

Opinion – Trump's Coronation: The New Romanov Century

Written by Patricia Sohn

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/01/27/opinion-trumps-coronation-the-new-romanov-century/>

PATRICIA SOHN, JAN 27 2025

If the Romanov family of historical, imperial Russia offered a marriage in alliances among Western and Eastern parts of Asia in the (thereafter peaceable) centuries aftermath of the Russo-Mongolian wars; then the Trump family, too, offers a marriage of many constituencies (West and East of Europe; North, South, East, and West of the U.S.; and across some religions). For some Americans, such a polyglot in real lived terms, culturally speaking, is among the right answers to the question of how similar and how different we are – as individuals and as groups – in the immigrant and melting pot society with singular, unified civic political order that is the U.S. It is the answer to standing firm regarding what we hold in common in our own “nation-state” (using late-modern terms) strategic and other interests. Is the U.S. the real inheritor of that coat of many colors (in Old World meanings of the word, “nations”) tradition to which Russian leaders have recently appealed? Who is the new Peter the Great?

Trump's inauguration events lasted no fewer than 17 hours. It began with no fewer than six events, services, and speeches followed by three balls. Taking into account only public ceremony and not the physical move to the White House, the day started at 8:15 a.m. and ended no earlier than 1 a.m. the next morning. Some of the events or ceremonies consisted of several coherent sub-parts and sub-ceremonies with multiple speakers. These included an opening religious service to offer blessing and a good path to the Trump administration; a tea ceremony including President Biden, President Trump, their spouses, their Vice Presidents, and their Vice Presidents' spouses; the inauguration ceremony itself consisting of multiple parts; a presidential address at the inauguration event; presidential speeches, remarks, and meetings with officials and constituencies after the inauguration event, including a presidential luncheon, and a signing ceremony at the White House in which presidential acts were established (e.g., executive orders); a parade; a review of military troops; and three balls.

If nothing else, Trump demonstrated that he and the First Lady have more stamina than many 20-somethings. What does this mean in terms of ritual and politics (or, ritual politics)? Events such as these, which model past eras of coronations, are intended to give confidence to the public that their leader is following the right path in religious or secular terms, or both. The inauguration events included religious ceremony, prayer, Benediction, and/or invocation representing several important religious traditions. Such religious ceremonies and moments literally ask for blessings of the Divine, and they give confidence to people who care about that. Ceremony, itself, whether religious or secular, demonstrates at least two dynamics intended to provide confidence to the people (and perhaps to the leader as well): willingness and ability to follow tradition and convention important to the given national context; and observable power and ability to conceive, organize, and to enact the events in proper form.

Seventeen hours, or more, of continuous ceremony reinforces that confidence in repetition (itself an important aspect of ritual), providing the public with a representation of its leader's submission to authority; the leader's enactment of authority; and the enactment of the ritual consent of the audience participants (presumed to be on the part of the remainder of the nation in a quasi-representative, symbolic format). The relative stateliness of the leader and spouse in the long durée of walking thorough these events, in continuation, does not only suggest pomp – which was, in itself, minimal. It implies and demonstrates dignity of the leader and family. It portrays an image of both mettle and patience, again, which provide a representation of strength, stamina, and vigor. These (if the rituals achieve their intent), in turn, suggest that the leader has the fortitude to do the job at hand.

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The balls, which are traditional to the U.S. context, provide an opportunity for elegance presented at an appropriate level, and in appropriate taste for the given era and its range of constituencies, cultural norms, and cultural values. Similarly, they provide a symbolic representation of stamina; courage; caliber; fortitude above average; and temperament appropriate to office in forms of politesse presented and practiced. They demonstrate, ritually, both decency and an ability to frivolity or gladness in appropriate measure (e.g., dancing with spouse).

In gender terms, the symbiotic relationship between spouses was presented in the inauguration durée in both (quite happy) traditional terms, as well as in modern terms and setting. The First Lady provided a significant presence, usually quiet, and on occasion with her own voice. Her engaging and serene presence, likewise, was dignified, one might even say regal, and demonstrated similar caliber, fortitude, and appropriate temperament for the office of the First Lady. That is, she offered a symbolic and real representation of intelligence, dignity, and understated, mild, modern, and traditional femininity with which supporters would be likely to identify. In ritual terms, it would support the perception of contributing to the strength of the Office of the President.

That is, the balls, following a long day of inaugural events and ceremonies, offered a representation of the Trump administration as its own version, or potential promise, of a New (Republican) Camelot White House. The support of one of the Kennedy family members only reinforced that presentation.

Ritual is powerful. It appears to have worked quite well for supporters. Will it soften lines across aisles and fences? One can hope that it reminded us that we, all, in the U.S. – regardless of political party and including independents – are intended to be on the same side. Indeed, the use of musical anthems traditional to the U.S. context was notable in creating an ambience of traditional, victorious, and unified eras; the joining of that with modern popular music effected a symbolic uniting those periods and epochs.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).