

# Trump's Body Language During the Inaugural Address

✘ *By Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D*

On January 20, 2017, Donald J. Trump took the oath of office as the 45th President of the United States. While audiences listened intently to his inaugural address, some of us were more focused on what his body was saying.

I exchanged initial observations with Patrick A. Stewart, Ph.D., Department of Political Science at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Stewart has published research on nonverbal communication by politicians in the journals *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Political Psychology*, *Motivation and Emotion*, *International Journal of Humor Research*, and *Politics and the Life Sciences*.

It's always interesting to compare notes with Patrick as he is a scientist and I am a practitioner, a leadership coach, so we approach this topic from different perspectives. Here is the gist of our conversation:

**Carol Kinsey Goman:** Donald Trump's signature nonverbal cues were in evidence during his speech. For example, he relied heavily on his most recognized hand gesture – the air pinch with thumb and forefinger. This gesture signals precision and control. And when he then exploded it into an open-hand, fingers spread gesture and hand chop, it sent an effective signal that he was ready to take that certainty into action.



(Photo Source: Twitter)

Trump also uses batonic gestures, such as the up-and-down beat of a hand, to mark out content he deems significant. What did you notice about this during the speech?

**Patrick Stewart:** The speech itself appeared to be more scripted with Trump's displays less crisp; however, as the speech continued, his hand and arm movements became more emphatic, with crisp punctuation of his words with batons (hand-and-arm movements that started either mouth level on his dominant right hand side, or slightly lower on this non-dominant left hand side that come down to punctuate his point often mid word and then come back up).

**Goman:** During the speech, and in pauses between thoughts, Trump's expression stayed pretty much unchanged. While eliminating his signature jaw juts and smirks was a good choice, Trump missed the chance to non-verbally express positive feelings about his vision of the future. Why didn't he – ever – smile?

**Stewart:** Trump engaged in polite smiles (posed with lip corners pulled up, but tight jaw and lips together) on the way

to the podium and afterwards, but only when focusing on individuals. But there were no Felt smiles (where the cheeks raise and produce crow's feet at the corners of the eyes). I viewed this as the norm for Trump – since he has a more “agonic” nonverbal style that focuses less on happiness/reassurance and more on anger/threat displays.

**Goman:** Trump has another familiar hand gesture that I spotted. He uses a side-to-side motion, with fingers together and his palm facing front, when discussing what he believes has gone wrong, and he did so when talking about “an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge.” He then immediately returned to tighter gestures to reinforce that he will supply the remedy. It was very effective.

**Stewart:** I believe that a good deal of Trump's allure comes from his ability to use his hand-and-arm movements, including his various illustrators, so effectively. Another example of how he showed he was emphatic was when he stated: “From this day forward, it's going to be only America first, America first.” He said the word “America” with a precision hand and “first” with a “we're #1” icon (index finger point up, second finger and thumb together, palm facing the audience).

**Goman:** Did you notice any body language that wasn't so impressive? For example, what did you think of Trump's unilateral shrug? Did you catch that his right shoulder raised slightly when, early in his speech, he said: “It belongs to everyone gathered here today and everyone watching all across America.”

**Stewart:** Yes, I saw it. I first noticed a Trump unilateral shrug with his “apology video” concerning the Billy Bush outtake video. That gesture tends to be an indication of deception or uncertainty.

**Goman:** Trump typically uses a lot of gestures in which both

hands move in unison. I was surprised that during the inaugural address, he gestured primarily with his right hand and occasionally with his left. It wasn't until the very end of his address that Trump used a parallel gesture (with both hands making a "L" shape). This is interesting because, as opposed to one-handed motions, the use of parallel gestures creates an impression of confidence and authority – which is why I would have expected to see more of them. On the other hand, ending with the dual L gesture was a powerful nonverbal way of saying, "I've got this right!"

What caught your attention?

**Stewart:** The big thing that I hadn't seen before was his flourish gesture – used twice in this speech. Once when saying "We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth. And we will bring back our dreams" and again with "we will be protected by God."

**Goman:** I'd like to close with an observation as a coach: I think that Trump missed a bet. He has been adept at using inclusion gestures (open-palm hand gestures with arms spread apart) to reinforce his statements that "we are all in this together." But inclusion gestures were not shown anytime during his speech. They would have been especially powerful when he stated, "At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America, and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other. When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice."

As a researcher and analyst, what are your closing thoughts?

**Stewart:** After analyzing a minute long clip from his RNC nomination acceptance speech on a frame-by-frame basis, as well as considering this much longer speech, I came away with the conclusion that he does a most exceptional job of coordinating the "end peak" of his points to exactly mid-word.

More colloquially, he means what he says (when he says it). The big question is does he say what he means to actually do? That is something we will see over the next four years.

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