

Inaugurations and Change (1949 & 1953)

*John Q. Barrett**

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On the morning of January 20, 1949, Justice Robert H. Jackson and his wife Irene drove in to Washington from their Hickory Hill home in McLean, Virginia.

At the United States Supreme Court building, they met their friends Floyd Odlum and Jacqueline Cochran (a businessman and a famous aviatrix and businesswoman, respectively), who were visiting from California. Later, they crossed First Street, Northeast, to the U.S. Capitol. They sat—separately, Jackson with fellow justices, Irene with Floyd and Jackie—in V.I.P. seats and watched the inauguration of President Harry S. Truman. Justice Jackson wore a small black cap, custom-made, from Livingston's, a store in downtown Washington.¹

In Chicago that morning, a young woman named Betty Stevens was one of many who watched the presidential inauguration ceremony on television, a relatively new medium. She was especially pleased to see two Supreme Court justices, Jackson and Wiley Rutledge, “walking along gaily chatting.” Her husband, Chicago attorney (and future U.S. Supreme Court justice) John Paul Stevens, age twenty-eight, had clerked for Justice Rutledge a year earlier. Mrs. Stevens was happy to see that Rutledge “appeared to be in excellent health and spirits.”²

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¹ See Letter from Robert H. Jackson to Livingston's, Jan. 29, 1949 (unsigned carbon copy of typed letter), in Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (RHJL), Box 15, Folder 6.

² Letter from John Paul Stevens to Justice Wiley B. Rutledge, Jan. 22, 1949 (original), in Wiley B. Rutledge Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 42: “The proximate cause of me writing you now is the fact that Betty saw you last Thursday morning via television walking along gaily chatting with Justice Jackson and she reported to me that you appeared to be in excellent health and spirits. You should be glad to know that you are ‘telegenic.’”

Nearly four years later, General (ret.) Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected to succeed President Truman. Eisenhower, a Republican, would become president after twenty years of presidents (Franklin D. Roosevelt, and then Truman) from the Democratic Party.

In late 1952, Jackie Cochran wrote to her friend Bob Jackson. She asked if she and Floyd could be Jackson's guests at the impending Eisenhower presidential inauguration.

Jackson, after checking, wrote back to her in late December 1952:

Dear Jackie:

I have inquired of the Marshal [of the Supreme Court] and so far as I can learn we can carry out this year the same program that we did at the last inauguration—which was that you and Floyd came to the Court and we went from here together. I think that will work out this time, although it may be something different. You know the slogan, "It's time for a change," and they do have to provide this year for two Cabinets and two sets of officers, incoming and outgoing, and two Presidents' parties, whereas before there was only one.³

The Inauguration Day, January 20, 1953, was indeed different. On that Tuesday morning, the Supreme Court had an official session. The justices took the bench and admitted attorneys to the Supreme Court bar. The Court then adjourned to attend, as it had four years earlier, the inauguration as a body.⁴

At the oath-taking ceremony, the Justices, all bare-headed, walked in procession from the Capitol rotunda to the platform, in pairs according to their seniority on the Court. Justice Jackson walked alongside Justice William O. Douglas.⁵

³ Letter from Robert H. Jackson to Mrs. Floyd Odum, Dec. 19, 1952 (unsigned carbon copy of typed letter), in RHJL, Box 17, Folder 9.

⁴ See *Journal of the Court*, Jan. 20, 1953, at 129.

⁵ See *Sun Beamed on Capitol*, WASH. POST, Jan. 21, 1953, at 19 (photograph, reproduced on the next page of this Jackson List essay).



January 20, 1953: The Justices of the Supreme Court of the U.S., in procession from the Capitol rotunda to the Inaugural platform. Left column, front to back: Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson and Associate Justices Stanley Reed, William O. Douglas and Harold H. Burton. Right column: Associate Justices Hugo L. Black, Felix Frankfurter, Robert H. Jackson, Tom C. Clark and Sherman Minton.

Later that afternoon, the justices returned to the Court and reconvened briefly in official session. They did not hear oral argument in any of the ten cases that they had, the previous day, put on call for January 20th. They sent “home” the attorneys who were assembled and prepared to argue those cases, putting them over until the next day.⁶

Jackson was able to arrange for Floyd Odlum and Jackie Cochran to attend President Eisenhower’s 1953 inauguration. As in 1949, they sat with Irene Jackson to witness the historic event.

⁶ See Journal of the Court, Jan. 19 & Jan. 20, 1953, at 128-29.