

The Torch has Passed to a New Generation: John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address and Responsibility

- **Compelling Question**
 - Why is important for you to act responsibly as a United States citizen?
- **Virtue:** Responsibility
- **Definition** – Responsibility is accountability to myself and others.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will analyze John F. Kennedy's call for responsible actions by the American citizenry in his Inaugural Address.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address.
 - Students will examine Kennedy's understanding of responsibility in American citizens.
 - Students will understand why acting responsibly affects the future of the United States.
 - Students will act responsibly in their own lives to protect freedom.
- **Background**
 - In the late 1950s, the United States was an affluent country and one of the world's military superpowers along with the Soviet Union. Americans were enjoying a lengthy period of prosperity after the tumultuous decades of the Great Depression and World War II. Millions drove new cars on the new national highway system during vacations or enjoyed consumer goods in their suburban homes. However, there were many significant challenges in postwar America. A Cold War threatening nuclear annihilation endangered the world. The Russians seemed to be pulling ahead in the arms race and technology when the USSR sent the satellite *Sputnik* into orbit. A series of small recessions caused economic setbacks, and many Americans lived in poverty and were not beneficiaries of postwar affluence. Finally, cultural critics complained about the sterility and conformity of American corporate life. When John F. Kennedy was elected as the youngest president in American history, he issued a ringing call to action for Americans to face these challenges and not settle for mediocrity.
- **Vocabulary**
 - Annihilation
 - Sterility
 - Conformity
 - Mediocrity
 - Affluence
 - Inauguration
 - Convocation
 - Orator
 - Enunciate
 - Clarion
 - Totalitarian
 - Communism
 - Prudence
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the "Walk-In-The-Shoes" question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
 - What was John F. Kennedy’s identity during this time? Was it different from how others perceived his identity?
 - What were the purposes of Kennedy’s speech? What were Kennedy’s purposes as president?
 - What did the purpose of Kennedy’s speech reveal about him as a leader?
 - Kennedy implored his fellow citizens to act responsibly in their own lives. What did this say about Kennedy’s own identity?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - President John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1961 http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kennedy.asp
 - PBS, *American Experience: The Presidents: JFK*
 - John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/>
 - The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/presidents/johnfkennedy>
 - Biography, John F. Kennedy <http://www.biography.com/people/john-f-kennedy-9362930>

Handout A: The Torch has Passed to a New Generation: JFK's Inaugural Address and Responsibility

Background

In the late 1950s, the United States was an affluent country and one of the world's military superpowers along with the Soviet Union. Americans were enjoying a lengthy period of prosperity after the tumultuous decades of the Great Depression and World War II. Millions drove new cars on the new national highway system during vacations or enjoyed consumer goods in their suburban homes. However, there were many significant challenges in postwar America. A Cold War threatening nuclear annihilation endangered the world. The Russians seemed to be pulling ahead in the arms race and technology when the USSR sent the satellite *Sputnik* into orbit. A series of small recessions caused economic setbacks, and many Americans lived in poverty and were not beneficiaries of postwar affluence. Finally, cultural critics complained about the sterility and conformity of American corporate life. When John F. Kennedy was elected as the youngest president in American history, he issued a ringing call to action for Americans to face these challenges and not settle for mediocrity.

Narrative

January 20, 1961 dawned as a cold day with a cutting wind. Brilliant sunlight reflected off the glistening eight inches of snow that had fallen the previous afternoon. Tens of thousands of dignitaries and ordinary Americans braved the winter weather for a chance to witness an event that was only occurring for the thirty-fifth time in the nation's history—the inauguration of a president. The day would be rife with anticipation for any new president, but Americans were especially eager to hear from the nation's youngest elected president in history about the course he would offer them.

After a hearty breakfast of eggs and bacon, Kennedy attended a Roman Catholic mass at Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown. He picked up his highly-cultured, beautiful young wife, Jacquelyn (who had just given birth to their second child, John, Jr., in December), and the couple was driven to the White House for coffee with President Dwight Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower. They traveled together to the East Portico of the Capitol, where the inaugural ceremonies began around noon with the playing of "Hail to the Chief." Besides the Eisenhowers and Kennedys, other past and future presidents and first ladies who were present included the Trumans, Johnsons, and Nixons. First ladies Edith Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt were also present.

The ceremony continued as Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston delivered a lengthy convocation, or blessing, during which a mechanism in the lectern short-circuited and began smoking. The Secret Service was alarmed, but the problem was quickly solved. Next, Marian Anderson, who was infamously banned from singing at Constitution Hall in 1939 because of her race, sang the "Star-Spangled Banner." Vice President Lyndon Johnson was then sworn into office by his fellow Texan, Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn.

With that, President Kennedy left his top hat and overcoat on his seat and took the Oath of Office to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States," as prescribed by the Constitution and administered by Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren. He recited the oath with his hand on his family Bible and concluded with the traditional words of George Washington and all subsequent presidents, "So help me God." Then, the deeply-tanned, handsome Kennedy delivered his Inaugural Address.

Kennedy had composed the speech with his special counsel and speechwriter, Ted Sorensen. They had collaborated on Kennedy's Pulitzer-Prize-winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, which chronicled the character of several famous Americans. They knew that expectations were high that Kennedy would deliver an inspiring inaugural address and sought to rise to the occasion. Kennedy was not a natural orator and honed his skills during the 1960 presidential campaign by listening to recordings of Winston Churchill's speeches from World War II. He was also learning the importance of television in politics and projecting the right image of youthful good looks and serious statesmanship as he did during the 1960 televised debates with candidate Richard Nixon. When the new president approached the podium, Americans eagerly listened to the principles that Kennedy would enunciate for his administration and the country.

Kennedy began the speech with the juxtaposition that humankind had the power in its hands to “abolish all forms of human poverty” with its affluence and “all forms of human life” with nuclear weapons. His speech promised the hope to elevate humanity while averting unthinkable nuclear destruction. He then asserted the American Founding principle that, “the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.”

Kennedy then issued a clarion call to inspire the younger generation of Americans to assume responsibility for leadership in the country and the world. “Let the word go forth . . . that the torch has 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 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.” Kennedy proceeded to explain that the American commitment to those rights was an active, not a passive, responsibility.

Kennedy pledged that the United States would be unyielding in its commitment to freedom around the globe. “Let every nation know,” he said, “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 was a broad—perhaps too broad—and open-ended responsibility that seemed to promise American involvement and perhaps military intervention in potential hotspots such as Berlin, Germany, the jungles of Vietnam, and the revolutionary, anti-colonial movements in Africa and Latin America, among many others. However, Kennedy and most Americans feared if the United States did not defend liberty around the globe, then the totalitarian forces of Communism would fill the vacuum and squash freedom.

Kennedy promised Americans a challenging road of toil and strife, not comfort and ease. America must seek world peace through strength when it faced the Soviet Union, and success against the “common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.” He warned that, “All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.”

Kennedy concluded his speech with the famous words of individual and civic responsibility: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” These ringing words motivated Americans to great deeds such as serving in the Peace Corps, marching for equality in the Civil Rights Movement, and putting a man on the moon. On the other hand, American Cold War commitments brought the world close to the brink of destruction in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and 58,000 Americans lost their lives in the Vietnam War. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address inspired Americans to take greater responsibility at home and abroad, though its exercise must be rooted in principles and prudence.

Questions to Consider

1. What was John F. Kennedy’s identity during this time? Was it different from how others perceived his identity?
2. What were the purposes of Kennedy’s speech? What were Kennedy’s purposes as president?
3. What did the purpose of Kennedy’s speech reveal about him as a leader?
4. Kennedy implored his fellow citizens to act responsibly in their own lives. What did this say about Kennedy’s own identity?

Journal Prompt

What did President Kennedy believe to be the purpose of American citizens?

Handout B: Journaling

Answer the following questions in a short essay.

- How can being a responsible citizen lead to freedom for yourself and others?
- How can you act responsibly as a citizen? How do responsible actions help you to achieve your purpose?
- How does the inaugural address help you see your purpose as an American citizen?
- How can you help others be responsible American citizens?
- President Kennedy understood that freedom must be protected with responsibility. How does acting responsibly protect freedom?