



John F Kennedy had a way with words. Whether he was encouraging a culture of service in his citizenry, highlighting the four essential qualities that he hoped would characterize his government, namely courage, judgment, integrity and dedication, addressing the nation on the Cuban Missile Crisis, or laying down the challenge to go to the moon, he spoke with passion and conviction, using frank language, which spoke to the heart of the American people. His speeches more than his legislative achievements are his legacy not only to those he governed, but to all of us around the world, who can still find relevance in them, half a century after his death.

A WAY WITH WORDS

The speeches of John F. Kennedy

A DEEP SENSE OF DUTY

John Fitzgerald "Jack" Kennedy was born on the 29th May 1917 in Brookline, Massachusetts. The Kennedy's were wealthy, politically connected Irish-Catholics. He and his eight siblings, enjoyed a life of privilege, yet he always strove to make his own way in the world. It was his older brother Joe, who announced to his family, that he intended to become the first Catholic President and no-one doubted he would. Jack developed a keen interest in European politics and world affairs when his father was appointed United States Ambassador to England in late 1937; however it was only after his brother's death, during the Second World War, that Jack Kennedy gave considered thought, to carrying this mantle to which his older brother had aspired. After completing his duties in the Pacific during the War, and a brief dalliance in journalism, Kennedy had a

serious discussion with his father Joseph, who convinced him to run for Congress, in Massachusetts' eleventh congressional district, where he won in 1946. Kennedy served in the US House of Representatives from 1947 to 1953, and the US Senate from 1953 to 1961. On July 13, 1960 the Democratic Party nominated Kennedy as its candidate for President. He asked Lyndon B. Johnson, a senator from Texas, to run with him as Vice President. In his acceptance of the nomination at the 1960 Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960, Kennedy stated, "With a deep sense of duty and high resolve, I accept your nomination. I accept it with a full and grateful heart--without reservation-- and with only one obligation--the obligation to devote every effort of body, mind and spirit to lead our Party back to victory and our Nation back to greatness. I am grateful, too, that you have provided me with such an eloquent statement of our Party's platform. Pledges which

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are made so eloquently are made to be kept. "The Rights of Man"--the civil and economic rights essential to the human dignity of all men--are indeed our goal and our first principles. This is a Platform on which I can run with enthusiasm and conviction."

ON THE ROAD TO THE PRESIDENCY

"The Rights of Man" was indeed a platform that Kennedy felt strongly about, but he had a number of challenges to address on the road to the Presidency, before he could enact legislation which would ensure civil and economic freedoms for all. The fact that he was Catholic was a topic he tackled head-on, in his address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960.

In it he stated, "I believe in a President whose religious views are his own private affair, neither imposed by him upon the nation or imposed by the nation upon him as a condition to holding that office." Later in the same address, he said, "But let me stress again that these are my views--for contrary to common newspaper usage, I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters--and the church does not speak for me.

Whatever issue may come before me as President--on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject--I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise."

THE PRESIDENT-ELECT

Kennedy was the youngest person elected U.S. President and the first Roman Catholic to serve in that office. He was acutely aware of the importance of the role which had been bestowed upon him. In his address as President-Elect to a Joint Convention of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, at The State House in Boston on the 9th of January 1961 he addressed the responsibility of the role he was about to assume. "For of those to whom much is given, much is required. And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each one of us--recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities to the state--our success or failure, in whatever office we may hold, will be measured by the answers to four questions:

First, were we truly men of courage--with the courage to stand up to one's enemies--and the courage to stand up, when necessary, to one's associates--the courage to resist public pressure, as well as private greed?

Secondly, were we truly men of judgment--with perceptive judgment of the future as well as the past--of our own mistakes as well as the mistakes of others--with enough wisdom to know that we did not know, and enough candor to admit it?

Third, were we truly men of integrity--men who never ran out on either the principles in which they believed or the people who believed in them--men who believed in us--men whom neither financial gain nor political ambition could ever divert from the fulfillment of our sacred trust?

Finally, were we truly men of dedication--with an honor mortgaged to no single individual or group, and compromised by no private obligation or aim, but devoted solely to serving the public good and the national interest."

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FOR THE FREEDOM OF MAN

In his Inaugural Address on 20th January 1961, Kennedy encouraged a culture of service within the American people and indeed the rest of the world. In his closing, which includes perhaps his most quoted words, he said, "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."

THE CHANCE OF WAR

Freedom was the common thread that ran throughout his short Presidency and was a topic that would come up repeatedly in his many addresses. This was hardly surprising given the fact that that by the end of 1961, American found itself at the height of the Cold War, a war unlike any the world had seen before. The possibility of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union hung heavy on Kennedy, and there were numerous occasions when the distrust between the two nations brought them to the brink of war, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the result of a failed attempt by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency's 1,400 armed Cuban exiles, to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. Additional tension came on the 20th of August 1961 as East Germany erected a 3.6 metre high concrete wall dividing East and West Berlin, and on the last day of that month, the Soviet Union began conducting above-ground nuclear tests, detonating approximately 15 bombs during September 1961. On the 28th of October 1961, a tense, 16-hour face off occurred at the Berlin Wall between Soviet and American tanks.

This was the context in which Kennedy delivered a major foreign policy speech at the University of Washington Centennial Convocation on the 16th of November 1961. He discussed how tangled and complex world relations had become, "We increase our arms at a heavy cost, primarily to make certain that we will not have to use them. We must face up to the chance of war, if we are to maintain the peace. We must work with certain countries lacking in freedom in order to strengthen the cause of freedom. We find some who call themselves neutral who are our friends and sympathetic to us, and others who call themselves neutral who are unremittingly hostile to us. And as the most powerful defender of freedom on earth, we find ourselves unable to escape the responsibilities of freedom, and yet unable to exercise it without restraints imposed by the very freedoms we seek to protect."

On the 22nd October 1962, on a radio and television broadcast, President Kennedy informed the American people, of the recently discovered Soviet military build-up in Cuba, including the ongoing installations of offensive nuclear missiles. He confirmed that the United States Navy had placed a quarantine around Cuba, and that any nuclear missile launched would be regarded as an attack on the United States. "Neither the United States of America nor the world community of nations can tolerate deliberate deception and offensive

threats on the part of any nation, large or small. We no longer live in a world where only the actual firing of weapons represents a sufficient challenge to a nation's security to constitute maximum peril. Nuclear weapons are so destructive and ballistic missiles are so swift, that any substantially increased possibility of their use or any sudden change in their deployment may well be regarded as a definite threat to peace." This was the closest the world ever came to nuclear war.

THE ADVANCE OF FREEDOM

In his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech on the 26th of June 1963, he stated, "Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us." He rebuked the erection of the wall, highlighting it as a vivid demonstration of the failure of the Communist system, stating, "...for it is, as your Mayor has said, an offense not only against history but an offense against humanity, separating families, dividing husbands and wives and brothers and sisters, and dividing a people who wish to be joined together."

"So let me ask you as I close, to lift your eyes beyond the dangers of today, to the hopes of tomorrow, beyond the freedom merely of this city of Berlin, or your country of Germany, to the advance of freedom everywhere, beyond the wall to the day of peace with justice, beyond yourselves and ourselves to all mankind."

RECOGNISING RIGHT

Back at home, President Kennedy faced a different challenge as Civil Rights protest became increasingly confrontational. After a non-violent protest was quelled with extreme force in Alabama and on the 11th of June 1963, when two black students there were prevented from entering the University of Alabama by Governor George Wallace, requiring Kennedy to use the National Guard to ensure their safety, he gave a televised evening speech announcing his civil rights bill proposal. In the address he made a heartfelt appeal, "I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents. This Nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened." He went on to say, "A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all.

Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality."

A LASTING LEGACY

On November 21, 1963, President Kennedy was shot and seriously wounded as his car drove past the cheering crowds in Dallas. He died a short time later. It was an event that shocked the nation and indeed the world. Though his time in office was brief, he is remembered for his leadership, personality, accomplishments and for his ability to inspire a nation with his eloquent speeches. Like all of us, he made mistakes, but he was always optimistic about the future, believing that people could solve common problems by placing their country's interests first and by working together. ■ Lindsay Grubb

