

# Analysis: Obama's speech takes on divisive issues



Susan Page, USA TODAY | 12:50a.m. EST January 22, 2013

*For the first time in U.S. history, an inaugural address endorsed same-sex marriage. Obama also talked about climate change.*



(Photo: H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY)

WASHINGTON — Less hope. More opportunity.

Barack Obama's first inaugural address to an unprecedented 1.8 million massed on the National Mall was buoyed by exuberance over the historic moment of swearing in the first African-American president — but it was also defined and limited by the unfolding financial crisis that dominated his first term.

In his second inaugural address Monday, his crowd was less than half the size, the breakthrough that his presidency represents has become more familiar and his own words promising a post-partisan era have been tempered by the confrontations of the past four years.

**FULL COVERAGE:** [The presidential inauguration \(http://www.usatoday.com/topic/39e60bae-e602-48ee-b80b-5745494b8bec/2013-presidential-inauguration/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/topic/39e60bae-e602-48ee-b80b-5745494b8bec/2013-presidential-inauguration/)

Even so, the opening for President Obama to shape his own agenda and his ability to push it through a resistant opposition may well have grown.

In his first four years, top White House concerns were determined in large part by the economic crisis and the two wars he inherited. With a recovery now underway and U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan headed home, he is in a better position to set his own priorities — not to mention he may feel liberated by the fact that he won't be running for office again.

In his 18-minute address on a cold day, he embraced more divisive issues and drew sharper lines than in the speech he delivered in 2009.

**MORE:** [Obama takes oath, delivers inaugural address \(http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/01/21/obamas-inaugural-day-celebration/1850901/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/01/21/obamas-inaugural-day-celebration/1850901/)

For the first time in U.S. history, an inaugural address endorsed gay rights and same-sex marriage; Obama said "our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law." He vowed action on climate change (a hot-button phrase he didn't utter in his 2009 address), saying no one "can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires and crippling drought and more powerful storms." He alluded to the school shooting rampage in Newtown, Conn., that has prompted him to add gun control to his agenda, saying children there and elsewhere should "know that they are ... safe from harm."

And he drew a bright line on the spending issues that are about to erupt on Capitol Hill as automatic spending cuts and a bill to continue funding of the federal government are debated.

**WORD CLOUD:** [Obama's inaugural addresses \(http://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2013/01/21/word-clouds-obama-speech-inauguration-2013/1851961/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2013/01/21/word-clouds-obama-speech-inauguration-2013/1851961/)

"We must make the hard choices to reduce the cost of health care and the size of our deficit," Obama said. But "the commitments we make to each other — through Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security — these things do not sap our initiative; they strengthen us. They do not make us a nation of takers; they free us to take the risks that make this country great."

The contemptuous reference to "a nation of takers" was a slap at Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, who was videotaped during the campaign as dismissing the "47%" who were "dependent upon government," and at his running mate, House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wis., who has contrasted the country's "takers versus makers."

As he did four years ago, Obama decried the capital's grinding partisanship. "We cannot mistake absolutism for principle, or substitute spectacle for politics, or treat name-calling as reasoned debate," he said. At his first inaugural, he said he had come "to proclaim an end" to the "worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics."

This time, however, he didn't argue he would be able to reconcile the warring sides or bring a new kind of politics to Washington. Rather, he seemed to be braced for waging those partisan wars — winning them, he hopes, by marshaling public support across the country.

His words were more unyielding, his manner more confident than four years ago.

"If the first inauguration was the coming-out party for the post-partisan politics that he ran on in 2008, today's inaugural was the announcement of a more fierce realism and recognition of deep, unbridgeable partisan differences," said Lawrence Jacobs, director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota.

Jacobs noted how often the president used the word or cited the idea of coming together in pursuit of American ideals. Obama grounded his arguments on government regulation and spending to the promises of the Declaration of Independence.

"Our journey is not complete," Obama said five times. Five times: "We the people." Seven times: "Together."

Obama's re-election has validated his first victory. A two-term president can't be dismissed as an historic aberration, the way the one-term Jimmy Carter sometimes has been. While second terms are often difficult and scandal-ridden, it has given Obama another chance to pursue issues such as immigration and climate change that were sidelined during his first term.

Republicans have hardly been vanquished. Navigating issues like gun control and energy through the GOP-controlled House of Representatives looms as a huge challenge. Still, an hour before the inauguration began Republican aides said the U.S. House would vote Wednesday to raise the debt ceiling — postponing what could have been an early and bitter standoff over spending.

"This generation of Americans has been tested by crises that steeled our resolve and proved our resilience," Obama declared. "A decade of war is now ending. An economic recovery has begun. America's possibilities are limitless. ... My fellow Americans, we are made for this moment, and we will seize it — so long as we seize it together."

