

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks Honoring the 50th Anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's Inauguration

January 20, 2011

To Caroline and the Kennedy family, to all the Members of Congress, and distinguished guests here tonight, it is an extraordinary pleasure to join you to mark the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's Inauguration. And I can't think of a better place to do it than here, in a living memorial that reflects not only his love of the arts, but also his recognition of how the arts can help sustain our national strength.

Now, we mark this anniversary with a measure of sadness, as we remember the extraordinary life of Sargent Shriver, a man who embodied the spirit of the new frontier as well as anybody. When a person passes away, there's often an urge to define their legacy and find a way in which it will endure. In the case of Sarge, that is not hard to do. His legacy is written in the villages around the world that have clean water or a new school through the Peace Corps. It's written into the lives of all the children in our own country whose fortunes have been lifted through Head Start. And it will endure in the work of his children, who are living out his legacy of service, and our thoughts and prayers are with them tonight.

Now, one of the remarkable aspects in commemorating the JFK Inauguration, in remembering those who were part of his team, like Sargent Shriver, who would help bring Kennedy's soaring vision to life, is that none of it feels dated. Even now, one half century later, there's something about that day—January 20, 1961—that feels immediate, feels new and urgent and exciting, despite the graininess of the 16-millimeter news reels that recorded it for posterity.

There he is, the handsome Bostonian, summoning a generation to service and a nation to greatness in a speech that would become part of the American canon. And there's the crowd, bundled up for the cold, making their way through streets white with snow, full of expectation; a nation feeling young again, its mood brightened by the promise of a new decade.

Now, I confess, I don't have my own memories of that day. [*Laughter*] I wasn't born until later that year. [*Laughter*] What I know of that day and the 1,000 days that followed, what I know of President Kennedy, came from a mother and grandparents who adored him, from books I read and classes I took, from growing up in a country still mourning its beloved leader, whose name was spoken with reverence. And I know him through the legacy of his children and his brother Teddy, who became extraordinarily dear friends of mine.

But I know him, John F. Kennedy, less as a man than as an icon, as a larger-than-life figure who graced this Earth for one brief and shining moment. But part of this—the function of this event, on this day, we must remember him as he was: as a father who loved his children, as a friend who lived life fully, as a noble public servant who wanted to make a difference.

A quick wit with a light touch, he was dealt, in many ways, a fortunate hand at birth. Attending one event, early in his career, where every speaker before him pompously claimed humble roots—things haven't changed that much—[*laughter*]—John Kennedy confessed, when he took the podium, that he was, and I quote, "the only fellow here who didn't come up the hard way." [*Laughter*]

And yet it cannot be said that John F. Kennedy lived an easy life. He lost an older brother in the war, a sister shortly thereafter. He nearly lost his own life too, when a Japanese gunship cut his PT boat in half, casting him into the water, from which he swam a crewmate to safety. Another sister struggled with a severe mental handicap. His own health was so poor that priests pronounced his last rites on several different occasions. And he endured the personal prejudice and political poison of anti-Catholic fervor.

And there is surely a possibility, under such circumstances, that a person will retreat from the world; that a person, particularly one born to wealth, will seek a life of luxury and ease; that a person, confronted by the coldness of chance, will become bitter or cynical or small. It has happened to others.

But that is not the life that John F. Kennedy chose. As he famously said at a press conference, "life is unfair." We can't choose the lots we are given in life, but we can choose how to live that life. John F. Kennedy chose a life in the arena, full of confidence that our country could surmount any obstacle, as he'd seen it do himself. He chose a life of leadership, fired not by naive optimism, but committed realism: "idealism," as his wife Jackie put it, "without illusions." That is the idealism—soaring, but sober—that inspired the country and the world one half century ago.

I can only imagine how he must have felt, entering the Oval Office in turbulent times. [*Laughter*] The Soviet Premier, Khrushchev, had threatened to "bury" America just a few years before. Wars of liberation, as they were called, were being waged around the globe, from Laos and Vietnam to Congo and Cuba, just 90 miles from our shore. At home, a young preacher's cause was gaining traction across a segregated land.

In this volatile America, this tinderbox of a world, President Kennedy led with a steady hand: defusing the most perilous crisis of the cold war without firing a single shot, enforcing the rights of young black men and women to attend the university of their choice, launching a corps of volunteers as ambassadors for peace in distant centers of the globe, setting America's sights on the Moon, unwilling to lose the space race in the wake of Sputnik.

We know the moon-shot story. It's a familiar one, often invoked to make the case for an ambitious idea. But it's easy to lose sight of just how improbable it seemed in May of 1961. When President Kennedy proposed going to the Moon, America had just 15 minutes of manned flight experience in space. NASA had neither a plan nor a shuttle for making a lunar voyage. [*Laughter*] Its own engineers had taken out the slide rules, and they were deeply skeptical of the mission. [*Laughter*]

The science just wasn't there. President Kennedy understood that. But he also knew something else. He knew that we, as a people, can do big things. We can reach great heights. We can rise to any challenge, so long as we're willing to ask what we can do for our country, so long as we're willing to take America's destiny into our own hands. What President Kennedy understood was the character of the people he led: our resilience, our fearlessness, our distinctly American ability, revealed time and again throughout history, to defy the odds, to fashion our future, to make the world anew.

The world is very different now than it was in 1961. We face new trials and new uncertainties, from our economy to our security. We have a politics that can often seem too small for the hardships at hand. So meeting these tests won't be easy. But we cannot forget: We are the heirs of this President, who showed us what is possible. Because of his vision, more

people prospered, more people served, our Union was made more perfect. Because of that vision, I can stand here tonight as President of the United States.

So John F. Kennedy captured that American spirit that not only put a man on the Moon, but saved a continent from tyranny and overcame a Great Depression, that forged, from 13 colonies, the last, best hope on Earth. And if we can hold onto that spirit today, I know that our generation will answer its call as ably as earlier ones did before us.

In December 1962, President Kennedy was asked by the Saturday Evening Post to submit his favorite quotation. A student not only of history, but also of literature, he chose a passage written by the poet Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., father of the Supreme Court Justice. Mr. Holmes wrote: "I find the great things in this world—is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving: to reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it—but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor."

That, I think, captures well the daring, graceful spirit of the unfinished life we celebrate today, a life that inspires us and lights our way, as we sail on to the new frontiers of our own time. Thank you. God bless you, and may God bless this country that we love.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:10 p.m. at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. In his remarks, he referred to Timothy P., Mark K., Anthony P.K., Maria, and Robert S. Shriver, III, children of R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.

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