Inaugural Address

John F. Kennedy

ANCHOR TEXT | SPEECH

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This version of the selection alternates original text with summarized passages. Dotted lines appear next to the summarized passages.

NOTES

President John F. Kennedy gave this speech to mark the beginning of his presidency. It was given on January 20, 1961, his inauguration day—the day on which he was sworn into office as president of the United States. At the time, the United States and its allies were locked in a Cold War, or a state of political and military tension, with the Soviet Union (a federation of communist republics headed by Russia).

President Kennedy begins his speech by telling his audience what his inauguration day means to him, saying that it is not about his individual victory or his party's victory.

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.

Kennedy says that he has sworn the same oath of office that former presidents have. However, he adds that the world is a different place now because humans have the power to end poverty or to destroy all life with nuclear weapons.

He urges listeners to remember the inherited freedoms won in the American 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. ...

Americans, he says, have always been, and will continue to be, committed to maintaining human rights at home and around the world. He explains how far Americans are willing to go to make sure that all nations have liberty.

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.

Kennedy next pledges loyalty to old allies and offers support to newly free nations. He pledges to help people who are struggling with poverty in many parts of the world—not because the communist-led Soviet Union is also doing it, but because it is the right thing to do.

He then turns to "the Americas"—the countries in North America, Central America, and South America. He says that the United States will defend these countries against any attacker.

Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other

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power know that this hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.

Kennedy next vows to support the United Nations. He asks America's adversaries, or enemies, to work toward peace before nuclear weapons destroy humankind. He says that the United States should not be afraid to negotiate, and he suggests limiting the creation of weapons. The science that created the weapons could be used for something positive, such as exploring space and curing disease.

Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms. …

Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.

He next addresses the American people and their part in America's future.

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.

Kennedy says that since the country was founded, Americans have answered the call to serve. Now, Americans are being called again—to maintain the fight against "tyranny, poverty, disease, and war."

Kennedy next states that freedom needs to be defended "in its hour of maximum danger," but he welcomes the opportunity. And he feels that the energy and dedication that Americans bring to the job of defending freedom will serve as an example to the world. In the spirit of giving, Kennedy asks Americans—and people of the world—to consider how they can help.

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.

Kennedy says that the only reward for their efforts will be a good conscience and that history will be the final judge of their actions. He ends his speech with a call to action.

… Let us go forth to lead the land we love. …

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