

Transcript of President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address (1961)

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

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

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

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

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

283 This much we pledge--and more.

295 To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we
310 pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United there is little we cannot do in a

324 host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do--for we dare
334 not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.

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

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

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

494 To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our
509 last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the
522 instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support--to prevent it from

535 becoming merely a forum for invective--to strengthen its shield of the new
549 and the weak--and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

815 Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of
827 Isaiah--to "undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free."
840 And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion,
855 let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power,
871 but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and
874 the peace preserved.

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

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

983 Now the trumpet summons us again--not as a call to bear arms,
999 though arms we need--not as a call to battle, though embattled we are-- but a
1014 call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out,
1025 "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation"--a struggle against the common
1034 enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

1046 Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North
1060 and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all
1068 mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

1081 In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been
1095 granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do
1110 not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of

1122 us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation.
1136 The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light
1152 our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light
1154 the world.

1167 And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for
1176 you--ask what you can do for your country.

1189 My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for
1201 you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

1213 Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world,
1227 ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we
1241 ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the
1258 final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His
1272 blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly
1275 be our own.”