

■ “The New Frontier”

Date: July 15, 1960

Author: John F. Kennedy

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

John F. Kennedy’s “New Frontier” program is considered a key moment in the liberal tradition. It emphasized progressive reforms in areas such as civil rights, education, healthcare, and economic development, aligning with the core values of liberalism—government intervention to promote social welfare, individual rights, and economic opportunity. Kennedy’s vision aimed to invigorate American society through modernization and expanded government leadership, reflecting liberal ideals of progress and social justice.

Kennedy gave his first speech on the topic as he accepted the Democratic nomination for president of the United States in 1960. Kennedy was young, only forty-three years old; he was a Roman Catholic, which meant his loyalty to a foreign pope was worrisome to many voters; and he had relatively little foreign-policy experience. This speech assuaged many of those fears, as Kennedy challenged the nation to accept the challenges and opportunities of a “new frontier”—the 1960s, with a new generation of progressive leaders at the helm. He also addressed his religious affiliation, assuring the nation that he believed in the strict separation of church and state, and that his Catholicism was therefore not relevant. Kennedy encouraged the nation to rise to the challenges of its time—to tackle civil rights and economic issues, the nuclear standoff with the Soviet Union, and the possibilities of space exploration and scientific discoveries. This speech was widely broadcast, and Kennedy’s eloquence, humor, and youthful energy captured the interest and imagination of a new generation of Americans eager for change.

Defining Moment

The presidential election of 1960 followed eight years of Republican leadership under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Though Eisenhower himself was popular with the American people, there were some areas of discontent with Republican leadership. The economy was in a slump and many felt that the Eisenhower administration had not done enough to address poverty and civil rights. There were growing Communist threats in Vietnam, Cuba, and the Middle East, and American national pride had taken a hit when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, the first artificial satellite, in 1957. The Cold War was in full swing, with massive nuclear buildup on both sides.



President John F. Kennedy in July 1963. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

Kennedy, then a senator from Massachusetts, announced his candidacy for president of the United States on January 2, 1960. He had already experienced a meteoric rise through the ranks of the Democratic Party, and had nearly been chosen as Adlai Stevenson's running mate in the 1956 presidential election. Though he was a young, energetic, popular candidate, there were grave concerns in the party that his youth, his Catholicism, and his lack of experience would work against him in the general election. The Republican nominee was almost certain to be Eisenhower's vice president, Richard M. Nixon, who was a less dynamic but far more experienced candidate. It would be an uphill battle for Kennedy to win the Democratic nomination. Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota had announced his candidacy on the same day as Kennedy, and there were other strong Democratic contenders, though others had chosen not to publicly announce their candidacy, preferring instead to wait for support they hoped would materialize at the Democratic National Convention in July. Other Democratic candidates included Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, and former governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois, who had run for president unsuccessfully in the previous two elections.

Kennedy campaigned hard across the country, beating out Humphrey to win the Wisconsin and then the West Virginia primaries. His Catholicism was a major issue in the primaries, as anti-Catholic prejudice was still strong in the United States, and many believed that a Catholic's primary loyalty was not to the country, but to the Catholic pope. When Kennedy won West Virginia, it was a turning point in his campaign, proving that he could win in a conservative, primarily Protestant state. By the time of the Democratic National Convention in July, held in Los Angeles, Kennedy was the clear front-runner, and withstood a convention-floor challenge from Johnson. Kennedy won the nomination easily on the first ballot with 806

votes, nearly twice as many as second-place Johnson. Conscious that he was weakest in the South, where civil rights were a contentious issue, and where his Catholicism seemed to generate the most opposition, Kennedy selected Johnson as his running mate. His televised acceptance speech further galvanized support for Kennedy, as he called on his countrymen to take on the "new frontier," a challenging new era of progress and change in the United States.

Author Biography

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on May 29, 1917. He was the second of nine children in a prominent Irish Catholic family. His father, Joseph Kennedy, was a successful banker who also served as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and as the American ambassador to the United Kingdom. Kennedy attended the Choate School and graduated from Harvard University in 1940, joining the Navy after college, in 1941. Kennedy was seriously injured when his PT boat was sunk by a Japanese destroyer in 1943, though Kennedy famously helped rescue some of his crew. After returning from the war, he served in the U.S. House of Representatives for six years (1947–53) and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1952. In 1955, he wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Profiles in Courage*. He was considered a serious contender for the vice presidential nomination in 1956, and was the Democratic nominee for president four years later. He became the first Roman Catholic president of the United States, and the youngest in history to that time. While in office, Kennedy took action on civil rights and combating poverty and founded the Peace Corps. He also narrowly avoided confrontations with the Soviet Union in Berlin and Cuba. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.



Historical Document

“The New Frontier”

Governor Stevenson, Senator Johnson, Mr. Butler, Senator Symington, Senator Humphrey, Speaker Rayburn, fellow Democrats. I want to express my thanks to Governor Stevenson for his generous and heart-warming introduction.

It was my great honor to place his name in nomination at the 1956 Democratic Convention, and I am delighted to have his support and his counsel and his advice in the coming months ahead.

Let me say first that I accept the nomination of the Democratic Party.

I accept it without reservation and with only one obligation, the obligation to devote every effort of my mind and spirit to lead our Party back to victory and our Nation to greatness.

I am grateful, too—I am grateful, too, that you have provided us with such a strong platform to stand on and to run on. Pledges which are made so eloquently are made to be kept. “The Rights of Man”—the civil and economic rights essential to the human dignity of all men—are indeed our goal and are indeed our first principle. This is a Platform on which I can run with enthusiasm and with conviction.

And I am grateful, finally, that I can rely in the coming months on many others: On a distinguished running-mate who brings unity and strength to our Platform and our ticket, Lyndon Johnson; on one of the most articulate spokesmen of modern times, Adlai Stevenson; on a great fighter—on a great fighter for our needs as a Nation and a people, Stuart Symington; on my traveling companion in Wisconsin and West Virginia, Senator Hubert Humphrey; on Paul Butler, our devoted and courageous Chairman; and on that fighting campaigner whose support I now welcome, President Harry Truman.

I feel a lot safer with all of them on my side. And I’m proud of the contrast with our Republican competitors. For their ranks are so thin that not one challenger has dared to put his head up in the last twelve months.

I am fully aware of the fact that the Democratic Party, by nominating someone of my faith, has taken on what many regard as a new and hazardous risk—new, at least since 1928. The Democratic Party has once again placed its confidence in the American people, and in their ability to render a free and fair judgment and in my ability to render a free and fair judgment.

To uphold the Constitution and my oath of office, to reject any kind of religious pressure or obligation that might directly or indirectly interfere with my conduct of the Presidency in the national interest. My record of fourteen years in supporting public education, supporting complete separation of Church and State and resisting pressure from sources of any kind should be clear by now to everyone.

I hope that no American—I hope that no American, considering the really critical issues facing this country, will waste his franchise and throw away his vote by voting either for me or against me because of my religious affiliation. It is not relevant.

I am telling you what you are entitled to know: As I come before you seeking your support for the most powerful office in the free world—I am saying to you that my decisions on every public policy will be my own, as an American, as a Democrat, and as a free man.

I mention all of this only because this country faces so many serious challenges, so many great opportunities, so many burdensome responsibilities that I hope that it is to those great matters that we can address ourselves in the coming months. And if this statement of mine makes it easier to concentrate on our Nation's problems, then I'm glad that I have made it.

Under any circumstances, the victory we seek in November will not be easy. We know that in our hearts. We know that our opponent will invoke the name of Abraham Lincoln on behalf of their candidate, despite the fact that his political career has often seemed to show charity towards none and malice for all.

We know it will not be easy to campaign against a man who has spoken and voted on every side of every issue. Mr. Nixon may feel that it's his turn now, after the New Deal and the Fair Deal—but before he deals, someone's going to cut the cards.

That "someone" may be the millions of Americans who voted for President Eisenhower but would balk at his successor.

For just as historians tell us that Richard the First was not fit to fill the shoes of the bold Henry the Second, and that Richard Cromwell was not fit to wear the mantle of his uncle, they might add in future years that Richard Nixon did not measure up to the footsteps of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Perhaps he could carry on the party policies, the policies of Nixon and Benson and Dirksen and Goldwater. But this Nation cannot afford such a luxury. Perhaps we could afford a Coolidge following Harding. And perhaps we could afford a Pierce following Fillmore. But after Buchanan this nation needed

Lincoln; after Taft we needed Wilson; and after Hoover we needed Franklin Roosevelt.

But we're not merely running against Mr. Nixon. Our task is not merely one of itemizing Republican failures. Nor is that wholly necessary. For the families forced from the farm do not need to tell us of their plight. The unemployed miners and textile workers know that the decision is before them in November. The old people without medical care, the families without a decent home, the parents of children without a decent school: They all know that it's time for a change.

We are not here to curse the darkness; we are here to light a candle. As Winston Churchill said on taking office some twenty years ago: If we open a quarrel between the present and the past, we shall be in danger of losing the future.

Today our concern must be with that future. For the world is changing. The old era is ending. The old ways will not do.

Abroad, the balance of power is shifting. New and more terrible weapons are coming into use.

One-third of the world may be free, but one-third is the victim of a cruel repression, and the other third is rocked by poverty and hunger and disease. Communist influence has penetrated into Asia; it stands in the Middle East; and now festers some ninety miles off the coast of Florida. Friends have slipped into neutrality and neutrals have slipped into hostility. As our keynoter reminded us, the President who began his career by going to Korea ends it by staying away from Japan.

The world has been close to war before, but now man, who's survived all previous threats to his existence, has taken into his mortal hands the power to exterminate his species seven times over.

Here at home the future is equally revolutionary. The New Deal and the Fair Deal were bold measures for their generations, but now this is a new generation.

A technological output and explosion on the farm has led to an output explosion. An urban population revolution has overcrowded our schools and cluttered our cities and crowded our slums.

A peaceful revolution for human rights, demanding an end to racial discrimination in all parts of our community life, has strained at the leashes imposed by a timid executive leadership.

It is time, in short—It is time, in short, for a new generation of leadership. All over the world, particularly in the newer nations, young men are coming to power, men who are not bound by the traditions of the past, men who are not blinded by the old fears and hates and rivalries—young men who can cast off the old slogans and the old delusions.

The Republican nominee, of course, is a young man. But his approach is as old as McKinley. His party is the party of the past, the party of memory. His speeches are generalities from Poor Richard's Almanac. Their platform—Their platform, made up of old, left-over Democratic planks, has the courage of our old convictions. Their pledge is to the status quo; and today there is no status quo.

For I stand here tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind us, the pioneers gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build our new West. They were not the captives of their own doubts, nor the prisoners of their own price tags. They were determined to make the new world strong and free—an example to the world, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from within and without.

Some would say that those struggles are all over, that all the horizons have been explored, that all the battles have been won, that there is no longer an American frontier. But I trust that no one in this assemblage would agree with that sentiment; for the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won; and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960's, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats.

Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom promised our nation a new political and economic framework. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal promised security and succor to those in need. But the New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises. It is a set of challenges.

It sums up not what I intend to offer to the American people, but what I intend to ask of them. It appeals to their pride—It appeals to our pride, not our security. It holds out the promise of more sacrifice instead of more security.

The New Frontier is here whether we seek it or not.

Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink from that new frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric—and those who prefer that course should not vote for me or the Democratic Party.

But I believe that the times require imagination and courage and perseverance. I'm asking each of you to be pioneers towards that New Frontier. My call is to the young in heart, regardless of age—to the stout in spirit, regardless of Party, to all who respond to the scriptural call: “Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be [thou] dismayed.”

For courage, not complacency, is our need today; leadership, not salesmanship. And the only valid test of leadership is the ability to lead, and lead vigorously. A tired nation—A tired nation, said David Lloyd George, is a Tory nation. And the United States today cannot afford to be either tired or Tory.

There may be those who wish to hear more—more promises to this group or that, more harsh rhetoric about the men in the Kremlin as a substitute for policy, more assurances of a golden future, where taxes are always low and the subsidies are always high. But my promises are in the platform that you have adopted. Our ends will not be won by rhetoric, and we can have faith in the future only if we have faith in ourselves.

For the harsh facts of the matter are that we stand at this frontier at a turning-point of history. We must prove all over again to a watching world, as we said on a most conspicuous stage, whether this nation, conceived as it is with its freedom of choice, its breadth of opportunity, its range of alternatives, can compete with the single-minded advance of the Communist system.

Can a nation organized and governed such as ours endure?

That is the real question.

Have we the nerve and the will? Can we carry through in an age where we will witness not only new breakthroughs in weapons of destruction, but also a race for mastery of the sky and the rain, the ocean and the tides, the far side of space, and the inside of men's minds?

That is the question of the New Frontier.

That is the choice our nation must make—a choice that lies not merely between two men or two parties, but between the public interest and private comfort, between national greatness and national decline, between the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of “normalcy,” between dedication of mediocrity.

All mankind waits upon our decision. A whole world looks to see what we shall do. And we cannot fail that trust. And we cannot fail to try.

It has been a long road from the first snowy day in New Hampshire many months ago to this crowded convention city. Now begins another long journey, taking me into your cities and homes across the United States.

Give me your help and your hand and your voice.

Recall with me the words of Isaiah that, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary."

As we face the coming great challenge, we too, shall wait upon the Lord, and ask that He renew our strength.

Then shall we be equal to the test.

Then we shall not be weary.

Then we shall prevail.

Thank you.



Document Analysis

Senator Kennedy begins this speech by thanking the leadership of the Democratic Party, many of whose members opposed him until hours before this speech was given. He thanks them for their support in the tough election ahead, acknowledging their power by saying that “I feel a lot safer with all of them on my side.” He also uses this as a way to point out the strength and vigor of the Democratic Party, since the Republicans have only one real candidate, and no one else has dared to “put his head up.”

Since his religious affiliation had been such an issue on the campaign trail, Kennedy addresses it directly. A vote for or against him based on his religious beliefs is a wasted vote, he argues, since it is not relevant. He assures Americans that they can trust that his judgment “on every public policy will be my own—as an American, a Democrat and a free man.” He states once again his firm belief in the separation of church and state, and his commitment to uphold the Constitution.

Kennedy injects humor into his critique of his Republican challenger, Vice President Nixon. He may believe that it is his turn to lead “after the New Deal and the Fair Deal—but before he deals, someone had better cut the cards.” Though Nixon may feel himself Eisenhower’s rightful successor, Kennedy uses examples from history to show that the heir of a great leader is often a mediocre or bad one. Kennedy says, Nixon will fail to measure up to Eisenhower, and Republican policies will fail to meet the nation’s challenges going forward. He says that he and the Democrats represent the change the nation needs.

Kennedy then lays out the challenges of his time: Communist expansion and aggression threaten the free world. Urbanization has led to slums and collapsing schools. Some Americans are still denied basic human and civil rights. Mechanization and automation are threatening traditional jobs. Though Nixon is himself a young man, his party is obsolete, “the party of the past.” Kennedy references the location of the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles, California. Where the West was once the last frontier, explored and settled by brave and fearless pioneers, so too “we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the

frontier of the 1960s—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils.”

Essential Themes

Following the Democratic National Convention, Kennedy began campaigning hard for the presidency against Republican Richard M. Nixon. The pair engaged in four televised debates, which are widely believed to have significantly boosted Kennedy’s campaign. Kennedy appeared poised and relaxed, while Nixon appeared tired, defensive, and stiff. The campaign was not only about appearances, however, with foreign policy dominating the debates. Vice President Nixon was eager to point out that Kennedy was too inexperienced to understand the complexities of Cold War leadership. He argued that his role in the Eisenhower administration had provided him with the experience necessary to contain the Communist threat and keep the nation’s defenses strong. On the other hand, Kennedy pointed out that the Eisenhower administration had allowed the Soviet Union to take the lead in dangerous new missile technology, and that they had lost Cuba to the Communists. He portrayed the Eisenhower administration as old-fashioned, conservative, and reactionary, promising to bring new ideas and flexibility to foreign relationships.

On November 8, 1960, John F. Kennedy became the youngest man ever elected to the presidency and the first Catholic president in U.S. history. He won by a narrow margin, less than 0.2 percent of the popular vote, and served for three years until his assassination in 1963.

—Bethany Groff Dorau, MA

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