“It’s Not a President’s Business to Catch Flies”
Proverbial Rhetoric in Presidential Inaugural Addresses

After yet another American presidential election in which the political rhetoric of the two principal candidates John Kerry and George W. Bush seemed rather uninspired, trite and devoid 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.” Regarding the special language of the “epideictic timelessness” of these addresses, the two authors also observe that “the language of great inaugurals captures complex, resonant ideas in memorable phrases. Americans still recall [...] Lincoln’s ‘With malice toward none, with charity for all’ [...] and John Kennedy’s ‘Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country’ remains memorable. Such
phrases illustrate special rhetorical skill in reinvigorating traditional values; in them familiar ideas become fresh and take on new meaning.” 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, including 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, all fifty-five ceremonial speeches by thirty-eight presidents have been carefully studied. (John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Chester A. Arthur, and Gerald Ford did not give an inaugural address, since they took over the presidency after a death or assassination.) Rather than citing the references from the inaugural speeches from the published papers of the individual presidents, this chapter makes use of John Gabriel Hunt’s edited volume on *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents* (1997). It should be noted at the outset that the proverb “It’s not a president’s business to catch flies” is the only American proverb registered in *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (1992) that refers to the presidency. It was recorded during the second half of the twentieth century in the state of Illinois, and it was not used by any presidents, as far as is known. Nevertheless, it does express with much imagination and a colorful metaphor that presidents deal with big issues. Had one of the two presidential candidates used this proverb or others during the most recent campaign, they might well have scored some points or gained 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.

**From George Washington to John Quincy Adams**

A comparison of the words uttered by George Washington in his concise first inaugural address delivered on April 30, 1789, with those spoken during the political campaign of the year 2004 makes it abundantly clear that the political rhetoric in the United States is at a low level. This is not to say that Washington amasses proverbs and proverbial expressions in his speech. Not at all, but he couches his language in proverb allusions, and his audience will most certainly have understood the wisdom expressed in the following words:
The foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality, and the preeminence of free government [will] be exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its citizens and command the respect of the world. [...] There is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage; between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity. (6)

The two “maxims” (proverbs) alluded to are most likely “Honesty is the best policy” and “Happiness is the best reward,” two bits of folk wisdom that the people of the young nation could embrace with conviction and commitment. Washington’s second inaugural address of March 4, 1793, consists of merely two very short paragraphs in which he expresses his willingness to take over the heavy burdens of the government once again. It definitely makes sense that he chose not to include a proverb in this short text that expresses no particular philosophical or pragmatic message.

John Adams, as the second president of the United States, did not employ any proverbs in his considerably longer inaugural address on March 4, 1797. However, he starts his remarks with some historical thoughts whose complexity is rhetorically eased by the inclusion of the proverbial expression of “the middle course” that was no longer possible at the founding of this country:

When it was first perceived, in early times, that no middle course for America remained between unlimited submission to a foreign legislature and a total independence of its claims, men of reflection were less apprehensive of danger from the formidable power of fleets and armies they must determine to resist than from those contests and dissensions which would certainly arise concerning the forms of government to be instituted over the whole and over the parts of this extensive country. (13–14)

As the third president, Thomas Jefferson also stayed away from proverbs in his two inaugural addresses of March 4, 1801 and 1805. However, in the introductory paragraph of his first address, Jefferson makes use of one of the many proverbial metaphors that speaks of the state as a ship or vessel that needs to be steered by a presidential captain:

Utterly, indeed should I despair did not the presence of many whom I here see remind me that in the other high authorities provided by our
Constitution I shall find resources of wisdom, of virtue, and of zeal on which to rely under all difficulties. To you, then, gentlemen, who are charged with the sovereign functions of legislation, and to those associated with you, I look with encouragement for that guidance and support which enable us to steer with safety the vessel in which we are all embarked amidst the conflicting elements of a troubled world. (24)

I can’t recall having heard either George W. Bush or John Kerry use the proverbial phrase of “the ship of state” that needs to be piloted in our truly troubled world today, even though this fitting metaphor has been in use since classical antiquity.6 Other presidents have used it, and in Frederick Douglass’s speeches and essays the proverbial phrase became a leitmotif.7 But finally, even though Jefferson did not employ proverbs in his two inaugural addresses, it must not be forgotten that we owe him one of the most powerful proverbs of them all. After all, his statement in the Declaration of Independence (1776) that “All men are created equal”8 has long become proverbial in the English speaking world.

James Madison, the fourth president of the young nation, faced a vexing problem with the War of 1812 which had gone badly at the time of his second inauguration on March 4, 1813. In his comments on this situation he most certainly has the proverb “One sword (drawn) keeps another in its scabbard” in mind:

To render the justice of the war on our part the more conspicuous, the reluctance to commence it was followed by the earliest and strongest manifestations of a disposition to arrest its progress. The sword was scarcely out of the scabbard before the enemy was apprised of the reasonable terms on which it would be resheathed. Still more precise advances were repeated, and have been received in a spirit forbidding every reliance not placed on the military resources of the nation. These resources are amply sufficient to bring the war to an honorable issue. (46)

One is reminded here of the war of words during the Cold War period in the second half of the twentieth century, one that was also fought with proverbial rhetoric expressed in words, caricatures, and cartoons.9

The fifth president, James Monroe, delivered two rather lengthy inaugural addresses on March 4, 1817, and March 5, 1821. However, he does not exhibit any particular inclination towards proverbial language. Merely during some general introductory comments in his first speech does he have recourse to a proverbial phrase. He is, of course, quite right in
stating that new presidents have an obligation of “shedding much light” on what their upcoming administration will do:

In commencing the duties of the chief executive office it has been the practice of the distinguished men who have gone before me to explain the principles which would govern them in their respective administrations. In following their venerated example my attention is naturally drawn to the great causes which have contributed in a principal degree to produce the present happy condition of the United States. They will best explain the nature of our duties and shed much light on the policy which ought to be pursued in the future. (50)

In fact, Monroe provides future presidents with a definition and purpose of these inaugural addresses.

John Quincy Adams, sixth president and until George W. Bush the only son of a former president, made use of the proverbial phrase “to enjoy the fruits of one’s labor” in his inaugural speech of March 4, 1825: “We now receive it [the government] as a precious inheritance from those to whom we are indebted for its establishment, doubly bound by the examples which they have left us and by the blessings which we have enjoyed as the fruits of their labors to transmit the same unimpaired to the succeeding generation” (76). Of course, enjoying the benefits of the hard labor of previous generations also means the obligation of handing the precious country on in good shape, a motif that is often used today in political parlance when politicians speak of making this country a better place to be for the children. Adams concludes his speech by calling on God to help him with his daunting task as the new president, a rhetorical topos that has been part of these speeches throughout history. By citing the biblical proverb “Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain” (Psalms 127:1), he humbly places his presidency under the ultimate guidance of the Almighty:

To the guidance of the legislative councils, to the assistance of the executive and subordinate departments, to the friendly cooperation of the respective state governments, to the candid and liberal support of the people so far as it may be deserved by honest industry and zeal, I shall look for whatever success may attend my public service; and knowing that ‘except the Lord keep the city the watchman waketh but in vain,’ with fervent supplications for His favor, to His overruling providence I commit with humble but fearless confidence my own fate and the future destinies of my country. (83)
FROM ANDREW JACKSON TO JAMES BUCHANAN

As the seventh president of the United States, Andrew Jackson presented somewhat of a shopping list of his governmental priorities in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1829. He is not particularly proverbial in his speech, but he does at least make use of the proverbial phrase “to be the exception to the rule” in his comments: “With regard to a proper selection of the subjects of impost with a view to revenue, it would seem to me that the spirit of equity, caution, and compromise in which the Constitution was formed requires that the great interests of agriculture, commerce, and manufactures should be equally favored, and that perhaps the only exception to this rule should consist in the peculiar encouragement of any products of either of them that may be found essential to our national independence” (88–89). He then continues singling out such matters as education and the military, and one is reminded of similar statements by more modern presidents.

Martin Van Buren, in his four years as the eighth president, did not prove to be a very popular or successful occupant of the White House due to an economic depression and the vexing problem of slavery. He was well aware, in his inaugural address of March 4, 1837, that he was to tread in the proverbial footsteps of his predecessors:

The practice of all my predecessors imposes on me an obligation I cheerfully fulfill—to accompany the first and solemn act of my public trust with an avowal of the principles that will guide me in performing it and an expression of my feelings on assuming a charge so responsible and vast. In imitating their example I tread in the footsteps of illustrious men, whose superiors it is our happiness to believe are not found on the executive calendar of any country. (97)

Unfortunately he slipped only too quickly out of the footsteps of the early presidential giants and can hardly be considered an illustrious president.

Even though William Henry Harrison, the ninth president, gave the longest inaugural address (23 pages) on March 4, 1841, he shows no predilection for proverbial rhetoric. He merely employs the adjective “proverbial” to describe the impressive commercial vigor of the American citizens: “The resources of the country are abundant, the enterprise and activity of our people proverbial, and we may well hope that wise legislation and prudent administration by the respective governments, each acting within its own sphere, will restore former prosperity” (128–129). It is almost surprising that Harrison does not add such proverbs as “Business
before pleasure” or “Business is business” which were already current at that
time. Of course, President Harrison had no chance to prove himself as
the man who brought the country back to economic prosperity. He died of
pneumonia after only one month in office. Vice President John Tyler took
over the reigns as the tenth president without an inaugural address and
was so unsuccessful in his job that he did not decide to seek the presidency
in 1844. In fact, the next three presidents also lasted only one term each, as
the issues over slavery and the maintenance of the federal union became ever
more prevalent. Neither James Polk nor Zachary Taylor employed proverbial
language in their inaugural addresses, and Vice President Millard Fillmore,
who became the thirteenth president after the death of President Taylor, did
not deliver a speech when he was sworn in on July 10, 1850.

Franklin Pierce as the fourteenth president addressed international
concerns in his inaugural address on March 4, 1853, assuring his listeners in
this country and abroad that he would, proverbially speaking, leave no blot
upon the hitherto peaceful record of the United States:

We have nothing in our history or position to invite aggression; we have
everything to beckon us to the cultivation of relations of peace and amity
with all nations. Purposes, therefore, at once just and pacific will be
significantly marked in the conduct of our foreign affairs. I intend that
my administration shall leave no blot upon our fair record, and trust that
I may safely give the assurance that no act within the legitimate scope
of my constitutional control will be tolerated on the part of any portion
of our citizens which cannot challenge a ready justification before the
tribunal of the civilized world. (166)

But with the inauguration of James Buchanan as the fifteenth president
on March 4, 1857, the nation had gained a leader who sided with slavery
interests. Buchanan made it perfectly clear in his inaugural address that he
was a strong believer in popular sovereignty, i.e., the right of individual states
to decide for themselves whether to tolerate slavery within their boundaries.
And to appease strong slavery interests, he made shrewd use of the proverb
“Time is a great corrective,” which also brings to mind such variants as
“Time assuages everything” or “Time changes everything.” But here is what
he actually said, clearly using the proverb as a dangerous manipulative tool:

The whole territorial question being thus settled upon the principle of
popular sovereignty—a principle as ancient as free government itself—
everything of a practical nature has been decided. No other question
remains for adjustment, because all agree that under the Constitution
slavery in the states is beyond the reach of any human power except that of the respective states themselves wherein it exists. May we not, then, hope that the long agitation on this subject is approaching its end [...]. Most happy will it be for the country when the public mind shall be diverted from this question to others of more pressing and practical importance. [...] It [the agitation] has alienated and estranged the people of the sister states from each other, and has even seriously endangered the very existence of the Union. Nor has the danger yet entirely ceased. Under our system there is a remedy for all mere political evils in the sound sense and sober judgment of the people. Time is a great corrective. Political subjects which but a few years ago excited and exasperated the public mind have passed away and are now forgotten. [...] Let every Union-loving man, therefore, exert his best influence to suppress this agitation, which since the recent legislation of Congress is without any legitimate object. (177–178)

This is indeed effective proverbial rhetoric, with the proverb serving as the ultimate appeaser in this case. Little wonder that Buchanan strongly supported the ill-conceived Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court during the very first year of his presidency. It unfortunately opened the floodgates of slavery into territories hitherto not open to slavery.

FROM ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO WILLIAM MCKINLEY

Fortunately the great sixteenth American president, Abraham Lincoln, elevated the principles of the Union above those of the states in regard to slavery. It took a Civil War to wipe out this inhuman institution, during which time Lincoln used powerful rhetoric in which proverbs take on a strong argumentative and persuasive role.¹³ His first inaugural address of March 4, 1861, is not especially memorable, but it certainly establishes a firm agenda to combat slavery throughout the country while trying to maintain the Union. Lincoln did not succeed with avoiding the Civil War, but by the time he uttered his second inaugural speech exactly four years later on March 4, 1865, one of the greatest American presidents ever spoke words of wisdom that are still remembered today. He did see the end of this gruesome war before he himself was assassinated, but in this speech a few weeks earlier he rose to oratorical heights that have not been surpassed by any subsequent president.

But what made his short remarks at the second inauguration so very special? Obviously Lincoln was expected to say something about slavery, and he did exactly that. However, he also cites two proverbs from the Bible to
underscore his major point that slavery is indeed wrong while at the same time warning his listeners to be careful in their judgments of others. In all of his condemnations of slavery Lincoln is ready and willing to find a way to bring North and South back together and to save the Union, especially as the Civil War is drawing to an end. For him, all Americans deserve to be treated alike:

One-eighth of the whole population [of the United States] were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither part expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. [...] Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” (200–201)

While he changes the proverb “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (Genesis 3:19) to ridicule the exploitive and inhuman treatment of the slaves by slaveholders, he cites the cautionary proverb “Judge not, lest ye be judged” (Matthew 7:1) with but a small change. And yet, his use of the personal pronoun “we” gives this comment a sense of humility by the leader of those who are about to win the Civil War. To the double proverbial wisdom Lincoln adds yet another Bible quotation, albeit without any claim to proverbiality. Nevertheless, the biblical claim that “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (Psalms 19:9) place the entire conflict and its resolution squarely into God’s hands.
But as if these three well-known Bible references do not already have enough rhetorical and moral persuasiveness, Lincoln adds his by now famous concluding paragraph to it to signal that he as president will deal humanely with the perpetrators once the Civil War is over:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us thrive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. (201)

The subsequent era of Reconstruction would certainly have proceeded on a more humane footing if President Lincoln could have lived out his second term. The phrase “With malice toward none, with charity for all” is not a proverb, but it most certainly is proverbially known and has long entered standard dictionaries of quotations as one of the greatest statements ever made by an American president."

Vice President Andrew Johnson served out Lincoln’s remaining term (actually almost all four years of it). Then the Republicans chose the victorious General Ulysses S. Grant as their presidential candidate in 1868. His skill as a field commander did not make him Lincoln’s equal in oratorical ability. In his second inaugural address, Grant as the eighteenth president merely uses the rather plain proverbial expression “In God’s own good time” to bring his point across that the country will surely move towards an ever greater nation:

In future, while I hold my present office, the subject of acquisition of territory must have the support of the people before I will recommend any proposition looking to such acquisition. I say here, however, that I do not share in the apprehension held by many as to the danger of governments becoming weakened and destroyed by reason of their extension of territory. Commerce, education, and rapid transit of thought and matter by telegraph and steam have changed all this. Rather do I believe that our Great Maker is preparing the world, in His own good time, to become one nation, speaking one language, and when armies and navies will be no longer required. (213)

If Grant could survey the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, he might well have to cite the proverb “God’s mills grind slowly” to describe the present state of affairs.
Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, and again Grover Cleveland as the nineteenth to twenty-fourth presidents, did not bother with proverbial language in their inaugural addresses. But that changes with the remarks which William McKinley, the twenty-fifth president, gave at his two inaugurations. He begins his first address on March 4, 1897, with the topos of humility in the face of his daunting task and argues proverbially that he intends to walk in the footsteps of God: “Our faith teaches that there is no safer reliance than upon the God of our fathers, who has so singularly favored the American people in every national trial, and who will not forsake us so long as we obey His commandments and walk humbly in His footsteps” (277). But he departs rather quickly from these rather standard references to the Almighty by turning to the “almighty dollar,” as the phrase goes:

Our financial system needs some revision; our money is all good now, but its value must not further be threatened. [...] Most of our financial laws are the outgrowth of experience and trial, and should not be amended without investigation and demonstration of the wisdom of the proposed changes. We must be both “sure we are right” and “make haste slowly.” If, therefore, Congress, in its wisdom, shall deem it expedient to create a commission to take under early consideration the revision of our coinage, banking and currency laws, and give them that exhaustive, careful and dispassionate examination that their importance demands, I shall cordially concur in such action. (278)

Thus spoke a fiscal conservative at the end of the nineteenth century, and the two proverbs “Be sure you’re right, then go ahead” and “Make haste slowly” suited him extremely well in his argument for monetary stability.

Two pages later, still talking about financial matters, President McKinley turns to the early nineteenth-century proverb “Pay as you go” as a sapiential rule for how the government should conduct its business: “The best way for the government to maintain its credit is to pay as it goes—not by resorting to loans, but by keeping out of debt—through an adequate income secured by a system of taxation, external or internal, or both” (280). When he turns to diplomatic issues, he comes up with the statement that “Our diplomacy should seek nothing more and accept nothing less than is due us” (285). There is a sententious if not proverbial ring to this concise formulation (perhaps based on the old proverb “Give everyone his due”), but the utterance has not found its way into any books of memorable phrases thus far. It might be seen, however, as a sign that presidents do attempt to come up with memorable phrases in their inaugural addresses.
As can be seen from the speech at his second inauguration on March 4, 1901, William McKinley has an inclination towards proverbial rhetoric. Looking into the future of his powerful and thriving country, he makes use of three proverbs in but one powerful paragraph:

Distrust of the capacity, integrity, and high purposes of the American people will not be an inspiring theme for future political contests. Dark pictures and gloomy forebodings are worse than useless. These only becloud, they do not help to point the way of safety and honor. “Hope maketh not ashamed.” The prophets of evil were not the builders of the Republic, nor in its crises since have they saved or served it. The faith of the fathers was a mighty force in its creation, and the faith of their descendants has wrought its progress and furnished its defenders. They are obstructionists who despair, and who would destroy confidence in the ability of our people to solve wisely and for civilization the mighty problems resting upon them. The American people, entrenched in freedom at home, take their love for it with them wherever they go, and they reject as mistaken and unworthy the doctrine that we lose our own liberties by securing the enduring foundations of liberty to others. Our institutions will not deteriorate by extension, and our sense of justice will not abate under tropic suns in distant seas. As heretofore, so hereafter will the nation demonstrate its fitness to administer any new estate which events devolve upon it, and in the fear of God will “take occasion by the hand and make the bounds of freedom wider yet.” If there are those among us who would make our way more difficult, we must not be disheartened, but the more earnestly dedicate ourselves to the task upon which we have rightly entered. The path of progress is seldom smooth. New things are often found hard to do. Our fathers found them so. We find them so. They are inconvenient. They cost us something. But are we not made better for the effort and sacrifice, and are not those we serve lifted up and blessed? (291–292)

The biblical proverb “Hope maketh not ashamed” (Romans 5:5) is well suited to argue for a positive outlook on the future of the Union, one that befits the future-oriented worldview of the American people. President McKinley’s optimistic claims are strengthened by the use of the classical proverb “Take occasion by the hand (forelock)” and the fittingly altered version of Shakespeare’s quotation long turned proverb “The path of true love never runs smooth” from the play Midsummer Night’s Dream. This is indeed a magisterial employment of biblical, literary, and folk proverbs,
and his enthusiastic audience no doubt reacted with pride to this string of proverbial statements.

The end of McKinley’s second inaugural address is also of interest, and not only because he does not complete his remarks with the more or less traditional humility topos of placing the ultimate fate of the country into the hands of God. Instead, he discusses expansionist policies regarding the Philippines which the United States as a new world power had taken into its possession during the Spanish-American War. To add a bit of patriotic fervor to his statement, he draws on the proverbial triad of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” of Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence:

“The greater part of the inhabitants [of the Philippines] recognize American sovereignty and welcome it as a guarantee of order and security for life, property, liberty, freedom of conscience, and the pursuit of happiness” (295). This certainly is an interesting use of this slogan of independence as the United States is occupying a foreign country.

From Theodore Roosevelt to Herbert Hoover

The “Rough Rider” Theodore Roosevelt, who had become the twenty-sixth president after McKinley’s assassination in September of 1901, delivered his inaugural address for his own four-year-term in office on March 5, 1905. One might have expected to find some solid proverbial rhetoric in the speech by this vital and dynamic politician. But in his short comments of not even three pages he did no more than allude to the proverb “Deeds, not words,” a piece of wisdom that is certainly in accord with his own activity level:

Much has been given us, and much will rightfully be expected from us. We have duties to others and duties to ourselves; and we can shirk neither. We have become a great nation, forced by the fact of its greatness into relations with other nations of the earth, and we must behave as beseems a people with such responsibilities. Toward all other nations, large and small, our attitude must be one of cordial and sincere friendship. We must show not only in our words, but in our deeds, that we are earnestly desirous of securing their goodwill by acting toward them in a spirit of just and generous recognition of all their rights. (300)

These are rather humble words by the energetic veteran and hero of the Spanish American War, whose down-to-earth forthrightness made him a very popular president indeed.

With Theodore Roosevelt’s help, William Howard Taft became the twenty-seventh president, presenting his rather long inaugural address
Proverbs Are the Best Policy

(fifteen pages) on March 9, 1909. Like his predecessor, Taft is not particularly colloquial in his remarks. In fact, he merely uses a proverbial expression to make the point that care must be taken in race relations, that good intentions for increased governmental appointments of Blacks may “do more harm than good.” This does not seem to be a particularly engaged statement for civil rights. But here are his own words:

The Negroes are now Americans. [...] We are charged with the sacred duty of making their path as smooth and easy as we can. Any recognition of their distinguished men, any appointment to office from among their number, is properly taken as an encouragement and an appreciation of their progress, and this just policy should be pursued when suitable occasion offers. But it may well admit of doubt whether, in the case of any race, an appointment of one of their number to a local office in a community in which the race feeling is so widespread and acute as to interfere with the ease and facility with which the local government business can be done by the appointee is of sufficient benefit by way of encouragements to the race to outweigh the recurrence and increase of race feeling which such an appointment is likely to engender. Therefore the executive, in recognizing the Negro race by appointments, must exercise a careful discretion not thereby to do it more harm than good. On the other hand, we must be careful not to encourage the mere pretense of race feeling manufactured in the interest of individual political ambition. (318)

This is a rather convoluted paragraph with too many if’s and but’s instead of straight language for integration of the government, even though Taft continues by stating, “Personally, I have not the slightest race prejudice or feeling” (318). Taft is much more forthright a page later when he discusses the need for “laws for the application of safety devices to save the lives and limbs of employees of interstate railroads” (319). In fact, he repeats his alliterative binary formula by proclaiming, “I shall be glad, whenever any additional reasonable safety device can be invented to reduce the loss of life and limb among railway employees, to urge Congress to require its adoption by interstate railways” (319). But where is the call for laws protecting the civil rights of the Blacks and other minorities?

With Woodrow Wilson as the two-term twenty-eighth president, the White House had as its occupant an intellectual who had previously been president of Princeton University. As one might expect, Wilson struck a rather philosophical note in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1913. While he too begins his speech with mentioning the great past of this
country, he cautions that “the evil has come with the good” (324). And then follow two paragraphs that amass such proverbial expressions as “To see the bad with the good,” “To have fair play,” “To have second thoughts,” “To have the scales fall of one’s eyes,” and “To make up one’s mind.” He clearly wants to confront the citizens with what we would call today a “reality check,” and he adds quite a bite to his jeremiad by satirically reducing the prevailing American philosophy of life to the proverb “Every man for himself.” The fact that he cites two variations of the proverb that indicate the all-pervasiveness of this worldview from one generation to another makes his statement especially powerful:

At last a vision has been vouchsafed us of our life as a whole. We see the bad with the good, the debased and decadent with the sound and vital. With this vision we approach new affairs. Our duty is to cleanse, to reconsider, to restore, to correct the evil without impairing the good, to purify and humanize every process of our common life without weakening or sentimentalizing it. There has been something crude and heartless and unfeeling in our haste to succeed and be great. Our thought has been “Let every man look out for himself, let every generation look out for itself,” while we reared giant machinery which made it impossible that any but those who stood at the levers of control should have a chance to look out for themselves. We had not forgotten our morals. We remembered well enough that we had set up a policy which was meant to serve the humblest as well as the most powerful, with an eye single to the standards of justice and fair play, and remembered it with pride. But we were very heedless and in a hurry to be great.

We have come now to the sober second thought. The scales of heedlessness have fallen from our eyes. We have made up our minds to square every process of our national life again with the standards we so proudly set up at the beginning and have always carried at our hearts. Our work is a work of restoration. (325)

This is quite a proverbial wake-up call for the nation. The last paragraph with its appropriate integration of the proverbial phrase “To hang in the balance” concludes this humanely inspired speech. This is not a boisterous president who speaks only of the greatness of the United States. Instead, one senses the sincerity and humility of Abraham Lincoln in these remarks, a man who did not have the intellectual schooling of Wilson but who certainly equalled him in moral wisdom. As Woodrow Wilson put it: “This is not a day of triumph; it is a day of dedication. Here muster, not the forces of party, but the forces of humanity. Men’s hearts wait upon us; men’s lives
hang in the balance; men’s hopes call upon us to say what we will do. Who shall live up to the great trust? Who dares fail to try? I summon all honest men, all patriotic, all forward-looking men, to my side. God helping me, I will not fail them, if they will but counsel and sustain me!” (327–328).

Little did Woodrow Wilson know that the next year World War I would break out in Europe! In fact, one month after his second inaugural address on March 5, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. This speech lacks proverbial passages save one in the first paragraph. Here Wilson looks back at the accomplishments of his first term in office, and it is with considerable pride that he speaks proverbially of having put the governmental house back in order:

The four years which have elapsed since last I stood in this place have been crowded with counsel and action of the most vital interest and consequence. Perhaps no equal period in our history has been so fruitful of important reforms in our economic and industrial life or so full of significant changes in the spirit and purpose of our political action. We have sought very thoroughly to set our house in order, correct the grosser errors and abuses of our industrial life, liberate and quicken the processes of our national genius and energy, and lift our politics to a broader view of the people’s essential interests. (329–330)

With the horrors of World War I fading, Warren G. Harding, the twenty-ninth president, had campaigned on the promise of returning the country once and for all to “normalcy.” Arguing for a more vigorous trade policy in time of peace, he paraphrased the biblical proverb “Give and you shall receive (Give, and it shall be given unto you)” (Luke 6:38) to add traditional wisdom to his economic message: “We must understand that ties of trade bind nations in closest intimacy, and none may receive except as he gives. We have not strengthened ours in accordance with our resources or our genius, notably on our continent, where a galaxy of republics reflects the glory of new-world democracy, but in the new order of finance and trade we mean to promote enlarged activities and seek expanded confidence” (340). Still speaking of economic matters, Harding argues proverbially that there must be plenty of “give and take” in getting matters back on track:

The business world reflects the disturbances of war’s reaction. [...] The normal balances have been impaired, the channels of distribution have been clogged, the relations of labor and management have been strained. We must seek the readjustment with care and courage. Our people must
give and take. Prices must reflect the receding fever of war activities. Perhaps we shall never know the old levels of wages again, because war invariably readjusts compensations, and the necessaries of life will show their inseparable relationship, but we must strive for normalcy to reach stability. (343)

Echoing his immediate predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, Harding also calls for putting the proverbial house in order: “We contemplate the immediate task of putting our public household in order. We need a rigid and yet sane economy, combined with fiscal justice, and it must be attended by individual prudence and thrift, which are so essential to this trying hour and reassuring for the future” (342). And also in keeping with Wilson’s moral stance, Harding places the goal of his administration on the proverb “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12), the Golden Rule: “Service is the supreme commitment of life. I would rejoice to acclaim the era of the Golden Rule and crown it with the autocracy of service. I pledge an administration wherein all the agencies of government are called to serve, and ever promote an understanding of government purely as an expression of the popular will” (346). Those are truly noble words, and the Golden Rule in one of its proverbial variants ought to be the guiding principle of all governments and their people. It is surprising that later presidents (except for mere allusions to it by Calvin Coolidge and Richard Nixon) have not picked up on this fundamental law of human ethical behavior in their inaugural addresses.

On March 4, 1925, Calvin Coolidge from the rural state of Vermont became the thirtieth president of the United States. Like other presidents before him, he begins his inaugural address with a short historical glance at the greatness of the American nation:

Because of what America is and what America has done, a firmer courage, a higher hope, inspires the heart of all humanity. These results have not occurred by mere chance. They have been secured by a constant and enlightened effort marked by many sacrifices and extending over many generations. We cannot continue these brilliant successes in the future, unless we continue to learn from the past. [...] We must realize that human nature is about the most constant thing in the universe and that the essentials of human relationship do not change. We must frequently take our bearings from these fixed stars of our political firmament if we expect to hold a true course. If we examine carefully what we have done, we can determine the more accurately what we can do. (350)
The seafaring proverbial expression “to hold a true course” is a perfect fit for the thoughts of a person who is taking over the helm of the ship of State. As to the sententious remark on what has been done and what can be done, it might well be structured on a truly famous speech by Abraham Lincoln. He had started his well-known “House Divided” speech of June 16, 1858, with the statement “If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.” It was in this speech that Lincoln employed the biblical proverb “A house divided against itself cannot stand” (Mark 3:25) to describe how slavery was threatening the survival of the Union.

Even though the American language owes the proverb “The business of America is business” to Calvin Coolidge, this taciturn president actually attempted to stay away from fixed phrases. Right at his inauguration he stated that “If we wish to continue to be distinctively American, we must continue to make that term comprehensive enough to embrace legitimate desires of a civilized and enlightened people determined in all their relations to pursue a conscientious and religious life. We cannot permit ourselves to be narrowed and dwarfed by slogans and phrases. It is not the adjective, but the substantive, which is of real importance. It is not the name of the action, but the result of the action, which is the chief concern” (351). But later in his speech he clearly builds on the two biblical proverbs “Judge not, lest ye be judged” and “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and adds the folk proverb of “God helps those who help themselves” for good measure:

Our program is never to oppress, but always to assist. But while we do justice to others, we must require that justice be done to us. With us a treaty of peace means peace, and a treaty of amity means amity. We have made great contributions to the settlement of contentious differences in both Europe and Asia. But there is a very definite point beyond which we cannot go. We can only help those who help themselves. Mindful of these limitations, the one great duty that stands out requires us to use our enormous powers to trim the balance of the world. (354–354)

These comments are thoroughly based on proverbial slogans, and the change of the proverb “God helps those who help themselves” to the collective “We [Americans] can only help those who help themselves” is a clear indication of the president’s willingness to flex the powerful muscles of the country in world affairs. The altered proverb might also imply the unseemly but not uncommon attitude that Americans (collectively) are God—or at least God’s surrogate decision makers in world affairs.
Towards the end of his speech on various principles for which America stands, the new president draws a very positive picture for the future of the country:

The encouraging feature of our country is not that it has reached its destination, but that it has overwhelmingly expressed its determination to proceed in the right direction. It is true that we could, with profit, be less sectional and more national in our thought. It would be well if we could replace much that is only false and ignorant prejudice with a true and enlightened pride of race. But the last election showed that appeals to class and nationality had little effect. We were all found loyal to a common citizenship. The fundamental precept of liberty is toleration. We cannot permit any inquisition either within or without the law or apply any religious test to the holding of office. The mind of America must be forever free. (359–360)

The claim that “The fundamental precept of liberty is toleration” is clearly of a linguistic structure and conciseness that gives it the ring of a sententious remark or slogan. It has not gained proverbiality, but it is surprising that it has not entered the many dictionaries of quotations. Be that as it may, Coolidge and his natural terseness of language appears to have a natural inclination to formulaic statements, and he seems to have failed in his attempt to avoid them!

The thirty-first president, however, was more successful in not reducing American ideals to readymade phrases. Herbert Hoover in his inaugural speech of March 4, 1929, basically repeated what Calvin Coolidge had said earlier: “These ideals and aspirations [of America] are the touchstones upon which the day-to-day administration and legislative acts of government must be tested. More than this, the government must, so far as lies within its proper power, give leadership to the realization of these ideals and to the fruition of these aspirations. No one can adequately reduce these things of the spirit to phrases or to a catalogue of definitions” (373). Consequently, his first speech as president is void of quotable phrases and proverbs. But there is, perhaps, one exception to this claim. It appears that he might allude to the proverb “There is no royal road to learning (success)” in the following comment:

There is no short road to the realization of these aspirations. Ours is a progressive people, but with a determination that progress must be based upon the foundation of experience. Ill-considered remedies for our faults bring only penalties after them. But if we hold the faith of men in our
mighty past who created these ideals, we shall leave them heightened and strengthened for our children. (373)

Whether President Coolidge in his time in office was more proverbial than President Hoover in his turn can, of course, only be ascertained by investigating all of their speeches and writings.

FROM FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT TO DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

Never again will there be a president of the United States who will have the opportunity of delivering four inaugural addresses! But Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the thirty-second president did exactly that, and he did so with much pervasive rhetorical power. The beginning paragraph of his speech at the first inauguration on March 4, 1933, is a telling example of his oratorical abilities that were to dominate American politics during the next twelve years, while Winston Churchill soared to rhetorical heights in Great Britain and Adolf Hitler manipulated the German language to bring about World War II and the Holocaust. All three political leaders made ample use of proverbial language to convince their respective people of their plans and intentions.22 Roosevelt himself began his first inaugural speech with a statement that included the three proverbial texts “To speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” and “To be a dark hour”:

I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our nation impels. This is preeminently the 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. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days. (377–378)

As Roosevelt promised the country a New Deal after the devastating depression, he chose his words well when he proclaimed with much optimism
that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” This statement has long
found its way into quotation dictionaries and even into the Dictionary of
American Proverbs (1992). However, the editors of these collections of
quotations and proverbs are quick to point out that Roosevelt based his
sententious remark on a number of possible sources:

Whenever conscience commands anything, there is only one thing to
fear, and that is fear (St. Theresa of Avila, c. 1575)
The thing I fear most is fear (Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, 1580)
Nothing is terrible except fear itself (Francis Bacon, 1623)
The only thing I am afraid of is fear (Arthur Wellesley, Duke of
Wellington, 1831)
Nothing is so much to be feared as fear (Henry David Thoreau, 1851)

Perhaps Roosevelt alone or with the help of speech writers coined
this variant of the formulaic theme of fearing fear, but it might also have
been formulated in knowledge of some of these earlier statements. In
any case, in its unique wording it has correctly become associated with
Franklin D. Roosevelt, and in the mind of most Americans he did in fact
invent it.

With a sense of optimism and courage and the willingness to be
innovative in governmental programs, Roosevelt called the nation into
revitalized action. Little wonder that he cites the proverbial expression “To
put the house in order” at this occasion, as Woodrow Wilson and Warren G.
Harding had done before him. But Roosevelt now adds the proverb “First
things first” in order to stress that certain priorities have to be set in getting
the country back on its feet:

Through this program [the New Deal] of action we address ourselves to
putting our own national house in order and making income balance
outgo. Our international trade relations, though vastly important,
are in point of time and necessity secondary to the establishment of a
sound national economy. I favor as a practical policy the putting of first
things first. I shall spare no effort to restore world trade by international
economic readjustment, but the emergency at home cannot wait on that
accomplishment. (380)

Four years later, on January 20 (new date for inaugural addresses), 1937,
Roosevelt begins the speech at his second inauguration with the justified
claim that the government had succeeded in adhering to the proverb “First things first” in its recovery program:

When four years ago we met to inaugurate a president, the Republic, single-minded in anxiety, stood in spirit here. We dedicated ourselves to the fulfillment of a vision—to speed the time when there would be for all the people that security and peace essential to the pursuit of happiness. We of the Republic pledged ourselves to drive from the temple of our ancient faith those who had profaned it; to end by action, tireless and unafraid, the stagnation and despair of that day. We did those first things first. (383)

Later on in the same speech, Roosevelt speaks with considerable pride of the changes that have come about, because the New Deal was not just a proverbial patchwork job but a program that, proverbially speaking, will meet with even more success in the long run:

Our progress out of the depression is obvious. But that is not all that you and I mean by the new order of things. Our pledge was not merely to do a patchwork job with secondhand materials. By using the new materials of social justice we have undertaken to erect on the old foundations a more enduring structure for the better use of future generations. [...] Out of the collapse of prosperity whose builders boasted their practicality has come the conviction that in the long run economic morality pays. (385)

By the time of his third inauguration on January 20, 1941, Roosevelt was already addressing the question whether the United States would have to enter into World War II. Not surprisingly, his short speech on that occasion deals with the idea that “Democracy is not dying” (390). He praises the traditional values of America, especially the importance of maintaining freedom: “Sometimes we fail to hear or heed these voices of freedom because to us the privilege of our freedom is such an old, old story” (292–393). The proverbial expression “To be an old story” serves him well in this case to warn against the feeling that freedom is something old that does not need constant vigilance. Many a puristic stylist might look at this traditional phrase as a cliché of no communicative value, but that would miss Roosevelt’s important message.

At the height of World War II, the country elected Roosevelt to a fourth term, but due to the tense situation, Roosevelt’s inaugural speech on January 20, 1945, comprised barely a page and a half. And yet, at this
It's Not a President's Business to Catch Flies

somber moment, President Roosevelt cites two proverbial expressions and a proverb to remind people of the necessity to find peace in the world by being a player on the world scene. Isolationism is clearly not a choice for a world power like the United States:

Today, in this year of war, 1945, we have learned lessons—at a fearful cost—and we shall profit from them. We have learned that we cannot live alone, at peace; that our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of other nations far away. We have learned that we must live as men, not as ostriches, nor as dogs in the manger. We have learned the simple truth, as Emerson said, that “the only way to have a friend is to be one.” We can gain no lasting peace if we approach it with suspicion and mistrust or with fear. We can gain it only if we proceed with the understanding, the confidence, and the courage which flow from conviction. (396)

The metaphors of the proverbial expressions “To be an ostrich” and “To be a dog in the manger” serve Roosevelt well to express the two ideas that America cannot afford to be blind to the events in the world and that it cannot retreat selfishly on its own territory, leaving the rest of the world to its own devices. Instead, the United States needs to be a friend to all other free nations, as Roosevelt explains it by quoting a line from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay on *Friendship* (1841), a line that had long since become a proverb. 27

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. 28 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).

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)

FROM JOHN F. KENNEDY TO JIMMY CARTER

When the youthful and vigorous John F. Kennedy was sworn in on January 20, 1961, 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, like 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. Three 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,” but he might also have alluded to the proverb “He who rides the tiger can never dismount”:

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 on the proverb “God helps those who help themselves,” once again replacing “God” by the “We” (Americans):

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)

Finally, the third pledge calls to memory the short proverb "Deeds, not words." Of course, Kennedy might well have used the proverb "Actions speak louder than words" in this case:

To our sister republics south of the border, we offer a special pledge—to convert our good words into good deeds, in a new Alliance for Progress, to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty.

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. 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_, 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" 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 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.” 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” and then spoke proverbially of this country where one can be one’s own man (person):

> 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. 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 what 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.” but 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).

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.” The few examples that Scott cites, and he quotes particularly the paragraph that follows below, do not seem 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.”

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 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 society in general as Kennedy had intended his message.

After Nixon’s disgraceful behavior and resignation from the presidency, Gerald Ford took over the helm of the country as the thirty-eighth president in August of 1974. He lost the 1976 election to Jimmy Carter, who 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].” Typical for the ethical Carter, he reinterpreted the political phrase to argue for social and racial fairness.

**From Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush**

With Ronald Reagan as the fortieth president, the nation had found a so-called “great communicator” to guide it through an increased military buildup and the implementation of supply-side economics in the form of spending cuts and tax cuts. Reagan has been criticized and 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 supposedly 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, 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.” 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 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. 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)

In fact, Reagan picks up the proverbial expression “To have fair play” that Woodrow Wilson had used in his first inaugural address. Reagan argues that “All must share in the productive work of this ‘new beginning’ and all
must share in the bounty of a revived economy. With the idealism and fair play which are the core of our system and our strength, we can have a strong and prosperous America at peace with itself and the world” (473–474). And then, 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” was too high a price to be paid by 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 always a tomorrow,” 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 H. W. 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.” 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)

Like other presidents before him, Bush has absolute trust in the American form of government: “We don’t have to talk late into the night about which form of government is better. We don’t have to wrest justice from the kings. We only have to summon it from within ourselves. We must act on what we know. I take as my guide the hope of a saint: In crucial things, unity; in important things, diversity; in all things, generosity” (491). It would indeed have been considerate if President Bush had told us what saint he had in mind. Most likely he thought of Saint Augustine, to whom the Latin motto “In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas” has occasionally been ascribed. The earliest printed reference found thus far dates, however, only from Rupertus Meldenius’s treatise on Praenesis votiva pro pace ecclesiae (1626). In any case, the English translation would be “In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity.” Bush and his speech
writers varied the sententious motto somewhat, but for the most part it expresses the spirit of the original.

In his National Convention acceptance speech mentioned above, Bush also spoke of the diverse American population as a “thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky.” Even though the light metaphor was most likely taken from Thomas Wolfe’s novel *The Web and the Rock* (1939), the phrase is now associated with George Bush who repeated it in his inaugural address: “I have spoken of a thousand points of light, of all the community organizations that are spread like stars throughout the nation, doing good. We will work hand in hand, encouraging, sometimes leading, sometimes being led, rewarding” (493). 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.

The six pages of Bush’s inaugural speech are certainly a solid testimony that proverbial language is part of this ceremonial performance by newly elected presidents. In this particular case, there is even a proverbial *leitmotif* in that George Bush returns two more times to the proverbial expression “A new breeze is blowing.” Regarding the Vietnam war, Bush said: “That war cleaves us still. But, friends, that war began in earnest a quarter of a century ago; and surely the statute of limitations has been reached. This is a fact: the final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory. A new breeze is blowing, and the old bipartisanship must be made new again” (493). And then, in the final crescendo of his speech, Bush
cites the “breeze” phrase one more time and connects it with an allusion to
his earlier sententious motto of unity, diversity, and generosity, certainly an
example of a carefully structured oration:

Some see leadership as a high drama, and the sound of trumpets calling,
and sometimes it is that. But I see history as a book with many pages,
and each day we fill a page with acts of hopefulness and meaning. The
new breeze blows, a page turns, the story unfolds. And so today a chapter
begins, a small and stately story of unity, diversity, and generosity—
shared, and written, together. (495)

Yet the masterful craftsman of proverbial rhetoric lost his bid for a second
term in the White House to a newcomer on the national scene. 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,
as William McKinley had done at his second inauguration in 1901. 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). Clinton
did well not to cite this threatening proverb decreeing punishment.
Instead his Bible passage promises rewards to the patiently faithful and hopeful along the lines of the proverb “Good things come to those who wait.”

Bill Clinton began his second inaugural address on January 20, 1997, with the old standby 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 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.” The only other proverbial utterance in this nondescript speech comes at its end, where Clinton talks about his upcoming problems of having to deal with both houses of Congress being in Republican hands:

The American people returned to office a president of one party and a Congress of another. Surely they did not do this to advance the politics of petty bickering and extreme partisanship they plainly deplore. No, they call all of us instead to be repairers of the breach and to move on with America’s mission. America demands and deserves big things from us, and nothing big ever came from being small. Let us remember the timeless wisdom of Cardinal [Joseph] Bernardin [of Chicago, 1928–1996] when facing the end of his own life. He said, “It is wrong to waste the precious gift of time on acrimony and division.” We must not waste the precious gift of this time, for all of us are on that same journey of our lives. And our journey too will come to an end, but the journey of our America must go on. (511)

On the one hand Clinton succeeds splendidly in coining a statement that has the ring of a folk proverb to it. He even integrates the idiomatic meaning of the phrase “to be small” in the sense of being uncooperative into his memorable phrase “Nothing big ever came from being small.” But then, as if he perhaps thought this successful pun too trite to conclude his important speech, he adds the awkward and not (if at all) known quotation
It’s Not a President’s Business to Catch Flies

of Cardinal Bernardin to it, destroying his successful slogan by an awkward and artificial statement. One would have preferred to hear Clinton’s own words, and if he wanted yet another quotable sentence about “the precious gift of time,” he could have found many of them among folk proverbs. For a start, the three American proverbs “Time wasted getting even could be saved by getting ahead,” “Time wasted is time lost,” and “Time wasted is never regained” come to mind as suitable possibilities.

This brings us to the 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.” 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.” 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 in fact made him the new president: “Our nation must rise above a house divided.” 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, was well chosen for this momentous occasion. It had been my conjecture that Bush would incorporate this fitting piece of traditional wisdom in its entirety into this inaugural speech, but he and his speechwriter Michael Gersen decided against it.

Possibly this speech will be counted among 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.” 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 not be because of its mediocre oratorical character but rather because of its message of civic responsibility.

While speaking of civility, 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.” 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.

Perhaps 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 use of folk wisdom, namely that of indirection. 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 “reestablished the tradition of political eloquence.” After George W. Bush’s first inaugural address there was hope for more eloquent rhetoric once again, an amazing achievement for the new president whose rhetorical skills had been ridiculed. Unfortunately Bush’s years as president have not been marked by verbal eloquence, and his second inaugural address, delivered on January 20, 2005, contained no particularly memorable phrase or proverbial statement.

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. Not surprisingly, 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.’” 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 are
meant to be timely and timeless, and a memorable phrase or a traditional proverb represents a preformulated and commonly known bit of wisdom that underscores 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.