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

Handout A: Narrative

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. The U.S.S.R. and the U.S. were embroiled in the Cold War, a conflict that could spark into nuclear annihilation at any moment. The Russians seemed to be pulling ahead in the arms race and technology when they 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 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 were present.

President Kennedy left his top hat and overcoat on his seat during the ceremony 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.”

Kennedy and his speechwriter understood that the American people were expecting 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. 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 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 and open-ended responsibility that seemed to promise American involvement and perhaps military intervention in potential hotspots such as Germany, the jungles of Vietnam, and the revolutionary, anti-colonial movements in Africa and Latin America. However, Kennedy and many 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. He sought to destroy the “common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself” while warning, “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. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address inspired Americans to take greater responsibility both at home and abroad.