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John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address (1961)

The presidential election of 1960 was a turning point in American political history. Democrat John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) faced Republican Richard M. Nixon (1913–1994). Both candidates were in their forties and were WWII veterans. But Nixon, who served two terms as vice president under Eisenhower, had more political experience than Kennedy, a U.S. senator from Massachusetts. Purditt predicted a Nixon landslide.

Kennedy ignored these gloomy forecasts. Born the second of nine children in an Irish Catholic family, he grew up in a privileged, competitive environment. His father, Joseph P. Kennedy, had made a fortune as a banker, bootlegger, and film producer. In the 1930s, he headed the Securities and Exchange Commission and then served as U.S. ambassador to Great Britain. John accompanied his father to Europe and examined Britain's belated response to the Nazis in his Harvard senior thesis. In 1940, when John published the essay as *Why England Slept*, his father secretly bought 40,000 copies to ensure that the book became a best seller. In 1943, while Kennedy was serving in the U.S. Navy, a Japanese destroyer rammed and sank his patrol torpedo (PT) boat in the Solomon Islands. His heroic efforts in saving his crew were recognized with the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Medal. The incident aggravated an old back injury that left Kennedy in constant pain despite three surgeries. He also suffered from Addison's disease, a rare endocrine disorder characterized by weight loss, muscle weakness, fatigue, and low blood pressure. Throughout his career, Kennedy concealed this ailment as well as his use of several prescription drugs.

These impediments did not thwart Kennedy's ambition. After his older brother died in combat, John deferred to his father's wish that he enter politics. In 1946, at age twenty-nine, he won the House of Representatives seat for the Massachusetts 11th district. In 1952, he ran successfully for the U.S. Senate and became known for his anti-Communism and New Deal liberalism. In 1953, Kennedy married the elegant Jacqueline Lee Bouvier. Three years later, he published the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage*, later revealed to be mainly the work of Ted Sorenson, a Kennedy aide. When the Democrats almost selected him as Adlai Stevenson's 1956 running mate, Kennedy became a national sensation. During his 1960 campaign for the presidency, Kennedy

SOURCE: "Inaugural Address," Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, 1961 (Washington DC, 1963), 1–3.

assured Protestant voters that his Catholicism would not interfere with his political judgment. After winning the Democratic nomination, he defeated Nixon by only 118,500 popular votes and a 303-219 vote in the Electoral College. Many observers claimed that voter fraud had determined the close election.

Dismissing such allegations, Kennedy supporters adored the eloquent and stylish president. On January 20, 1961, Kennedy withstood frigid weather and gave his inaugural address outside the U.S. Capitol.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What role does Kennedy try to establish for his presidency and the nation as a whole?
2. What are Kennedy's foreign policy goals? Did he realize these objectives? Support your answer with examples.
3. Why do you think Kennedy's remarks inspired so many Americans?
4. How should we weigh recent revelations about Kennedy's private life in assessing his presidency? What is your evaluation of his presidency?

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 forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds 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 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 peoples 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 assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty—to peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. But this 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. . . .

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 tracing 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 power to control 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. . . .

And if a beach-head 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 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 pathed 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.

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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 and all ask what you can do for your country.

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

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask 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.

23.2

Young Americans for Freedom, The Sharon Statement (1960)

In the 1940s and 1950s, a number of intellectuals revitalized American conservatism. Books like Friedrich Hayek's The Road to Serfdom (1944), Richard Weaver's Ideas Have Consequences (1948) and Russell Kirk's The Conservative Mind (1953) denounced Communism, celebrated individual

SOURCE: Young Americans for Freedom, <http://www.yaf.com/sharon.shtml>