Inaugural Address

March 4, 1881.

Fellow Citizens:

We stand today upon an eminence which overlooks a hundred years of national life—a century crowded with perils, but crowned with the triumphs of liberty and law. Before continuing the onward march let us pause on this height for a moment to strengthen our faith and renew our hope by a glance at the pathway along which our people have traveled.

It is now three days more than a hundred years since the adoption of the first written constitution of the United States—the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union. The new Republic was then beset with danger on every hand. It had not conquered a place in the family of nations. The decisive battle of the war for independence, whose centennial anniversary will soon be gratefully celebrated at Yorktown, had not yet been fought. The colonists were struggling not only against the armies of a great nation, but against the settled opinions of mankind; for the world did not then believe that the supreme authority of government could be safely intrusted to the guardianship of the people themselves.

We can not overestimate the fervent love of liberty, the intelligent courage, and the sum of common sense with which our fathers made the great experiment of self-government. When they found, after a short trial, that the confederacy of States, was too weak to meet the necessities of a vigorous and expanding republic, they boldly set it aside, and in its stead established a National Union, founded directly upon the will of the people, endowed with full power of self-preservation and ample authority for the accomplishment of its great object.

Under this Constitution the boundaries of freedom have been enlarged, the foundations of order and peace have been strengthened, and the growth of our people in all the better elements of national life has indicated the wisdom of the founders and given new hope to their descendants... Under this Constitution twenty-five States have been added to the Union, with constitutions and laws, framed and enforced by their own citizens, to secure the manifold blessings of local self-government.

The jurisdiction of this Constitution now covers an area fifty times greater than that of the original thirteen States and a population twenty times greater than that of 1780...

And now, at the close of this first century of growth, with the inspirations of its history in their hearts, our people have lately reviewed the condition of the nation, passed judgment upon the conduct and opinions of political
parties, and have registered their will concerning the future administration of
the Government. To interpret and to execute that will in accordance with the
Constitution is the paramount duty of the Executive.

Even from this brief review it is manifest that the nation is resolutely facing to the
front, resolved to employ its best energies in developing the great possibilities
of the future. Sacredly preserving whatever has been gained to liberty and good
government during the century, our people are determined to leave behind them
all those bitter controversies concerning things which have been irrevocably
settled, and the further discussion of which can only stir up strife and delay the
onward march...

Enterprises of the highest importance to our moral and material well-being unite
us and offer ample employment of our best powers. Let all our people, leaving
behind them the battlefields of dead issues, move forward and in their strength
of liberty and the restored Union win the grander victories of peace...

The civil service can never be placed on a satisfactory basis until it is regulated
by law. For the good of the service itself, for the protection of those who are
intrusted with the appointing power against the waste of time and obstruction
to the public business caused by the inordinate pressure for place, and for the
protection of incumbents against intrigue and wrong, I shall at the proper time
ask Congress to fix the tenure of the minor offices of the several Executive
Departments and prescribe the grounds upon which removals shall be made
during the terms for which incumbents have been appointed.

Finally, acting always within the authority and limitations of the Constitution,
invading neither the rights of the States nor the reserved rights of the people,
it will be the purpose of my Administration to maintain the authority of the
nation in all places within its jurisdiction; to enforce obedience to all the laws
of the Union in the interests of the people; to demand rigid economy in all the
expenditures of the Government, and to require the honest and faithful service
of all executive officers, remembering that the offices were created, not for the
benefit of incumbents or their supporters, but for the service of the Government.

And now, fellow-citizens, I am about to assume the great trust which you have
committed to my hands. I appeal to you for that earnest and thoughtful support
which makes this Government in fact, as it is in law, a government of the people.

I shall greatly rely upon the wisdom and patriotism of Congress and of those
who may share with me the responsibilities and duties of administration, and,
above all, upon our efforts to promote the welfare of this great people and their
Government I reverently invoke the support and blessings of Almighty God.