

In the Legitimacy of “Change” We Trust

The *Washington Post* estimated that over 1.8 million people crowded the streets from the National Mall to the Lincoln Memorial to watch the Inaugural Ceremony held on the west front of the U.S. Capitol Building on January 20, 2009. This figure does not account for the number of people who watched the historic event on television that day. Even without television viewers, 1.8 million people is believed to be a record number gathered for any event ever held in Washington, D.C. Why was the inauguration so important? Why did over 1.8 million people show up to watch Barack Obama take an oath on the Bible? What were the incentives for seeing this event? Was parking free? Were there snacks? Or was this truly a historical event that displayed the United States’ unique capability to administer a democratic change in power peacefully? Was it such an event that it called for an amount of attention that trumped any previous event ever held in Washington, D.C.? Indeed, the 1.8 million people all came to witness a profound example of “change.” Barack Obama’s inauguration ceremony on January 20, 2009 served as a demonstration of the significance of “change” and what it really points out about the United States. When Obama, the first African American president, swore to serve his country, this gesture symbolized both the American government’s legitimacy through a peaceful transfer of power and its ability to transcend a past marked by civil inequality.

While watching the Presidential Inauguration, one must have questioned, what if this were not the United States of America? How would a transfer of power in an illegitimate government appear? Best-selling author Martin L. Gross once stated that a “government loses its claim to legitimacy when it fails to fulfill its obligations.” This is an accurate statement considering that governments acquire low levels of legitimacy when their people dispute government policy and lose confidence in the leadership. People who live under governments

with low levels of legitimacy often ignore the ruling power and resort to violence to solve political disagreements.

Illegitimacy can produce coup d'états that have the potential to birth acts of violence and infrastructural crises that can hinder the advancement of nations. For example, in 1987, major legitimacy problems arose in both Burkina Faso and Tunisia. In Burkina Faso, opposition leader Blaise Compaoré led a bloody coup that resulted in the murder of his predecessor allowing Compaoré to assume power as head of state. Since the coup, Burkina Faso has suffered economic stagnation and human rights violations. Strong public opposition to Compaoré has led to public boycotts and outcry that suggests the terms he has served as head of state were unconstitutional and illegitimate. Meanwhile in Tunisia during the same year, Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali administered a bloodless coup in which he claimed his predecessor was medically unable to fulfill his obligations and undemocratically assumed power. The public of Tunisia, who did not approve this self-appointment, believe Ben Ali has never completed a high school education and is responsible for the current turmoil that their country faces. Under the rule of Ben Ali, Tunisia has been secluded from outside media and the subject of a plethora of human rights violation discussions that pertain specifically to kidnapping, torture and murder. It's hard to imagine the United States suffering from the many problems that plague the developing world. The United States can remain immune to these troubles by ensuring the quality of the democratic process. The peaceful transfer of power demonstrated at the Obama inauguration exemplified the strength of democracy in the United States.

Another example concerning illegitimacy is the more contemporary Malagasy political crisis of 2009. This crisis featured anti-government demonstrations in Madagascar that culminated in military involvement and the succession of opposition leader Andry Rajoelina to

the Presidency. The protests began in January 2009 and quickly turned violent. Approximately 130 people were killed in Madagascar following the initial protests. Rajoelina later led his oppositional forces in the climax of their campaign when they forcefully took control of the presidential palace and Rajoelina assumed presidential authority in March. Rajoelina and his supporters claim that this act was not a coup d'état, but rather a direct representation of democracy when representative democracy fails to represent the good of the public and its institutions. Despite the claims of Rajoelina and his supports, the crisis drew substantial attention from both the United States and the United Kingdom and both condemned the actions and called the overthrowing of the incumbent Malagasy government a coup. This contemporary example displays how problematic undemocratic transfers of power exist and are often the result of illegitimate rule. The Malagasy crisis serves as another testimony to the importance of peaceful “change” and gives further credit to the ability of the United States to maintain the trustworthiness of their government to the point that transfers of power constitute a celebration of democracy rather than undemocratic opposition.

While Burkina Faso, Tunisia and Madagascar are all examples of what illegitimacy can do to a nation, the 2009 Presidential Inauguration serves as an important illustration of the legitimacy of the United States' government. The change in power from George W. Bush to Barack Obama was non-violent and was clearly a celebration of legitimacy, with broad undertones of national identity. Over 1.8 million people attended the Presidential Inauguration to see a democratically elected leader pledge to serve his country and his people. This was a remarkable display of change. Obama stood and took oath as the 44th president of the United States and the former president, George W. Bush, sat near him watching. There were no protests

or riots; there was no bloodshed. Few nations can boast such a celebration of change during transfers of power as the United States can.

The Obama mantra, “Change we can believe in,” encompasses the idea that the legitimate U.S. government can overcome hardships and will continue to provide for its people. Without the government’s legitimacy, there would not have been 1.8 million people watching Barack Obama swear in as the 44th president of the United States. What does this change mean for the United States? First and foremost, it is much easier for the government to function when its citizens believe in its legitimacy. The public’s feelings of legitimacy reflect a basic understanding between citizens and political authority. A government with legitimacy like the United States will be able to carry out important policies and overcome hardships. While the United States is currently facing an economic crisis comparable to the Great Depression and fighting a war on terrorism, it is of the utmost importance that the change of power is accompanied by the support of the people. The 2009 Presidential Inauguration illustrated that support. It showed the world that the people of the United States identify with, and support, their government.

Furthermore, the Inauguration also exemplified the United States’ ability to transcend the past. This past includes an economy built on slavery and segregation. Slavery in the United States began shortly after the pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock in 1607. The institution was established and provided great commerce for the South’s “cotton kingdom”. In retrospect, without the institution of slavery the wealth accumulated by the “cotton kingdom” would have been non-existent. President Abraham Lincoln issued two executive orders comprising the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which freed all slaves in the Confederate States. The institution of slavery was not legally outlawed until two years later in 1865 by the Thirteenth

Amendment to the United States Constitution. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished and prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude. Although the slaves had been freed, they still faced civil rights violations including segregation laws and prejudice. Throughout the past century the United States has undergone vast changes resulting in equal rights for all races. The 2009 Presidential Inauguration symbolized the progress of equal rights in the United States. The election of its first African-American president is a perfect example of change and furthers the concept that a legitimate government does not oppress its people. The United States government and the people it leads was able to transcend the practices of our nation's fathers and move forward, striving to provide equal rights for all of its citizens no matter their color, gender or social status.

The fact of the matter is that 1.8 million people gathered in Washington D.C. on January 20, 2009 to watch the first African-American swear his oath to serve his country as the President of the United States, while millions more watched live coverage on television. There was no outbreak of violence or conflict in the crowd at the dawning of the transfer of power. There were two men: one was the former president, George W. Bush, who sat patiently to watch the other newly and democratically elected, African-American symbol of legitimacy and change, Barack Obama take the oath of office. This move forward not only showed Americans how they have changed, but the entire world.