

Textual analysis of john f. kennedy's inaugural address essay sample



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John F. Kennedy's only inaugural address as the United State's youngest president presented both his mission and vision for the country, as well as his famed challenge to Americans and the rest of the world.

Kennedy delivered his speech on a Friday, January 20, 1961. From the very start of his address, he introduced the theme of continuity which he made use throughout the entire speech (Roesller, 2002, p. 5). For example, after the mention of the *Almighty God*, he talked about the *founding fathers of America* and then mentioned the *new generation* of the American race.

He also made good use of parallelism in his introduction. After acknowledging the presence of other leaders, he talked about the celebration of freedom, which symbolizes "*an end, as well as a beginning—signifying renewal, as well as change.*"

He also made good use of anti-thesis several times. To draw a sharp contrast between good and bad, he made mention of "*well or ill*" and "*support any friend, oppose any foe.*"

To make good the rhetoric, Kennedy also injected a lot of figurative language and metaphors to stress some points. When referring to the new States, he said "*those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.*" He carefully chose his words and made them sound both sensitive and strong: "*casting off the chains of poverty*", "*jungle of suspicion*", "*the prey of hostile powers*", "*this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house,*" and so on (p. 6).

At the mid-part of the address, he started moving to the challenge. As if responding to the “beginning” and “change” he mentioned at the start, he made a request to the Americans: “*But let us begin.*”

Again using the aid of continuity, he follows that with “*each generation of Americans has been summoned.*” At one point he even resorted to a biblical reference by saying “*the trumpet summons us.*”

These phrases prepared Kennedy for the rhetorical focal point of his speech. The next lines have become famous all over the world not only because of its content but because of the powerful way Kennedy had said it (p. 7).

The last part of his speech was a dare, a challenge to the citizens of America and of the world: “*And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.*” He goes on to say: “*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.*”

The popularity of those lines is unprecedented. Almost half a century since it was delivered, no American president has managed to pull something of that magnitude off. Those lines also sum up the way Kennedy is most remembered, the prince of American politics.

This is where the difference between his inaugural speech and other presidents' speeches lies. He did not talk in great length what he and his government can do. As much as he can, he did away with so many promises. Instead, he made sure that the Americans and the rest of the world know what they are capable of doing. At some point, he made the

people feel like they are the captains of the ship, so to speak. Kennedy brought Americans back to the driver seat.

Kennedy was elected into office during one of the most trying times in American history. The Cold War was becoming more aggressive and the battle between democracy and communism has prompted the US and the Soviet Union to take refuge in nuclear weapons. In his inaugural speech, Kennedy focused on freedom (p. 8), which at that time was very timely. He addressed many issues but always found a way to bring it back to freedom. Aside from the mention of freedom at the famous part, he explicitly claimed that it is the target of his administration when he said that America swears to *“ assure the survival and success of liberty.”*

Dubbed as the “ New Frontier”, Kennedy’s policies led to a period of new expectations in American politics. Starting from himself, his administration introduced a new breed of politicians. He asked for the kind of legislation that would trickle down to the poor.

Kennedy, with his youth and eloquence, also offered a sense of humility when he delivered his inaugural address: *“ 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.”* He didn’t see those words as a weakness but as a way to connect to the people.

Kennedy refused to give himself and his administration a time frame but requested that the American people “ begin.” *“ In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than in mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course.”*

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By those words, Kennedy gave Americans the assurance that they are in control of their country. By those words, Kennedy made the people feel secure in their place as nation builders. By those words, he let Americans know how important they are in his administration.

His noble speech was so powerful and remarkable that it would tarnish the revelations of his moral and physical weaknesses later on in his short-lived presidency. His hard-line stance on international diplomacy, for example, earned cheers and hisses. But soon after his death, the world remembers him as a champion of freedom and that young American prince who happened to deliver the famous lines that has moved the world.

Kennedy beamed with promise as soon as he took the stand for his inaugural address. Americans formed their expectations. Kennedy's speech, judging from its popularity and place in history, satisfied those expectations.

By supplementing his eloquence with powerful rhetorical tactics, he won America's heart. He instantly connected with Americans who previously felt so detached and distant with the White House. His speech was all about his people and how important they are for him and his administration.

All throughout his speech, he observed continuity. From the start, he made it clear that the target of his address was the American population. He started his address with a challenge and ended with another emphatic one.

There was poetry written all over his speech. His use of metaphors, anti-theses and parallelisms are evidence to this. There are figurative languages on his address, too. These made the words and his message more forceful.

The way he delivered his well-crafted lines presented a sense of urgency, as if saying there is no better time to begin but now.

Then of course, like all political speeches, he had pledges and promises. The difference, however, was he humbly asked the American population to help him go through them—over and over again.

Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, just two years into his short lived presidency.

References:

Roessler, E. (2002). *Three Inaugural Addresses: John F. Kennedy, William Clinton and George W. Bush* . Retrieved September 23, 2007, from http://www.gymnasium-oberhaching.de/klassen/fab/view.php?fn=2002_E_Roessler.pdf.