



# Media Reality ✓ Check

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## History of Double Standards: Clinton Touted as Sturdy-Jawed Icon; Bush's Speech Paired with Funeral Media Mudballs Unlikely for Obama Inaugural

The news media are giddy with excitement as Barack Obama's Inauguration Day approaches (see box), but it would be a mistake to think reporters are always so worshipful of new presidents. While most presidents do start with a media honeymoon, a review of the past 20 years finds reporters are more celebratory when Democrats are taking over the White House, while coverage of GOP inaugurals has included a fair number of anti-conservative stinkbombs:

■ **1989.** TV reporters chose to salute the incoming President George Bush by slamming the more conservative Ronald Reagan. ABC's Richard Threlkeld went to Overtown, a riot-scarred area of Miami, for Inauguration Day: "After eight years of what many saw as the Reagan administration's benign neglect of the poor and studied indifference to civil rights, a lot of those who lived through this week in Overtown seemed to think the best thing about George Bush is that he is not Ronald Reagan," Threlkeld claimed on the January 20, 1989 *World News Tonight*. "There is an Overtown in every big city in America — pockets of misery made even meaner and more desperate the past eight years."

On NBC, anchor Bryant Gumbel praised Bush's speech as signaling "a new activism, a new engagement in the lives of others, a yearning for greater tolerance.... Basically a rejection of everything that the Reagan years had been about."

■ **1993.** Bill Clinton's arrival was touted with the same fervor now bestowed on Obama. The *New York Times* asked in a January 3, 1993 headline: "Clinton as National Idol: Can the Honeymoon Last?" *Newsweek* magazine ran TV ads touting its commemorative edition "that's sure to be a collector's item because it covers the most important inauguration of our lifetime." *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jill Abramson — now managing editor of news at the *New York Times* — confessed: "It's an exciting time to be in Washington.... People are excited. They're happy about change.... I think you're going to see crowds for these inaugural events the likes of which we haven't seen in Washington ever."

■ **1997.** Clinton's second inaugural inspired just as much

hero-worship. Howard Rosenberg reviewed Clinton's speech for the *Los Angeles Times*: "His sturdy jaw precedes him. He smiles from sea to shining sea. Is this President a candidate for Mt. Rushmore or what?... In fact, when it comes to influencing the public, a single medley of expressions from Clinton may be worth much more, to much of America, than every ugly accusation Paula Jones can muster."

■ **2001.** After the long recount, reporters applied an asterisk to Bush's first inaugural. NBC's Maria Shriver emphasized "millions of people who felt disenfranchised by this election, who don't feel that he's their President yet."

On ABC, George Stephanopoulos warned Bush to avoid conservative policies: "With a 50-50 Senate and a tiny margin in the House, and a majority in the country who actually voted against President Bush, he'll be able to fulfill that central promise of unifying the country only if he's willing to compromise."

■ **2005.** Bush's second inaugural was met with far more hostility, with reporters attacking the \$40 million price tag as obscene. "In a time of war and natural disaster, is it time for a lavish celebration?" ABC's Terry Moran doubted. The AP's Will Lester calculated that the money spent on Bush's inaugural could vaccinate "22 million children in regions devastated by the tsunami.... Do we need to spend this money on what seems so extravagant?" (Obama's inaugural will cost \$45 million.)

The day before Bush's swearing-in, ABC's Web site pleaded for tips of "any military funerals for Iraq war casualties scheduled for Thursday, Jan. 20." Sure enough, then-ABC anchor Peter Jennings got his wish to report how "just about the time the president was speaking, there was a funeral for a young Marine reservist: 21-year-old Matthew Holloway was killed in Iraq last week by a roadside bomb." Don't look for the networks to use such tactics to sour Obama's celebration.

— Rich Noyes, MRC Research Director

**Obama: The Next Abraham Lincoln**  
"Barack Obama has some big shoes to fill, roughly the size of the ones up on the Lincoln Memorial.... Barack Obama's inaugural address may be more than the speech of his lifetime. Historians and speechwriters say it could be one for the ages." — CNN reporter Jim Acosta on *American Morning*, January 13.

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