Inaugural of John F. Kennedy (January 20, 1961)

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Essay by Ryan Koonce

John F. Kennedy at his 1961 inauguration

There are four United States presidential inaugural speeches that have transcended their largely drab and unmemorable siblings. Only four: Abraham Lincoln's first and second inaugural addresses; Franklin Roosevelt's first, and John F. Kennedy's. In the category of the Great Speech—by which I mean those anthology-ready history-making texts whose quotations become littered throughout our common speech until knowledge of their origins passes to the historically minded—inaugural addresses are strange birds. A powerful oration is generally given in response to something: a catastrophe, a battle, a war; a danger or a victory or a triumph. And they usually require some period to "set" before their greatness is recognized. History is not so much prologue as it is selective memory—what becomes "great" are largely those events that stick out in our minds as we are remembering the past. That was not so with the Kennedy inaugural. Like a thunderbolt it riveted American attention from the moment it was uttered and connected to the heart of the nation like no inaugural address since.

"Let the word go forth from this time and place," "pay any price, bear any burden," "support any friend, oppose any foe," "let us never negotiate out of fear . . . but let us never fear to negotiate," and of course, "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." The quotations roll off the tongue and mind as effortlessly as lines from our favorite movies or cherished anecdotes from our lives. Pithy phrases are the hooks on which our excitement is caught and roused. What other speech in living memory is so suffused with phrases that are not only so memorable but so impossible to forget? It had remained such a touchstone for the public that in the wake of Kennedy's death published recordings of the inaugural and his other speeches were purchased to such a degree that the recording broke into the pop album charts. No other presidential speech has attained such a distinction.

John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960 by one of the slimmest margins, both electorally and popularly, in the history of the United States. As he ascended the rostrum to deliver his inaugural address, he must have been acutely aware that his legitimacy as the American president was still in doubt by a great many Americans. He was also the youngest person elected president and that came with both drawbacks and advantages. Drawback in that he was

considered a lightweight or the privileged puppet of his powerful father; advantage in that he was the vanguard of a new generation seizing the reigns of power from a sclerotic old guard. The address was crafted to mitigate the negative and accentuate the positive of this persona.

Like all presidential speeches in the modern era, this speech was not solely the work of the president, but of a team of contributors, most especially Ted Sorenson. Sorenson was the youngest of Kennedy's aides and his principal speechwriter. His devotion to his boss was fathomless. Often characterized as Kennedy's "intellectual alter ego," Sorenson had the ability to create a feedback loop between himself and his boss wherein ideas and contours of phrases originated with Kennedy but then bounced back-and-forth between the two of them until an acceptable final version was authorized by Kennedy. The murky gray area this created in between the genesis and terminus of Kennedy's speeches stoked the belief amongst much of Washington's chattering class that Sorenson was in fact exclusively responsible for Kennedy's eloquence. Many, including Richard Nixon and Katharine Graham, openly asserted that Kennedy was merely reading a Sorenson speech at the inauguration. Most historians have refuted this claim, identifying Kennedy as the primary architect and craftsman, and Sorenson more aptly characterized as the chief polisher of the work.

The speech was in its entirety a Cold War speech. One has to wonder if the intended audience was actually the American people or the Soviet Politburo. Competition with the Soviet Union over influence throughout the world had become a monomania for Americans since the end of the Second World War and this intense focus on foreign affairs was *the* theme of the address. The address was perhaps Kennedy's—he of the generation who had fought the gruesome and perhaps unnecessary war against fascism—chance to mark the line in the sand to a despotic Soviet Union in 1961 that should have been marked by the Western powers to the despotic Axis powers in 1938. (To be sure, Kennedy had spent much of his political life running from his father's record as an appeaser in the run-up to the war, and thus the urge to foster an ostentatiously belligerent attitude towards the enemies of freedom was pronounced within him.)

Today we find ourselves befuddled trying to chart a clear path in a chaotic multipolar world of rising powers and an ever-increasing number of non-state actors. It feels almost quaint to listen to the words spoken during the most bipolar era this planet has ever known. Kennedy's recurring admonitions to "both sides" demonstrate acutely that there were none but two forces in the world that really mattered in 1961. This highlights another audience Kennedy was addressing: the scores of independent nations in Africa and Asia that had won their independence from the Western empires since 1945. Early in his congressional career, Kennedy had known that the United States would have to campaign proactively to the newly independent nations to win their support and alliance. The creation of what became the Peace Corps, long a goal of Kennedy and other policymakers, was one of the outgrowths of this aim for mutual benefit between the First and Third Worlds expressed by the new president.

Finally, besides examining the great uplifting messages within the inaugural address, attention must be paid to the sad gaping hole that existed within it. Although the address was almost entirely devoted to foreign policy, there was a domestic issue deliberately avoided by Kennedy that was rapidly metastasizing into an existential threat for the United States government: the struggle for civil rights by black Americans. Because the Kennedy Administration began their

term so focused on the freedom and human rights of the peoples across the seas, they were woefully inconsiderate of the enemies of freedom operating within their own government. Indeed, the power of the reactionary southern Democrats in government made the liberal Democratic president sadly beholden to their interests in order to advance his other priorities. There had been an attempt to include a reference to struggles black Americans were making to gain their rightful share of dignity as citizens. One line was included in an early draft of the speech which did allude to the ongoing civil rights controversies: [so that] "our nation's most precious resource, our youth, are not developed according to their race or funds, instead of their own capability," but it was dropped from the final version. Two of Kennedy's advisors (Louis Martin and Harris Wofford) did manage to convince Kennedy to add the phrase "*at home* and around the world" to his statement about defending human rights.[*]

Quibbling aside, the Kennedy inaugural speech shall likely be read and studied centuries from now alongside Pericles, Shakespeare, and Lincoln. Its influence on the Baby Boom generation of Americans was profound, especially coming at the apex of a time when the public had an almost religious faith that the United States government could accomplish any positive end it attempted to achieve. It is rather astounding that the speech has endured as a paragon of American exceptionalism even as the current generation of Americans revel in a sarcastic and cynical disdain for the idealism of the '60s. Perhaps we are not as world weary and snidely sophisticated as we think we are. Historian Douglas Brinkley summed it up like this:

> His identification with a moment of unusual public activism explains much of his appeal to many Americans of the 1960s, and even to many Americans born after his death. They look back nostalgically to an era that seemed to be a time of national confidence and purpose. Kennedy reminds many Americans of an age when it was possible to believe that politics could be harnessed to America's highest aspirations, that it could speak to the country's moral yearnings. And perhaps most of all, Kennedy reminds Americans of a time when the nation's capacities seemed limitless, when its future seemed unbounded, when it was possible to believe that the United States could solve social problems and accomplish great deeds….
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> To the many Americans who yearn for a new age of public activism and commitment, the image of a heroic John Fitzgerald Kennedy has endured as a bright and beckoning symbol of the world that many people believe they have lost.

Many more generations will have to pass before any final judgment can be rendered on this quandary. Was Kennedy expressing a dangerous naïveté that would lead to quagmire wars and fiscal insolvency, or rationally comprehending the need for vigorous engagement with a world that needs a beacon of righteousness? Can our ideals ever really withstand the onslaught of pitiless circumstance?

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[*] "… 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***."

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