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**America is 'ready to lead once more'; Massive crowd roars as first African-American president takes oath**

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WASHINGTON-Barack Hussein Obama took the oath of office Tuesday as the country's first African-American president, acknowledging the nation's "gathering clouds and raging storms" but insisting "we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America."

He promised -- to a crowd at least a mile deep jammed into the National Mall and to those watching around the world -- that America is "ready to lead once more."

Facing one of the largest inauguration audiences ever -- estimated at between 1 million and 2 million -- Obama said the pain of a sick economy and two wars overseas won't subside soon.

But on a day of grandeur, euphoria and history, the reality of layoffs, home foreclosures and war was trumped by Obama's message of hope.

"Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious, and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time," Obama said.

"But know this, America -- they will be met."

He was met with loud applause from a crowd in parkas, fur hats and glove warmers.

At exactly 11:05 a.m. Chicago time, Obama placed his hand on the same Bible Abraham Lincoln used to be sworn in 148 years ago, repeated the oath of office administered by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts and became the nation's 44th president.

After reciting the 35-word oath, Obama smiled broadly at his wife, Michelle, and then leaned over and kissed their two daughters, Malia and Sasha, as a roar rose from a flag-waving crowd that stretched the length of the National Mall.

People began arriving before dawn. In the back, college kids stood alongside working-class families who rode buses or drove from across the country to get here.

Celebrities and political luminaries such as Mayor Daley congregated closer to where Obama spoke. VIPs included Oprah Winfrey, Denzel Washington, Beyonce Knowles, Halle Berry, Caroline Kennedy and Dustin Hoffman.

Asked his take on Obama's speech, Hoffman offered a one-word response:

"Gospel."

**'GOOD RIDDANCE'**

The pro-Obama masses were less generous to departing President George W. Bush.

After the swearing-in, a Marine helicopter lifted Bush away from the Capitol.

"Good riddance," some shouted.

**'A NEW ERA OF RESPONSIBILITY'**

In ending eight years of Republican rule under Bush, Obama, in his 18-minute address, pledged to work with the other side in a bid to end "the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics."

As he prepares a massive public works package, the new president said, "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works -- whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified."

Still, Obama called on citizens to do their part.

"What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility -- a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task," he said.

Obama acknowledged America's difficult racial past but said American ideals are the reason "a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath."

**'I COULD NOT MISS IT'**

Obama, 47, is the fourth president with Illinois roots. Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses Grant lived in Illinois, and Ronald Reagan was born in the Prairie State.

The Democrat from the Kenwood neighborhood enters the highest office in the land with a favorable rating from nearly eight in 10 Americans -- one of the highest levels of support for a political figure in Gallup's polling history.

That adoration was evident in city diners where people took pictures of television screens as Obama spoke and by those who braved the cold and stood in long lines even though they could not actually see him in person.

"This was something I had to come to," said Brandon Steele, 40, an African-American benefits administrator from Oak Park, who made the 700-mile drive to Washington alone.

"This was the first time in my life I supported a president not only by voting, but by going out to get other people to vote and register. I could not miss it."

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