

President Trump Declares Independence

By Peggy Noonan, The Wall Street Journal, 23 January 2017

His message to America: Remember those things I said in the campaign? I meant them. I meant it all.

I was more moved than I expected. Then more startled.

The old forms and traditions, the bands and bunting, endured. I thought, as I watched the inauguration: *It continues*. There were pomp and splendor, happy, cheering crowds; and for all the confounding nature of the past 18 months, and all the trauma, it came as a reassurance to see us do what we do the way we do it. A friend in the Southwest, a longtime Trump supporter, emailed just before the swearing in: “I have been crying all morning.” From joy.

I found myself unexpectedly moved during the White House meeting of the Trumps and the Obamas, at the moment Melania Trump emerged from her car. She was beautiful, seemed so shy and game. There are many ways to show your respect for people and events, and one is to present yourself with elegance and dignity.

The inaugural address was utterly and uncompromisingly Trumpian. The man who ran is the man who’ll reign. It was plain, unfancy and blunt to the point of blistering. A little humility would have gone a long way, but that’s not the path he took. Nor did he attempt to reassure. It was pow, right in the face. Most important, he did not in any way align himself with the proud Democrats and Republicans arrayed around him. He looked out at the crowd and said he was allied with *them*.

He presented himself not as a Republican or a conservative but as a populist independent. The essential message: Remember those things I said in the campaign? I meant them. *I meant it all*. The address was bold in its assertion of the distance in America between the leaders and the led: “For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished—but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered—but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself but not the citizens of our country.”

It was an unmistakable indictment of almost everyone seated with him on the platform.

Then a stark vow: “That all changes—starting right here and right now.” Jan. 20 “will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.”

And these words were most remarkable, not because they were new, but because he didn’t back away from them, he repeated them in an improvisation: “From this day forward it’s going to be only America first—America first.” To American workers and families: “You will never be ignored again.”

The speech will electrify President Trump’s followers. They will feel satisfaction that they understood him and knew what they were backing. And it will deepen the Washington establishment’s unease. Republican leaders had been hoping the address would ameliorate their anxieties about the continued primacy of their traditional policy preferences. Forget that. This was a declaration that the president is going his own way and they’d best follow.

Throughout the speech, and much of the day, Mr. Trump looked stern. At first I thought it was the face he puts on when he’s nervous. I don’t think so now.

Anyway, it was a remarkable speech, like none before it, and it marked, I think, yet another break point in the two-party reality that has dominated our politics for many decades.

And so, now, it begins. And it simply has to be repeated: We have never had a political moment like this in our lives. We have never had a president like this, such a norm-breaker, in all the ways we know. We are in uncharted seas.

His supporters, who flooded Washington this week, were friendly, courteous—but watchful. Two Midwestern women told me separately that they used to be but no longer are Republican. They’re something new, waiting for a name.

They like Mr. Trump the way you learn to like someone you hired and will depend on. They judged him as exactly what’s needed to cut through the *merde* machine of modern Washington. He is a destabilizer; he shifts the tectonic plates; in the chaos that results, breakthroughs are possible.

And yet all admit that yes, we’re in uncharted waters.

The mood among Republicans in Washington is hopeful apprehension. Even Trump supporters, even his staff and advisers, feel it. No one knows what he’ll be like as president,

how this will go. Including, probably, him. A GOP senator characterized his mood as “tentatively positive.” Another said, with a big grin: “I feel somewhat optimistic!”

We’ll find out a lot the next few months. How will Mr. Trump work with Congress, and what are his specific legislative priorities? How important will the cabinet be? Will the Trumps really live in the White House or just stay and do events a few days a week? Will they come to own the physical space, the psychic space, of the executive mansion and the presidency? Will they give Camp David—those rustic cabins that are a glass, brass and marble-free zone—a chance?

The big embassies this week gave receptions to celebrate the inauguration, and invited official Washington. Ambassadors made friendly speeches about their countries’ long, deep and unchanging ties to America. They approached the big change with sangfroid, even jolliness. But Washington still doesn’t know what to make of this thing America did.

At the Kuwaiti Embassy I looked out at hundreds of Washingtonians of both parties—diplomats, lobbyists, military brass, journalists—all networking, meeting, greeting, all handsomely dressed. As I surveyed the scene I turned to a social figure of 40 years’ standing. “Do they have any sense they’re living through big history?” I asked. “Noooooo!” she said. The look on her face—if it had been the late 19th century she would have said, “Pshaw!” History is not what they’re about, she was suggesting; satisfying their personal and immediate hungers is what they’re about.

The Trump Wars of the past 18 months do not now go away. Now it becomes the Trump Civil War, every day, with Democrats trying to get rid of him and half the country pushing back. To reduce it to the essentials: As long as Mr. Trump’s party holds the House, it will be a standoff. If the Democrats take the House, they will move to oust him.

Because we are divided. We are two nations, maybe more.

Normally a new president has someone backing him up, someone publicly behind him. Mr. Obama had the mainstream media—the big broadcast networks, big newspapers, activists and intellectuals, pundits and columnists of the left—the whole shebang. He had a unified, passionate party. Mr. Trump in comparison has almost nothing. The mainstream legacy media oppose him, even hate him, and will not let up. The columnists, thinkers and magazines of the right were mostly NeverTrump; some came reluctantly to support him. His party is split or

splitting. The new president has gradations of sympathy, respect or support from exactly one cable news channel, and some websites.

He really has no one but those who voted for him.

Do they understand what a lift daily governance is going to be, and how long the odds are, with so much arrayed against him, and them?