

# John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 1961



*On January 20, 1961, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the youngest person ever elected to the presidency, was sworn in as thirty-fifth President of the United States. In making his Inaugural Address brief, the young President was consciously following the example of Lincoln at Gettysburg. Kennedy's speech, focusing on the relationship of the United States to the world, called on Americans to serve their country.*

We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedoms—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 forebears 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. . . .

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. . . .

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. . . .

To those peoples 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. . . .

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 that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations . . . we renew our pledge of support. . . .

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. . . .

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. . . .

Now the trumpet summons us again . . . [to] a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself. . . .

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

