JOHN F. KENNEDY, "INAUGURAL ADDRESS" (20 JANUARY 1961)

<http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm>

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The Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy is considered one of the greatest speeches in twentieth-century American public address. Communication scholars have ranked the speech second in a list of the hundred "top speeches" of the twentieth century based on its impact and artistry.[[1]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm" \l "_edn1" \o ")It is famous for its eloquence and for its call to duty: "Ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country (26).[[2]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn2) The young president spoke to the nation after a close, divisive election, and at a time when the American people were growing increasingly fearful of a long, drawn-out cold war. Yet instead of reassuring his audience by minimizing the dangers, Kennedy warned of a long, difficult struggle, emphasized differences between the United States and its enemies, and outlined the specific responsibilities and obligations of the United States and its citizens.

Historians of the cold war and biographers of Kennedy agree about the quality and significance of the speech. Thurston Clarke claims that Kennedy's address is "generally acknowledged to have been the greatest oration of any twentieth-century politician."[[3]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn3) Robert Dallek writes that the speech "thrilled the crowd of twenty thousand dignitaries and ordinary citizens" gathered in front of the Capitol building.[[4]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn4) Arthur Schlesinger, who served as a Special Assistant to the president and later wrote a best-selling history of the Kennedy administration, calls the Inaugural Address a "splendid speech."[[5]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn5) And James C. Humes identifies the speech as one of those rare presidential addresses that truly shaped history, calling it a speech of "brilliant eloquence" that inspired "American hopes" for the future.[[6]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn6)

The tradition of the presidential inaugural address in the United States is well established. Inaugural addresses typically aim to unify the nation and provide a vision for the future. They are supposed to be eloquent and pleasing to the ear.[[7]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn7) Kennedy's Inaugural Address was certainly a well-crafted speech stylistically, and that alone may account for some of its fame. Yet there was much more to the speech than its stylistic eloquence. Kennedy's speech also created a bolder vision for American foreign policy, a vision that raised the stakes of the cold war competition and foreshadowed decades of diplomatic, economic, and even military action to support and defend freedom and liberty around the world.

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*The Election of 1960*

After the nominating conventions in 1960, neither candidate was on firm political ground. John F. Kennedy narrowly won his party's nomination at the Democratic convention; the final state to announce their vote, Wyoming, secured him the necessary delegates.[[28]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn28) Many of the Southern Democrats were wary of Kennedy due to his liberal, pro-civil rights stance and, admittedly, because he was a Catholic. JFK chose Lyndon Johnson as his running mate in an attempt to unite the party behind the ticket. The Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, won his nomination uncontested but still faced significant problems in the general election. He was the sitting vice president of an administration that was well-liked and respected by Americans, but he did not have the full support of President Dwight D. Eisenhower on the campaign trail. Kennedy was young, vulnerable to charges of inexperience, and a staunch supporter of civil rights--a stance that hurt him in the Democratic South. And, of course, he was Catholic. Nixon was abrasive and abrupt at times, but he also had a strong anti-communist record and significant foreign policy experience--an important issue in the 1960 campaign. Polls during the fall of 1960 "showed Nixon and Kennedy locked in a dead heat."[[29]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm" \l "_edn29" \o ")

The Kennedy campaign recognized that there were two major concerns about his candidacy: his religion and his youth. Kennedy addressed the "Catholic Question" before a hostile audience of protestant ministers in Houston, Texas on September 12, 1960. He failed to persuade many conservative evangelicals to vote for him, but his campaign later used footage from the Houston Ministerial Address as television advertisements in key states. As Arthur Schlesinger writes in his account of the Kennedy presidency, Kennedy's smooth, effective performance in the first televised presidential debate on September 26, 1960, helped answer concerns about his maturity and undermined "Nixon's key issue--Kennedy's supposed youth and inexperience."[[30]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn30)Kennedy also framed his foreign policy discussions in tough, cold war terms. He attacked Nixon and the current administration for allowing the Soviet Union to gain dominance in the late 1950s. In speeches and television appearances, Kennedy spoke of a "missile gap" between the United States and the Soviet Union and reminded voters of the successful launch of Sputnik. He also blamed the administration for the ascendancy of a communist regime in Cuba. These issues played on the fears of many Americans that the Soviet Union was the "primary problem facing the nation" in 1960.[[31]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn31)

After the hotly contested campaign, John F. Kennedy won the presidency, defeating Nixon by an electoral count of 303 to 219. The popular vote, however, indicated that the race was far closer. The people chose Kennedy by a margin of just 118,574 votes, with more than sixty-eight million cast. JFK won only 49.72 percent of the popular vote, since a third candidate, Senator Harry F. Byrd, garnered more than 500,000 votes. Kennedy was appalled that the margin was so small but attributed his narrow victory to a false sense of hope and confidence in Eisenhower, as well as to anti-Catholic sentiment.[[32]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn32)

As Kennedy prepared his Inaugural Address, he was acutely aware of the mood in the United States. The 1950s had brought concern and even pessimism to the United States. Eisenhower had suffered a heart attack, bungled the U-2 spy plane incident, and dispatched federal troops to Little Rock to enforce school desegregation. Fidel Castro had established a communist regime just ninety miles off the coast of Florida. The Soviets had launched Sputnik, and their leader, Nikita Khrushchev, had threatened to "bury" the United States.[[33]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn33) In his Inaugural Address, Kennedy would announce the start of a new era in American politics, one in which Americans could look forward with optimism and confidence despite all these challenges. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, Kennedy had spoken of the "new frontier of the 1960s."[[34]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn34) His task in his Inaugural Address, then, was to explain what that "new frontier" might entail and to unite the nation behind his new, more aggressive approach to cold war politics.

*Kennedy's Inaugural Address*

John F. Kennedy is routinely characterized as one of America's greatest orators and his Inaugural Address is generally counted among the great speeches in U.S. history. Virtually all who have commented on the speech consider it a success. In a 1965 essay, rhetorical scholar Edward B. Kenny recalled "the splendor of the occasion and the forceful manner in which the newly elected president delivered his marks."[[35]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn35) In *Speech Education,*Takato Sugino went even further, proclaiming the speech a "success all over the world."[[36]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn36) Other critics have emphasized the sincerity of the address and Kennedy's high hopes that it would be remembered as one of the great inaugurals in U.S. history. Rhetorical critic Sam Meyer, for example, commented, "We can be sure that the inaugural oration was the product of Kennedy's deepest convictions and embodied his fervent hopes that it would win a high place as one of the lasting documents of American history."[[37]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn37) Similarly, Sugino concluded that Kennedy's "bright and vivid personality" was "reflected through his unique style" in the inaugural, and that Kennedy's "ideas, personality, and his emotional feelings were skillfully woven into refined language and well-balanced sentences." In short, "President Kennedy said all that he wanted to in that brief speech on January 20, 1961."[[38]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn38)

A few critics have noted the ways in which Kennedy's speech differed from the typical inaugural address. Focusing on Kennedy's use of antithesis, for example, Edward B. Kenny emphasized how the speech cast global events as a simplistic struggle between two opposing forces, the United States and the Soviet Union.[[39]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn39) Similarly, Meyer observed that Kennedy polarized the world into "two camps with opposing ideologies," concluding that even the salutations within the speech--e.g., "To those old allies," or "Let both sides"--contained "revelations of Kennedy's central thrust and meaning."[[40]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn40) Other scholars have noted that the speech was shorter and perhaps more succinct than other inaugurals, and Donald L Wolfarth observed that it also was more focused on foreign policy than most inaugural addresses. Despite these differences, however, Wolfarth judged the speech to be "quite consistent" with the "broad outline of inaugural tradition," although perhaps a bit "above the average inaugural" because of its "emotional color."[[41]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn41)

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have written extensively about the inaugural address as a rhetorical genre, and their theories help illuminate the specific virtues of Kennedy's speech. Defining genres as recurrent forms of speech with common "pragmatic ends and typified by their substantive, stylistic, and strategic similarities," they identify four generic elements that distinguish inaugural addresses.[[42]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn42) First, inaugurals aim to unify their audience after a politically divisive election by rhetorically constructing a portrait of "the people" as committed not to partisanship but the common good. Second, they typically rehearse a set of communal values drawn from the collective memory of the American people. Third, inaugurals set forth the ideals and political principles that will guide the new administration's policies and actions. Finally, inaugurals demonstrate that the president understands and appreciates the requirements and limits of his executive power.[[43]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn43)

By these generic standards, Campbell and Jamieson have declared Kennedy's speech "one of the more eloquent inaugurals." According to Campbell and Jamieson, the speech reflected the "ritualistic nature of the occasion," phrasing each assertion or promise as "a pledge jointly made by leader or people." It also "achieved timelessness" by reflecting on "the history of the cold war" and by expressing "the resoluteness required under any circumstances to sustain a struggle against a menacing ideology." By using parallelism, Kennedy invited his listeners "to ponder these ideas, ideas less suited to contemplation when stated in more mundane language." In short, Campbell and Jamieson count Kennedy's speech among the "great" presidential inaugurals. It not only fulfilled the generic requirements of a presidential inaugural address, but it did so in language that invited deep reflection on the ideas it articulated.[[44]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn44)

Kennedy's speech was no doubt a fine example of the inaugural genre. But it also was a forceful, persuasive response to a particular situation--an escalating cold war that, in Kennedy's view, would demand commitment and sacrifice from all Americans. Kennedy's Inaugural Address was not *merely*ceremonial or ritualistic. To the contrary, it crafted a vision of public service that inspired a whole generation of political and civic leaders, boldly announced an ambitious and far-reaching policy of defending freedom around the globe, and influenced American presidential discourse for decades to come. In the process, the address also may have exacerbated cold war tensions and encouraged a more rigid, hard-line American foreign policy. In dividing the world between the forces of good and evil and committing the United States to a "long twilight struggle," Kennedy employed a polarizing rhetoric that not only put the Russians on the defensive, but also foreshadowed the rhetoric of later American presidents, including Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Such divisive rhetoric was not new to the American presidency and the rhetoric surrounding the cold war; Kennedy, however, used the polarized worldview to ground his bold foreign policy plan.

Kennedy delivered his Inaugural Address on a cold, windy afternoon--January 20, 1961-- before an audience of some twenty thousand people outside the U.S. Capitol building. As both journalists at the time and later historians have noted, there seemed to be something different about that day, something that suggested a new sense of optimism and hope for the dawning of a new era. Kennedy's youth and vigor plainly contrasted with that of the outgoing president sitting near him on the platform. Dwight Eisenhower was now seventy years old--the oldest sitting president in the history of the United States. He, like others on the platform, was bundled in a coat and scarf on that blustery day. Kennedy, in contrast, was twenty-seven years Eisenhower's junior. Eisenhower was born in the nineteenth century, Kennedy in the twentieth. Eisenhower was balding and had suffered two strokes during the second term of his presidency. Kennedy was young and glamorous, and, as historian Thurston Clarke notes, "one of the most handsome men to become president."[[45]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn45) As Kennedy rose to take the oath of office, he left behind his hat, coat, and scarf, thereby reinforcing his image of youthful vigor.

Kennedy delivered the strong, eloquent words of his Inaugural Address slowly and deliberately, trying to deemphasize his pronounced Boston accent. The language was artistic and formal--appropriate for a presidential inaugural. His successful style, however, rested more on the simple elegance of his phrasing than particular word choices. Kennedy used repetition to add emphasis to important sections, such as when he reminded Americans that man "holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish *all forms* of human poverty and *all forms* of human life" (3).[[46]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn46) He used anaphora, or repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a sentence, to create a rhythmic flow in his speech. Kennedy's speech also is filled with visual imagery, such as when he referred to the developing world "struggling to break the bonds of mass misery" (9). Of course, the most memorable rhetorical device in Kennedy's speech was his use of antithesis or "inversion" in two famous lines: "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate" (15), and "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" (26). These "inversions sound deceptively easy and inevitable, as do all such concise and pointed expressions," according to rhetoric critic Burham Carter, Jr. In Carter's assessment, Kennedy's inversions were "short, witty, and precise."[[47]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn47)

While Kennedy's style was no doubt impressive, his speech also fulfilled the substantive, generic functions of an American presidential inaugural address. From the opening of his address, Kennedy placed his listeners within the communal memory of the American experience. To encourage his audience to transcend their differences, he redefined the occasion of the inaugural as "not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom" (2). The American people, both Democrats and Republicans, were urged to celebrate the historic past of their nation and to face the future together, as a united people. In reminding them of their common heritage, Kennedy declared his audience the "heirs of the first revolution" (4), a phrase that reminded his listeners of the special character of the American experience.

Kennedy placed special emphasis on his role as the voice of a new generation, a group with exceptional values and qualities. The "torch" had been passed to them (4), symbolic not just of the transfer of power but of generational change. This new generation was "born in this century," suggesting that they possessed a spirit of innovation. They were "tempered by war" and "disciplined by a hard and bitter peace," suggesting fortitude and strength. They recognized the importance of the American democratic experience and were forward-looking, yet "proud of [their] ancient heritage" (4). As Campbell and Jamieson noted in their study of presidential inaugurals, Kennedy portrayed this new generation of Americans as a people "willing to sacrifice for an ideal"[[48]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn48)--the ideal of freedom at home and around the globe. His portrait of the people was no doubt attractive to his audience, motivating them to embrace the communal values, political principles, and ambitions that Kennedy articulated in the remainder of the speech.

Kennedy appeared to accept the limitations of his own powers as head of the executive branch by acknowledging historical tradition and attributing his power to the people. He reminded the audience that he was swearing the "same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago" (2), and he suggested that the ultimate power to enact his vision of protecting and defending freedom rested with the people: "In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course" (22). Thus, Kennedy challenged the people themselves to determine their own future. Any proposals or promises that Kennedy made as the leader of the nation were witnessed by--and jointly pledged to--by his "fellow Americans."[[49]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm" \l "_edn49" \o ") Even in urging Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you" but what "you can do for your country" (26), he displayed an understanding and respect for the limitations of the executive office. The people had elected him, and Kennedy pledged that his role would be to empower and inspire the people to act for the good of the nation.

Yet while Kennedy's speech met the generic expectations of an inaugural address and appeared to defer to the people, it also suggested a different global role for the United States. Polarizing the world into two antagonistic camps, Kennedy depicted world politics as a life-or-death struggle between the forces of freedom and democracy and the forces of totalitarianism—cold war depictions that were more commonplace by the time of JFK's presidency. Truman and Eisenhower both used a variety of rhetorical devices to persuade the public that the Soviet Union was the ultimate enemy other.[[50]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn50) Kennedy continued to employ polarizing rhetoric, and also used such rhetoric to propose a more active, more aggressive foreign policy. Kennedy’s foreign policy vision was committed not only to peaceful co-existence or the containment of communism but to the spread of freedom and democracy, perhaps even the liberation of those already under communist domination.

Kennedy's commitment to this vision came early in the speech. In perhaps the most controversial line of the address, he made a forceful pronouncement: "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" (5). The repetition of the word "any" suggested a total commitment to defending freedom and democracy, wherever it might be threatened. The implications of the statement were far-reaching indeed. Kennedy, of course, did not start the cold war, nor did he create the antagonism towards communism that fueled its escalation. Yet while previous presidents had responded to perceived communist threats with economic programs (like the Marshall Plan) or defensive military postures (like Truman's "containment" policy), Kennedy seemed to be suggesting something more: an all-out crusade to promote the ideals of freedom, liberty, and democracy around the world.

Kennedy elaborated on this commitment to promoting liberty throughout the address. Promising "loyalty" to those "faithful friends" who joined with the United States in "a host of cooperative ventures" (7), he offered U.S. aid to developing nations in Asia and Africa: "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" (8). To those people "struggling to break the bonds of mass misery," he promised "our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required" (9). In the Western hemisphere, Kennedy promised to "convert good words into good deeds" and to "assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty" (10). Kennedy's promise to "bear any burden," it seemed, was no empty promise; it opened the door for a wide variety of never-ending international commitments. The promise to assure liberty's survival was vague, encompassing a wide range of possible responses to those actions that threatened human freedom around the globe. Kennedy's pledge to protect, assist, and encourage nations struggling to be free seemed open-ended and permanent--a bold departure from the cautious policies of the past.

Kennedy's use of antithesis highlighted the dramatic scope of that commitment. Antithesis as a literary form highlights a contrast between two opposing objects or ideas. As Edward B. Kenny notes in his analysis of the Kennedy inaugural, antithesis is "reminiscent of courtly conceits and self-conscious writers who strove after a deliberate effect."[[51]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn51) In contemporary discourse, antithesis sometimes comes across as artificial or trite. In Kennedy's speech, however, the prolific use of antithesis--at least fifteen times, by Kenny's count--emphasized the stark dichotomy between the forces of freedom, led by the United States, and the communist world. The United States represented freedom and liberty, while the Soviet Union and its satellites represented "aggression" and "subversion" (10)—common cold war constructions that Kennedy inherited from his two presidential predecessors and other political leaders.

Kennedy also used antithesis to suggest that the United States was morally superior to the Soviet Union. The United States was committed to peace; it was only responding to Soviet acts of aggression. The communists were attempting to bait the free world into war, but not the kind of war Americans historically had fought. Kennedy explained:

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 as 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. (23)

In Kennedy's dichotomous world view, the battle was not just between the United States and the Soviet Union, but between the United States and the "common enemies" of mankind: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself. And that would not be a "war" that would end anytime soon or with victory parades in the streets of America. Instead, it would be a "long twilight struggle"--one with few obvious victories and no end in sight.

Kennedy spoke of abstract ideals, like freedom and democracy; the enemies he had in mind would also have been clear to anybody in his audience. The "iron tyranny" threatening the developing world was obviously a reference to what Winston Churchill had earlier dubbed the Iron Curtain of communism. The "nations who would make themselves our adversary" were clearly the Soviet Union and its allies (12). Those nations, presumably opposed to the ideals of the United States, could not be appeased or trusted to act in good faith. Kennedy warned, "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" (13). The Eisenhower administration, as Martin J. Medhurst has shown, had built up America's nuclear arsenal behind a propaganda campaign emphasizing "Atoms for Peace."[[52]](http://archive.vod.umd.edu/internat/jfk1961int.htm#_edn52) Kennedy seemed to go even further, pledging to "bear any burden" and create "arms sufficient beyond doubt" in an effort to roll back communism's advances and promote liberty and democracy around the world.

Towards the end of his Inaugural Address, Kennedy appeared more conciliatory while subtly reinforcing the dichotomous worldview he had created. He encouraged both sides to "begin anew" in the search for peace, while "remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof" (15). Yet Kennedy's appeals to "both sides" apparently required that the Soviet Union abandon its own communist principles and values and instead embrace the American ideals of freedom and liberty. "Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us," Kennedy intoned (16). He also called for "both sides" to "invoke the wonders of science" instead of promoting "its terrors" (18), and he imagined "both sides" creating a "new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved" (20). Yet his repeated references to "both sides" subtly reinforced a polarized worldview that was characteristic of earlier cold war depictions. He also called upon "both sides" to heed "the command of Isaiah--to 'undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free'" (19). The biblical injunction was an odd appeal to make to the explicitly atheistic Soviet Union. It seemed unlikely the Soviets would be persuaded by religious quotations and calls for peace. Moreover, the statement implied an open-ended commitment to liberating those already under the domination of totalitarian regimes in "all corners of the earth."

In sum, Kennedy's speech no doubt possessed the literary style and elegance of a great inaugural address. It rehearsed the communal values of the typical inaugural, and it aimed to unite the public in common cause. In terms of its generic qualities, it clearly ranked among the best inaugural addresses in U.S. history. Contextualizing the speech historically, however, casts it in a somewhat different light. With its polarized world view and its implicit claims to moral superiority, Kennedy’s Inaugural Address proposed a new vision of American foreign policy that one could imagine the Soviets interpreting as disrespectful and even threatening. And, in fact, the Soviets responded to the speech, not with conciliatory gestures, but by stationing "defensive" missiles in Cuba. In short, the speech appears to have escalated cold war tensions and contributed to a legacy of heightened American interventionism that persists to this day.