

# Interpreting JFK's Inaugural Address

**Topic:** President Kennedy's Inaugural Speech

**Grade Level:** 9 - 12

**Subject Area:** US History

**Time required:** 1 class period

## Goals/ Rationale

President Kennedy's inaugural speech addressed not only the American people, but also people throughout the world—including newly independent nations, old allies, and the Soviet Union. In this lesson plan, students are challenged to consider how the speech might have resonated with some of these audiences.

**Essential Question:** How can a speech or public statement resonate differently with various audiences, depending upon their point of view?

## Objectives

Students will:

- discuss the significance of events leading up to Kennedy's inauguration.
- analyze the inaugural address from three perspectives—a young civil rights activist, a Soviet diplomat, and a Cuban exile.
- evaluate the speech from one of these perspectives.

## Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

*National History Standards*

U.S. History: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s), Era 9:

2A: The student understands the international origins and domestic consequences of the Cold War.

3B: The student understands the "New Frontier" and the "Great Society."

*Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework*

USII.T5.1 - Using primary sources such as campaign literature and debates, news articles/analyses, editorials, and television coverage, analyze the important policies and events that took place during the presidencies of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon.

## Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should have a working knowledge of the Cold War, civil rights movement, and the major events following World War II. Students should also know how to analyze a piece of text, and draw their own conclusions.

## **Historical Background and Context**

On January 20, 1961, a clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court held the large Fitzgerald family Bible as John F. Kennedy took the oath of office to become the nation's 35th president. Against a backdrop of deep snow and sunshine, more than twenty thousand people huddled in 20-degree temperatures on the east front of the Capitol to witness the event. Kennedy, having removed his topcoat and projecting both youth and vigor, delivered what has become a landmark inaugural address.

His audience reached far beyond those gathered before him to people around the world. In preparing for this moment, he sought both to inspire the nation and to send a message abroad signaling the challenges of the Cold War and his hope for peace in the nuclear age. He also wanted to be brief. As he'd remarked to his close advisor, Ted Sorensen, "I don't want people to think I'm a windbag."

He assigned Sorensen the task of studying other inaugural speeches and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to glean the secrets of successful addresses. The finely crafted final speech had been revised and reworked numerous times by Kennedy and Sorensen until the president-elect was satisfied. Though not the shortest of inaugural addresses, Kennedy's was shorter than most at 1,355 words in length and, like Lincoln's famous speech, was comprised of short phrases and words. In addition to message, word choice and length, he recognized that captivating his audience required a powerful delivery. On the day before and on the morning of Inauguration Day, he kept a copy handy to take advantage of any spare moment to review it, even at the breakfast table.

Having won the election by one of the smallest popular vote margins in history, Kennedy had known the great importance of this speech. Following his inaugural address, nearly seventy-five percent of Americans expressed approval of President Kennedy.

## **Materials**

- Timeline of Cold War and civil rights events that occurred from January 1959 to January 20, 1961
- JFK's inaugural address
- Three profiles of fictional individuals

## **Procedure**

1. Provide students with the handout *Timeline: Kennedy's Inaugural Address* which provides a chronology of Cold War and civil rights events that occurred from January 1959 to January 20, 1961. Discuss the historical significance of these events.
2. Divide students into groups of 3-4.
3. Provide each group with one of three profiles of a fictional individual responding to the speech: (a) a young civil rights activist, (b) a Soviet diplomat, or (c) a Cuban exile.
4. Have students to analyze the inaugural address and answer the questions associated with their individual.
5. Have students share their group's response with the entire class.

### **Assessment**

For homework, have students role play the fictional individual and write a letter to President Kennedy voicing their reaction to the inaugural address.

### **Additional Resources**

Clarke, Thurston. *Ask Not: The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech that Changed America*. Henry Holt and Company, 2004.

Hershberg, Jim. Introduction. "A Typical Pragmatist": The Soviet Embassy Profiles John F. Kennedy, 1960." *Cold War International History Project Bulletin 4* (Fall 1994), 64-67. (Soviet document provided by Vladislav M. Zubok, National Security Archive, translated by Benjamin Aldrich-Moody.) Or online:

[https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP\\_Bulletin\\_4.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP_Bulletin_4.pdf); scroll through to page 64.

Hill, Kenneth L. *Cold War Chronology: Soviet-American Relations, 1945-1991*. Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1993.

Sorensen, Theodore C. *Kennedy*. Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965.

Tofel, Richard J. *Sounding the Trumpet: The Making of John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address*. Ian R. Dee, Publisher, 2005.

## Timeline Kennedy's Inaugural Address

<b>January 1, 1959</b>	Fidel Castro takes power in Cuba.
<b>January –November, 1960</b>	17 African nations achieve independence.
<b>February 1, 1960</b>	African American students stage sit-in at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, NC.
<b>February 20, 1960</b>	“Whatever the exact facts may be about the size of the missile gap, it is clear that we shall need more missiles, more ships, planes and men, more atomic submarines and airlift mobility.” --Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, Hartford, CT.
<b>April 17, 1960</b>	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is formed.
<b>May 1960</b>	American U-2 Plane on an intelligence-gathering mission, piloted by Francis Gary Powers, is shot down over Soviet Territory—the pilot is captured.  Paris Summit between Great Britain, France, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. is aborted.  U.S.S.R. and Cuba establish diplomatic relations.
<b>July 9, 1960</b>	Khrushchev says in a speech that the U.S.S.R. will come to Cuba's assistance if the U.S. attacks.
<b>July 12, 1960</b>	At a news conference, Khrushchev accuses the U.S. of using the Monroe Doctrine to assert the right to steal from the Latin American people, and says the doctrine no longer applies in that region.
<b>July 14, 1960</b>	U.S. State Department reaffirms that the principles of the Monroe Doctrine are still valid for Latin America.
<b>October 19, 1960</b>	Martin Luther King, Jr. is arrested in Atlanta during mass sit-in demonstrations. JFK's subsequent call to Mrs. King helps gain him African American support in the election.
<b>November 8, 1960</b>	John F. Kennedy elected president.
<b>December 20, 1960</b>	National Liberation Front (also known as Vietcong) is formed in South Vietnam.
<b>January 3, 1961</b>	U.S. breaks off diplomatic and consular relations with Cuba.
<b>January 6, 1961</b>	In a secret speech to Communist leaders in Moscow, Khrushchev says the U.S.S.R. supports wars of national liberation.
<b>January 19, 1961</b>	JFK and selected advisers meet with Eisenhower. On Kennedy's agenda is a discussion of “Trouble Spots”—Berlin, the Far East, and Cuba. Kennedy is told of the critical importance of Laos and the deteriorating situation in that country.
<b>January 20, 1961</b>	JFK's inaugural address.

## Analyzing JFK's Inaugural Address

### Civil Rights Activist Profile

You are a college-aged, African-American member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a group of young civil rights activists formed in April 1960. Although the Supreme Court had ruled in 1954 in their *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that public schools must be integrated, you attended an all-black elementary and high school in Alabama and are now attending Fisk University, a private, all-black college in Nashville, Tennessee. A few months ago, you participated in a sit-in in an effort to desegregate the lunch counter at the local department store. Your organization is planning more non-violent demonstrations.

Initially, you did not support John F. Kennedy for president because you thought that Richard M. Nixon, raised as a Quaker, might be a stronger advocate for civil rights. But, after hearing Kennedy speak during his campaign about ending discrimination in federally subsidized housing “by a stroke of the presidential pen,” and after learning that he had called Coretta Scott King when her husband, Martin Luther King Jr., was unjustly thrown into jail in October 1960, you have been hopeful that Kennedy might help gain equality for African Americans.

You are sitting in the college dining hall with your friends, watching President Kennedy's inaugural address on the university's black and white television set. What are your reactions to his speech? Is there anything in the speech that surprises you? What did Kennedy say that might either have reinforced or changed your previously held beliefs?

For more background information on the sit-in movement in Tennessee, visit [\*The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture website\*](#).

## Analyzing JFK's Inaugural Address

### Soviet Diplomat Profile

You are a member of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, and have worked in the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC for the last seven years. During the summer of 1960, you helped prepare a political profile of Senator John F. Kennedy for Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Like Khrushchev, you had hoped that Vice President Richard M. Nixon would not succeed President Eisenhower because you viewed Nixon as an aggressive anti-communist, and appreciated Senator Kennedy's statement during the campaign that, unlike Eisenhower, he would have apologized to the U.S.S.R. for Francis Gary Powers' U-2 flight over the Soviet Union. In your profile of Kennedy, you described him as a politician, "not governed by any firm convictions, but by purely pragmatic considerations." You also noted that Kennedy "advocates talks" with the Soviets, but you were concerned about Kennedy's emphasis on strengthening the U.S. military.

You are watching the inaugural address on the color TV in the Soviet Embassy. What are your reactions to the speech? Is there anything in this speech that surprises you? What does Kennedy say that might reinforce or change your previously held beliefs? Is there anything he says that particularly concerns you?

For more background information on the Soviet profile of JFK, go to the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin 4* (Fall 1994)--available online at: [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP\\_Bulletin\\_4.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP_Bulletin_4.pdf); scroll through to page 64.

For more background information on the Soviet Foreign Ministry and Khrushchev before and during the Kennedy years, read the [interview with Oleg Troyanovksi](#) from the National Security Archive.

## Analyzing JFK's Inaugural Address

### Cuban Exile Profile

You are a doctor who recently fled Cuba to live with your brother in Miami. He left Cuba six years earlier, fearing the corruption and cruelty of the Fulgencio Batista government. You both had friends and relatives who had been imprisoned and even murdered. Your hopes for a just and free Cuba soared when Fidel Castro and the revolutionary forces entered Havana on January 1, 1959. However, your dream of an independent Cuba seemed unattainable as you witnessed Castro centralize power, authorize executions, and turn to the Soviet Union for economic assistance. You feel deceived by Castro. You thought he stood for justice and freedom, but his actions proved otherwise. Furthermore, he was cementing an alliance with the Soviet Union, making Cuba economically and politically dependent on a foreign Communist country. You believe your homeland will never be free as long as he is in power.

The U.S. presidential campaign has ignited your interest in the democratic process. You can see that both Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy are both strong anti-Communists. You were especially impressed when Kennedy, in the fourth televised debate, claimed that the U.S. had not done enough to stave off communism in Cuba. He warned that the same course of events could easily spread to countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

You are in your brother's living room, watching the new president's inaugural address on television. What parts of the speech address your concerns? How would you characterize Kennedy's commitment to Latin America? Does the speech give you reassurance about Cuba's future? If so, why? If not, why not?

For more background information on Cuban exiles in the US, visit this [PBS web page](#).

## **Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy**

Washington, D.C.

January 20, 1961

*Vice President Johnson, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, President Truman, Reverend Clergy, fellow citizens:*

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 forbears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands 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 the 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 people 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 convert our good words into good deeds--in a new alliance for progress--to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of



hostile powers. Let all our 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.

To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support--to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective--to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak--and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.

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 racing 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 control of 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.

Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah--to "undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free."

And if a beachhead 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 new 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 finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps 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. 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--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.

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