



1965 AP photo Vice President Hubert Humphrey and his wife, Muriel, left, and President Lyndon Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird, right, dance at the Inaugural Ball at the Mayflower Hotel in January 1965.

At inaugural balls, there's some suffering in celebration

By [Maria Puente](#), USA TODAY

This is the bicentennial year of the presidential Inaugural Ball, adding another historic dimension to the momentous inauguration of Barack Obama.

In the modern era, Inaugural Balls have come to resemble a chaotic round of overbooked, overdressed, overhyped cattle calls. Not unlike, strangely enough, the first official Inaugural Ball on March 4, 1809.

Presided over by the fourth president, James Madison, and his socially adept first lady, Dolley, the ball nearly spun out of control as Dolley spun around the dance floor at Long's Hotel in her turban and buff velvet gown with a long train. It was so crowded she was nearly pressed to death. It was so suffocating they had to break the glass in windows to get some fresh air.

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John Quincy Adams, son of the second president and later to be the sixth, was overheard grumping to Madison, "The crowd is excessive, the heat oppressive and the entertainment bad." Madison, 17 years older than Dolley, 41, and just as dour as Adams, replied, "I would much rather be (home) in bed." At midnight, he had enough and took Dolley home to Georgetown, because the third president, Thomas Jefferson, hadn't moved out of the White House.

Thus was an American tradition born and maintained, more or less, through successive presidencies, and continued by the 44th president, whose inauguration today will be followed by 10 official Inaugural Balls, not counting scores of unofficial parties. If Obama Inaugural Balls are anything like those of recent presidencies — Bill Clinton holds the record for most (14 official balls in 1997) — then President Adams must be groaning in his grave.

This is what modern ball attendees have to look forward to: freezing weather outside; overheated temperatures inside. People can wait hours in line outside to get inside. The food, if there is any, is unmemorable, and good luck finding a drink. There are not enough bathrooms, not enough coat hangers, not enough room to spin, let alone dance. Attendees can see the presidential couple for about 30 seconds — the time it takes for them to twirl a little on the dance floor for the cameras, wave and be off for another twirl at another ball.

Strictly speaking, a ball, a formal party involving dancing, isn't supposed to be a foot-stomping hootenanny. But it's not supposed to be an ordeal, either. Official balls are organized by the Presidential Inaugural Committee for friends and supporters, and usually have a theme — regions and states, the military, youth, and so on. Unofficial balls are organized by private parties who just want to celebrate.

"Inaugural Ball is an oxymoron — it has nothing to do with dancing," says Barry Landau, 60, a New Yorker who has been to every inauguration since President John F. Kennedy's and whose collection of inaugural material rivals the Smithsonian's. He says the proliferation of balls is "absurd."

"If I were president-elect, I would have a *real* ball, with real dancing," he says.

Still, every four years, people clamor for tickets, which have become ever more expensive (tickets to Obama Inaugural Balls cost hundreds; tickets to Madison's cost \$4). The trappings, especially fashions, have changed dramatically over the years, but the purpose of the tradition remains the same, says Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian of the National First Ladies Library.

"The purpose was and still is to celebrate a new beginning," Anthony says. "There is a human need for ceremony at all the important passages of life. This is our national rite of passage."

Sometimes it's a debacle: The Inaugural Ball of Ulysses S. Grant was held in 1869 in an unheated tent outdoors. It was so cold (minus 4 degrees) that guests had to dance in their overcoats, and the decorative canaries froze to death in their cages, according to reports at the time.

More than one woman has lost her fur coat in coat-check hell, most recently at the Inaugural Balls of George H.W. Bush in 1989. And maybe one presidential death? William Henry Harrison, after delivering his inaugural speech in the cold, went to all three of his Inaugural Balls, caught pneumonia and died a month later.

Some Inaugural Balls are memorable for *not* being a disaster.

"If you go back to the 1800s, it was really a high-society sort of event," says Jim Bendat, a Los Angeles defense attorney and author of *Democracy's Big Day: The Inauguration of Our President 1789-2009*. "Inaugural Balls were elegant affairs, they would bring in the most expensive food, people would dress up, the music would be classical."

Not every president had an Inaugural Ball, including the first three. In 1789, friends of George Washington threw a party, not a ball, a week after his inauguration in New York, then the capital.

Later presidents decided to forgo the ball: Some didn't believe in all the hoopla (the austere Woodrow Wilson); some were too depressed (Franklin and Jane Pierce had just seen their last young son die in a train wreck); some weren't interested for obvious reasons (Franklin Roosevelt had the Great Depression to fix).

There were four periods in the evolution of Inaugural Balls, according to Anthony. Early presidents mostly had only one, and it was a private party held in private quarters for his supporters. During the second period, from the mid-19th century into the early 20th century, Inaugural Balls were more public and took place in large, impressive government buildings.

"These were the most beautiful and interesting balls," Anthony says. "People dressed elegantly. There was enough room that people could actually see what women were wearing. "

In the third period, including all of the 1920s, there were no presidential Inaugural Balls; instead, there were private charity balls that presidents did not attend.

In the post-World War II period, starting with President Dwight Eisenhower, the Inaugural Ball as people know it today emerged. Air travel was easier and more affordable, so attendees came from all over the country. There were multiple balls (Eisenhower had five), they were covered on television, and there were organized schedules of public events that included pre-inaugural galas featuring Hollywood entertainers.

In short, the Inaugural Ball evolved in a way that reflects the American balance of pomp and ceremony with democratic ideals, Anthony says. "Kings and queens are crowned in cathedrals, and the people remain outside. American presidents are inaugurated outside in public, and that symbolism is important."