knows best" in this paragraph:

Abroad and at home, the key to new responsibilities lies in the placing and the division of responsibility. We have lived too long with the

⁹ See also Mieder, Kingsbury & Harder (1992:267).

consequences of attempting to gather all power and responsibility in Washington. Abroad and at home, the time has come to turn away from the condescending policies of paternalism — of "Washington knows best." A person can be expected to act responsibly only if he has responsibility. This is human nature. So let us encourage individuals at home and nations abroad to do more for themselves, to decide more for themselves. Let us locate responsibility in more places. Let us measure what we will do for others by what they will do for themselves. That is why today I offer no promise of a purely governmental solution for every problem (454).

It is interesting to note that Nixon's sententious request "Let us measure what we will do for others by what they will do for themselves" appears to be structurally modelled on Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." But obviously he is also basing this sentence on the Golden Rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" from the Bible and the proverb "God helps those who help themselves."

Towards the end he refers much more directly to Kennedy's "inaugural proverb," and perhaps it was not mere political expedience that made Nixon do this. It must not be forgotten that Kennedy had defeated Nixon very narrowly in the national election of 1960. Especially regarding international politics, Nixon might well have had considerable respect for Kennedy's vigorous policies of dealing with the Soviet Union. In any case, here is what Nixon, indirectly quoting Kennedy, said:

Let us remember that America was built not by government, but by people — not by welfare, but by work — not by shirking responsibility, but by seeking responsibility. In our own lives, let each of us ask — not just what will government do for me, but what can I do for myself? In the challenges we face together, let each of us ask — not just how can government help, but how can I help? Your national government has a great and vital role to play. And I pledge to you that where this government should act, we will act boldly and we will lead boldly. But just as important is the role that each and every one of us must play, as an individual and as a member of his own community (455).

Nixon's rephrasing of Kennedy's by now proverbial remark does, of course, emphasize the individual rather than the society in general as Kennedy had intended his message.

After Nixon's disgraceful behavior and resignation from the presidency, Vice President Gerald Ford took over the helm of the country without an inaugural speech as the thirty-eighth president in August of 1974. Having lost the election to Jimmy Carter, the latter delivered his inaugural address as the thirty-ninth president on January 20, 1977. It is surprising that as a deeply religious, honest, and unpretentious man he did not include any proverbial wisdom in his speech. He merely speaks of the proverbial place in the sun that all people of the world deserve to achieve:

The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving and now demanding their place in the sun — not just for the benefit of their physical condition, but for basic human rights. The passion for freedom is on the rise. Tapping this new spirit, there can be no nobler nor more ambitious task for America to undertake on this day of a new beginning than to help shape a just and peaceful world that is truly humane (465).

The phrase of "A place in the sun" was used originally by the German Chancellor Bernard von Bülow in a *Reichstag* speech of December 6, 1897, when he described and justified Germany's colonial ambitions thus: "In a word, we desire to throw no one into the shade, but we also demand our own place in the sun [*Platz an der Sonne*]" (cited from Rees 1995:382).¹⁰ Typical for the ethical Carter, he reinterpreted the political phrase to argue for social and racial fairness.

With Ronald Reagan as the fortieth president, the nation had found a so-called "great communicator"¹¹ to guide it through an increased military buildup and the implementation of supply-side economics in the form of spending and tax cuts.¹² Reagan has been criticized if not satirized for his inclination towards sound-byte rhetoric, but his two inaugural addresses do not necessarily bear witness to this phenomenon. His infamous one-liners were usually during spontaneous remarks, while he and his speech writers obviously labored on his comments made at his two inaugurations. Nevertheless, in a paragraph in his first inaugural speech of January 20, 1981, Reagan, as the first of forty presidents, finally cites the well-known proverbial definition of the American form of government which Abraham Lincoln had immortalized in his famous Gettysburg Address of November 19, 1863: "We here highly resolve [that] these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation [under God] shall have a new birth of freedom — and that [this] government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people, shall not perish from the earth" (cited from Basler 1953:18-23).¹³ To emphasize that the American people must work together, Reagan added the two proverbial expressions "To bear the burden" and "To pay the price" (used previously by Dwight D. Eisenhower) to his message:

In this present [economic] crisis, government is not the solution to our problem. From time to time, we have been tempted to believe that

¹⁰ See also Bartlett (1992:557, no. 3).

¹¹ See Phifer (1983:385): "Reagan is often called the Great Communicator. And why not? For the first time in our nation's history we have in the White House a man whose principal source of income prior to the election of 1980 was his mastery of the spoken word, his ability to charm audiences and command large fees for a single talk. A better term, however, would be the Great Persuader or Salesman, since genuine communication requires a two-way flow of ideas."

¹² For two collections of his wit and wisdom see Cassell (1984) and Adler (1996).

¹³ The words in square brackets indicate different versions of the speech. See also Wills (1992) and Mieder (2000:35-37).

society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people.¹⁴ But if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden. The solutions we seek must be equitable, with no one group singled out to pay a higher price (473).

Turning to his theme that less government is best, Reagan employs the proverbial phrase "To pay the price" for a second time to point out that life in a free country is full of responsibilities: "Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here [in America] than in any other place on earth. The price for this freedom at times has been high, but we have never been unwilling to pay that price" (474). And there is even a third time that Reagan relies on this traditional phrase by adding the classical proverbial expression "To stand on the shoulders of giants" to it in a moving tribute to the truly great American presidents:

This is the first time in history that this [inaugural] ceremony has been held on this west front of the Capitol. Standing here, one faces a magnificent vista, opening up on this city's special beauty and history. At the end of this open mall are those shrines to the giants, on whose shoulders we stand. Directly in front of me, the monument to a monumental man: George Washington, Father of Our Country. A man of humility who came to greatness reluctantly. He led America out of revolutionary victory into infant nationhood. Off to one side, the stately memorial to Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration of Independence flames with his eloquence. And then beyond the Reflecting Pool the dignified columns of the Lincoln Memorial. Whoever would understand in his heart the meaning of America will find it in the life of Abraham Lincoln. Beyond those monuments to heroism is the Potomac River, and on the far shore the sloping hills of Arlington National Cemetery with its row on row of simple white markers bearing crosses or stars of David. They add up to only a tiny fraction of the price that has been paid for our freedom (477).

Reagan did not repeat his favorite maxim of having to pay the price in his second inaugural address of January 21, 1985. Perhaps he had become aware of the fact that his reaganomics were too high a price to pay for the less privileged people of the United States. In any case, he now used the somewhat similar proverbial expression "To have mountains to climb" to spur people on to greater and better things: "We are creating a nation once again vibrant, robust, and alive. But there are many mountains yet to climb. We will not rest until every American enjoys the fullness of freedom, dignity, and opportunity as our birthright" (481). Reagan remained the eternal optimist, arguing that "we, the present-day Americans, are not given to looking backward. In this blessed land, there is always a better tomorrow" (480). The actual proverb simply states that "There is

¹⁴ This proverbial sentence is also cited by Bradley (1983:125).

always a tomorrow" (see Mieder et al. 1992:603), but as the addition of the word "better" indicates, President Reagan could always see the proverbial silver lining on the political clouds.

The inaugural address of George Bush as the forty-first president is perhaps not particularly memorable, but he will most certainly be remembered for having created the proverbial phrase "Read my lips!" during his acceptance speech on August 18, 1988, at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans: "The Congress will push me to raise taxes, and I'll say no, and they'll push, and I'll say no, and they'll push again. And all I can say to them is read my lips: No New Taxes" (cited from Bartlett 1992:753, no. 12). But his inaugural address of January 20, 1989, is replete with proverbial expressions as no other inauguration speech has been. In the following paragraph, for example, he amasses five of them, citing the phrase "A new breeze is blowing" twice at the beginning:

I come before you and assume the presidency at a moment rich with promise. We live in a peaceful, prosperous time, but we can make it better. For a new breeze is blowing, and a world refreshed by freedom seems reborn; for in man's heart, if not in fact, the day of the dictator is over. The totalitarian era is passing, its old ideas blown away like leaves from an ancient, lifeless tree. A new breeze is blowing, and a nation refreshed by freedom stands ready to push on. There is new ground to be broken, and new action to be taken. There are times when the future seems thick as a fog; you sit and wait, hoping the mists will lift and reveal the right path. But this is a time when the future seems a door you can walk right through into a room called tomorrow (490-491).

In his forward-looking message, Bush claims proverbially that "We can't turn back the clocks, [...] and we don't wish to turn back time" (494). And he even changes the pecuniary proverb "Money begets money" into an expression of faith and goodwill: "There are today Americans who are held against their will in foreign lands, and Americans who are unaccounted for. Assistance can be shown here, and will be long remembered. Goodwill begets goodwill. Good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on" (494).

But speaking of money and the need of bringing the deficit down, Bush uttered the following fascinating proverbial words: "We have more will than wallet; but will is what we need. We will make the hard choices, looking at what we have and perhaps allocating differently, making our decisions based on honest need and prudent safety. And then we will do the wisest thing of all: we will turn to the only resource we have that in times of need always grows — the goodness and the courage of the American people" (492). The phrase "To have more will than wallet" with its striking alliteration is nowhere to be found in dictionaries of formulaic language. However, Bush probably based it on the phraseological structure of "To have more X than Y," as for example in "To have more luck than

brains (sense)", "To have more cry than wool," etc. In addition, it seems that the President also had the old proverb "Where there is a will, there is a way" in mind.

An economic recession and the unkept promise of "No new taxes" swept George Bush out of office, and in came Bill Clinton for two terms as the forty-second president. Clinton began his first inaugural address on January 20, 1993, by quoting the famous proverbial triad from the Declaration of Independence. Spring had just sprung in Washington, D.C., and this led Clinton to his idea of reinventing America while holding on to its basic principles:

A spring reborn in the world's oldest democracy, that brings forth the vision and courage to reinvent America. When our Founders boldly declared America's independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew America, to endure, would have to change. Not change for change's sake, but change to preserve America's ideals — life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Though we march to the music of our time, our mission is timeless. Each generation of Americans must define what it means to be an American (500).

Clinton follows up his proverbial call "to march to the music of our time" with the metaphorically appropriate proverbial request: "My fellow Americans, you, too, must play your part in our renewal" (503). His merely four-page address ended with a quotation of the Bible: "As we stand at the edge of the twenty-first century, let us begin anew with energy and hope, with faith and discipline, and let us work until our work is done. The Scripture says, 'And let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season, we shall reap, if we faint not' [Galatians 6:9]" (504). Certainly this little known Bible passage called into memory the Biblical proverb "As you sow, so shall you reap" (Galatians 6:7),¹⁵ and the latter might have been a more effective rhetorical device for Bill Clinton since its proverbiality would have rung loud and clear in the ears of his audience.

Bill Clinton began his second inaugural address on January 20, 1997, with the old stand-by proverbial quotation from the Declaration of Independence: "The promise of America was born in the eighteenth century out of the bold conviction that we are all created equal. It was extended and preserved in the nineteenth century, when our nation spread across the continent, saved the Union, and abolished the scourge of slavery. Then, in turmoil and triumph, that promise exploded onto the world stage to make this the American century. What a century [i.e., the twentieth century] it has been! America became the world's mightiest industrial power, saved the world from tyranny in two world wars and a long cold war, and time and again reached across the globe to millions who longed for the blessings of liberty" (506). After this short history lesson, Clinton moved on to a glance into the challenges of the twenty-first

¹⁵ For those 425 texts of the Bible that have become folk proverbs in the English language see Mieder (1990). See also the much larger collection by Burton Stevenson (1949).

century, declaring that "the future is up to us" (507). This latter statement might well be a shortened version of the longer proverb "The future belongs to those who prepare for it."

This brings us to the most recent and much anticipated fifty-fourth inaugural address delivered on January 20, 2001, by George W. Bush as the forty-third president of the United States. Speculation in the media was rampant about what Bush would say and whether he could indeed rise to the rhetorical challenge. As Roderick Hart, Professor of Communication and Government at the University of Texas, had put it quite negatively: "You take a person with no love of language or sense of timing, comparatively devoid of vision, he's a rhetorical disaster area" (cited from Barnes 2001:111).¹⁶ And yet, immediately after his inaugural address television commentators had considerable praise for this inexperienced public speaker. The day after newspapers followed suit, as can be seen from the analysis by Frank Bruni and David E. Sanger in *The New York Times*: "Mr Bush turned to a loftiness of oratory that he had often avoided in the past, when he would regularly prune his speechwriters' language to fit his folksy, unpretentious image of himself. His remarks today were sprinkled with elegant locutions, artful syntax and alliterative phrases. He spoke to many audiences" (Bruni & Sanger 2001:14). This was a speech calling for unity of a country divided, not only because of the bitterly contested election. As Bush had said on December 13, 2001, after the Supreme Court of the United States had made him president: "Our nation must rise above a house divided" (cited from Fournier 2001:1). The allusion to the Bible proverb "A house divided against itself cannot stand," echoing Abraham Lincoln's use of it in his struggle to keep the Union together, were well chosen for this momentous occasion. It had been my conjecture that Bush would incorporate this fitting piece of traditional wisdom into this inaugural speech, but he and his speechwriter Michael Gersen decided against it.

No doubt this speech will be counted among some of the more memorable inaugural addresses. As veteran reporter Bob Schieffer of the CBS network remarked to anchorman Dan Rather immediately following the address, this speech will probably be referred to as the "Four C's Speech." With much eloquent humility George W. Bush had stated that "Today we affirm a new commitment to live out our nation's promise through civility, courage, compassion and character."¹⁷ Of course, there were other "c"-words, such as "commitment," "common good," "citizen," and "community." The most memorable utterance might well be: "I ask you to be citizens. Citizens, not spectators. Citizens, not subjects. Responsible citizens, building communities of service and a nation of character." If then this speech were to go down as the "C-Speech," it will

¹⁶ I owe this reference to my colleague Prof. John Burke.

¹⁷ The entire text of the inaugural address is cited from "President: 'I ask You to Be Citizens'," *The New York Times* (January 21, 2001), pp. 12-13.

not be because of its mediocre oratorical character but rather because of its message of civic responsibility.

While speaking of civility,¹⁸ courage, compassion, and character, Bush might well have chosen the proverb "Where there is a will, there is a way" to add some traditional authority to his pledge to these ideals. He comes close to doing so by choosing the structure of this proverb to add a considerable proverbial ring to his commitment to compassion: "Where there is suffering, there is duty. Americans in need are not strangers, they are citizens; not problems, but priorities; and all of us are diminished when any are hopeless." A bit later, speaking of basic fairness and human decency, he underscores his pledge to compassion by a significant quotation: "Sometimes in life we are called to do great things. But as a saint of our times has said, every day we are called to do small things with great love. The most important tasks of a democracy are done by everyone."¹⁹ While many listeners might not have been aware that Bush was quoting Mother Teresa, his message of humility certainly touched their hearts.

After his indirect reference to this modern saint, George W. Bush concludes his address quite appropriately with a Bible quotation long turned proverb that once again alludes metaphorically to his theme of humility for the citizens of this great nation:

After the Declaration of Independence was signed, Virginia statesman John Page wrote to Thomas Jefferson: "We know the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. Do you not think an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm?" Much time has passed since Jefferson arrived at his inauguration. The years and changes accumulate. But the themes of this day he would know: our nation's grand story of courage, and its simple dream of dignity. [...]

Never tiring, never yielding, never finishing, we renew that purpose today: to make our country more just and generous, to affirm the dignity of our lives and every life.

This work continues. This story goes on. And an angel rides the whirlwind and directs this storm.

God bless you all, and God bless America.

Doubtlessly Bush is also alluding to the cautionary Biblical proverb "They that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7) in these final comments. With the two proverbial metaphors he makes the best possible

¹⁸ It might be recalled that John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address had declared that "Civility is not a sign of weakness" regarding his foreign policies during the Cold War. Bush looks at "civility" more from an interpersonal point of view.

¹⁹ The modern saint seems to be Mother Teresa, even though I could not find this specific statement in any of my numerous books of quotations. Somehow Melinda Henneberger was able to identify the person behind the quotation; see her article on "In His Address, Bush Lingers on a Promise to Care" (2001:14): "He quoted Mother Teresa, though not by name, saying, 'as a saint of our times has said, every day we are called to do small things with great love.'"

use of folk wisdom, namely that of indirection.²⁰ On the one hand he sends an indirect message to the world that America will continue to be a strong defender of human rights, freedom and democracy. But on the other hand he also warns the American citizens not to give in to pride and superiority, for "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong" (Ecclesiastes 9:11), at least not always. But there is hope and a willingness by the new president that an angel or God will guide him and all Americans in a life dedicated to compassion, dignity, humility and civility in the service of all citizens.

Forty years ago, after the energizing and spirited inaugural address of John F. Kennedy, the editors of *The New Yorker* began their laudatory comments with the observation that "As rhetoric has become an increasingly dispensable member of the liberal arts, people have abandoned the idea, held so firmly by the ancient Greeks and Romans, that eloquence is indispensable to politics. Perhaps President Kennedy's achievements in both spheres will revive a taste for good oratory — a taste that has been alternately frustrated by inarticulateness and dulled by bombast." Stressing Kennedy's adherence to Aristotle's and Cicero's insistence on logical, emotional, and ethical persuasion in the ideal oration, they expressed the hope that Kennedy had "re-established the tradition of political eloquence" (Anonymous 1961).²¹ After George W. Bush's inaugural address one might perhaps express this hope for more eloquent rhetoric once again, an amazing achievement for the moment for the new president whose rhetorical skills have been ridiculed thus far.

But be that as it may, all presidents have tried to give memorable inaugural addresses. Thus far, the speeches by Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy stand out by far. Interestingly enough, their speeches also contain some of the most often quoted eloquent phrases which have found their way into dictionaries of quotations and proverbs. Presidents address a very heterogeneous audience, and they must find a common denominator in their rhetoric that will be grasped and appreciated by the largest possible number of people, both here in the United States and throughout the world. In an enlightening article on "Maxims, 'Practical Wisdom,' and the Language of Action: Beyond Grand Theory" (1996) in the renowned journal *Political Theory*, the political scientist Ray Nichols argued convincingly that political rhetoric must be characterized by "'practical wisdom,' 'practical knowledge,' 'practical reason,' [and] 'practical judgment'" (Nichols 1996:687). The common sense of such practical wisdom expressed in quotable phrases or proverbs definitely adds to the communicative and emotional quality of presidential rhetoric. Inaugural addresses especially

²⁰ Both Bible proverbs have long become folk proverbs in the English language; see Mieder at al. (1992:407, 656-657).

²¹ Also reprinted in Edward P.J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, pp. 506-508.

are meant to be timely and timeless, and a memorable phrase or a traditional proverb represent preformulated and commonly known bits of wisdom that underscore the value system and mentality of the people. All of this must be understood with an obvious caveat, of course. As with everything in life the proverbs "Everything in moderation" and "Nothing in excess" also hold true for the use of proverbs in inaugural addresses. But now and then a solid statement of timeless folk wisdom in the form of a proverb will clearly do no harm, as some of the very best inaugural addresses by American presidents make abundantly clear. An occasional proverb at the right moment will not hinder the call for eloquence in political rhetoric.

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"UVIJEK POSTOJI BOLJE SUTRA": POSLOVIČNA RETORIKA U INAUGURACIJSKIM GOVORIMA AMERIČKIH PREDsjedNIKA U DRUGOJ POLOVICI DVADESETOGA STOLJEĆA

SAŽETAK

Četrnaest nastupnih govora deset američkih predsjednika iz druge polovice dvadesetoga stoljeća svojim su jedinstvenim korpusom poseban retorički žanr. Ti govori nastoje biti istodobno aktualni, primjenjivi na konkretne prilike, ali i bezvremenski, a sastavljeni su s mnogo pozornosti prema elegantnom književnom stilu. Ipak, i Biblija i usmene poslovice igraju glavnu ulogu u tim porukama novih predsjednika, koji svoje političke poruke nastoje prenijeti što pristupačnije. U želji da se njihove riječi pamte, predsjednici su se potrudili skovati svoje vlastite lako pamtljive izraze utemeljene na općim izrekama, time doslovno osiguravajući svojim riječima poslovičnost.

Kako bi se predstavila uloga tradicionalnoga jezika poslovice u nastupnim govorima, tih je četrnaest govora deset predsjednika (Gerald Ford kao jedanaesti predsjednik nije održao svoj nastupni govor) pažljivo proučeno. Pokazano je da je Harry S. Truman poslovice rabio namjerno, dok je Dwight D. Eisenhower pokazao manje sklonosti ka uporabi jezika poslovice. U modernome se razdoblju po uporabi poslovice ističu John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon i George Bush, dok — što je zanimljivo — Jimmy Carter i Bill Clinton poslovice rabe vrlo malo. Lyndon Baines Johnson i Ronald Reagan bili su lukavi korisnici jezika poslovice, a i George W. Bush je djelotvorno upotrijebio tradicijske mudrosti.

Rašireno svakodnevno poznavanje tih praktičnih mudrosti, izrečenih izrazima pogodnima za navođenje ili poslovičnim izrekama nedvojbeno pridaju novu komunikacijsku i emotivnu kakvoću predsjedničkoj retorici. Tu i tamo ubačen djelić bezvremenske narodne mudrosti u obliku poslovice jasno povećava komunikacijsku moć tih nastupnih govora. Povremena poslovice upotrijebljena u pravome trenutku svakako pojačava dojam metaforične elokvencije političke retorike te pruža mogućnost obraćanja ljudima svih struka, razina obrazovanja, etničkoga podrijetla, dobnih skupina, itd.

Ključne riječi: politička retorika, poslovice