

■ “Ask Not What Your Country Can Do for You”

Date: January 20, 1961

Author: President John F. Kennedy

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

John F. Kennedy’s famous “Ask not what your country can do for you” speech is closely associated with civic responsibility, patriotism, and public service. While it embodies a call to personal sacrifice and collective effort, it is often seen as rooted in liberal ideals of civic engagement and optimistic national unity.

Kennedy gave this speech at his inauguration on January 20, 1961, as he became the thirty-fifth, and youngest, president of the United States. Kennedy’s inauguration ceremony on the lawn of the Capitol was widely broadcast on radio and television, and his eloquence, youth, and energy set the tone for his administration. With millions of Americans listening, Kennedy declared that the “torch has been passed to a new generation” committed to human rights, peace, and public service. He called on the American people to serve both their country and the world and to fight for freedom. Kennedy was a sharp contrast to his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was leaving office at age seventy, and who was the last president to be born in the nineteenth century. After the prosperous but perilous 1950s, with the United States and the Soviet Union locked in the bitter ideological conflict and arms race of the Cold War, Kennedy made it clear that he would open negotiations with the Soviet Union but that he was committed to halting the spread of Communism.

Defining Moment

The U.S. presidential election of 1960 followed eight years of Republican leadership under President Eisenhower. Though Eisenhower was personally popular with the American people, there was 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 the American ego had taken a serious hit when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, the first artificial satellite, in 1957. The Cold War was in full swing, with massive nuclear-weapons buildup on both sides.

A senator from Massachusetts, Kennedy announced his candidacy for president in January 1960. He had already experienced a meteoric rise through the ranks of the Democratic Party and had been considered as a running mate for Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson in 1956. Though Kennedy was a young, energetic, popular candidate, some party members were concerned that his youth, his religion

(Catholicism), and his lack of experience would work against him in the general election.

Eisenhower’s vice president, Richard M. Nixon, was relatively young, but he seemed poised to carry on the conservative policies of his predecessor. He was nominated for the presidency at the Republican



President Kennedy delivering his inaugural speech, January 20, 1961.
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National Convention in July 1960. His acceptance speech was a homage to Eisenhower, who had given a speech the night before, and an attack on the Democratic platform, calling it “disastrous for America.” In comparison to Kennedy, Nixon seemed old-fashioned and regressive, though he had significantly greater foreign policy experience. Kennedy’s televised acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention two weeks earlier galvanized support for his campaign, as he called on his fellow citizens to take on the “New Frontier,” a challenging era of progress and change in the United States.

Despite the momentum that followed the Democratic National Convention, Kennedy had a hard road to the presidency. He did not have strong poll numbers in the South and would need to overcome his inexperience and questions about his religious affiliation. Kennedy campaigned hard across the country and engaged Nixon in four televised debates, which significantly boosted Kennedy’s campaign. In the debates, 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. Kennedy 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 the history of the United States. He won by a narrow margin, with only 118,574 more votes than Nixon.

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 P. Kennedy, was a successful banker who also served as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and as the American ambassador to Great Britain. Kennedy attended the Choate School and graduated from Harvard University in 1940, joining the Navy after college. In 1943, he was seriously injured when a Japanese destroyer sunk his PT boat, but he famously helped to rescue the survivors. After returning from war, he served in the U.S. House of Representatives for six years and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1953. In 1955, he wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Profiles in Courage*. In 1960, he became the first Roman Catholic president of the United States and the youngest in its history. While in office, Kennedy took action on civil rights, combated 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

“Ask Not What Your Country Can Do for You”

Vice President Johnson, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, President Truman, Reverend Clergy, fellow citizens:

We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end as well as a beginning—signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forbears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

This much we pledge—and more.

To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do—for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom—and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge—to convert our good words into good deeds—in a new alliance for progress—to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.

To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support—to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective—to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak—and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.

Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.

We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.

But neither can two great and powerful groups of nations take comfort from our present course—both sides overburdened by the cost of modern weapons, both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom, yet both racing to alter that uncertain balance of terror that stays the hand of mankind's final war.

So let us begin anew—remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us.

Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms—and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations.

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.

Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah—to “undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free.”

And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation”—a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.



Document Analysis

President Kennedy begins his inaugural address by linking himself and the ceremonies of the day with the founding of the United States. He has sworn the same oath as was given to George Washington “nearly a century and three-quarters ago,” and though the world has changed, “we are the heirs of that first revolution.” Though the struggle for human rights and freedom are part of that long tradition, Kennedy is clear that he is not tied to the past but will carry the values of the nation’s founders into the future. This responsibility is passed “to a new generation of Americans,” like Kennedy himself, born in the twentieth century and committed to human rights and the “survival and the success of liberty,” even after the experiences of World War II and the Cold War that followed.

Kennedy does not intend to approach peace from a position of weakness, however. He assures the world that the United States will “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” He specifically pledges his loyalty and support to those nations who have traditionally been allies of the United States, and he welcomes newly formed nations, former colonies, as long as they are also in pursuit and support of freedom. In a famous line, he warns these nations not to be deluded by the overtures of the Soviet Union, reminding them that throughout history, “those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.”

Those nations struggling to free themselves from poverty and misery will receive help from the United States—not to counteract the aid offered by the Soviet Union, but because it is the right thing to do. The same promise, and warning, is targeted at South and Central American republics. There is the chance to work together, Kennedy says, and the United States will offer assistance to its neighbors, but “aggression or subversion” anywhere in the Americas will not be tolerated. Kennedy addresses the Soviet Union and other nations that would “make themselves our adversary”: return to the table and renew peace talks. Both nations can then unburden themselves from amassing deadly weapons and use their energy in the

interests of peace and progress. Kennedy ends with his famous call to the people of the United States to fight “tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself,” by asking what service they can offer to their country and the world.

Essential Themes

The theme of service to one’s country is often given as the primary message of Kennedy’s inaugural address, and his call to “ask what you can do for your country” certainly had a profound effect on his listeners. Kennedy was deeply entrenched in the Cold War, however. Even the Peace Corps, founded on March 1, 1961, as a direct result of Kennedy’s belief in the value of service and direct international assistance, had an anti-Communist purpose. During the presidential campaign, Kennedy argued that the Soviet Union “had hundreds of men and women, scientists, physicists, teachers, engineers, doctors, and nurses . . . prepared to spend their lives abroad in the service of world Communism.” The Peace Corps would counteract Communist overtures. Kennedy used significant portions of his inaugural address to offer a new path of communication with the Soviet Union, but he also assured the world that he would act with all of the significant resources of the United States to defend against aggression. Like Eisenhower before him, Kennedy believed that limiting the growth of Communism throughout the world was the goal of American foreign policy. The United States needed to be more actively engaged in the spread of democracy, he said.

—Bethany Groff Dorau, MA

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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