

## FREEDOM



## STORIES

*Inauguration Day**March 4, 1793–1933*

## The Quiet Triumph of Restraint

**Historical Spotlight**

On March 4, 1797, George Washington surrendered the presidency to John Adams. That act would signify something more consequential than any victorious battlefield event. No banners marked it as miraculous, and we rarely remember it at all in America today. But the gravitational pull that bent republics toward ruin since the beginning of time had been resisted by one of the greatest leaders in history. While much of the nation was clamoring for Washington to continue in power, he deliberately refused, knowing the young nation needed an example.

For eight years, Washington embodied the fragile American experiment. He had already astonished the world by resigning his commission after the Revolutionary War and returning to Mount Vernon—prompting King George III to say that if he gave up power, “he will be the greatest man in the world.” His second relinquishment, on March 4, proved the first was no mere display of virtue but a matter of principle. Believing that absolute power corrupts, and aware he was setting a precedent, Washington chose to transfer authority to another man. In an age when many generals crowned themselves monarchs, that decision established a pattern more enduring than any law. The philosophical importance of the day lies here: liberty can only survive when ambition is restrained. A constitution, however artfully drafted, is only paper

if the men entrusted with power lack the internal discipline to limit themselves. We must be a people who have governable appetites. The law alone will not protect us.

Scripture’s warning is sobering indeed. When Israel demanded a king “like all the nations,” the prophet Samuel cautioned them that centralized power would consume their sons, daughters, and fields (I Sam 8). History is littered with examples of this abuse.

**What this means for us:**

Washington’s departure from office and transfer of power to John Adams stands as an intentional rebuttal to that drift from liberty. At the time of Adams inauguration, no large republic during that period in history had sustained peaceful executive succession. The American experiment could easily have fractured. Instead Washington’s relinquishment of power embodied sacrificial love.

“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” (Galatians 5:13)

This kind of humility affirms the covenantal social compact we have with one another inside the American Republic. It highlights our responsibility, as well as our inheritance.

President’s Levee, or  
All Creation Going to the White House  
Robert Cruickshank 1841