



## Ask Not (JFK's Inaugural Address)

*excerpts from John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, Jan 20, 1961*

**Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.**

We observe today not a victory of party (1) but a celebration of freedom--symbolizing an end as well as a beginning--signifying renewal as well as change. (2)

For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath (3) our forbears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago. We dare not forget today that we are heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe (4) 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, (and) proud of our ancient heritage...

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 (5), oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

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. (6)

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service (7) surround the globe.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country (8). 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.

Full Text: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/JFK-Quotations/Inaugural-Address.aspx>



## Notes

- 1) **victory of party**: Kennedy, a Democrat, defeated Republican Richard Nixon by only 112,827 votes, 0.17% of the total cast. He won the electoral college 303-219.
- 2) **renewal as well as change**: JFK was the youngest person ever elected President. He assumed office at 43. Kennedy's image of youth, vigor and change was cultivated by the administration and embraced by the public.
- 3) **oath**: Kenney was administered the oath of office by Earl Warren, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He served three years, until he was assassinated in November 1963.
- 4) **foe**: Kennedy assumed office during a tense period of the Cold War. He faced up to the Soviet Union as a rival, but offered negotiations and mutual understanding alongside a strong military posture.
- 5) **support any friend**: Foreign affairs were predominant concerns during the Kennedy Administration. JFK supported Cold War allies in Europe and throughout the world.
- 6) **negotiate**: During his term of office Kennedy negotiated the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union. This banned above ground nuclear testing.
- 7) **service**: Kennedy called upon America's youth to serve their country, and thousands responded by joining service organizations such as the Peace Corps, which sent young people to developing countries to serve as economic and political advisors.
- 8) **ask not**: This famous line was written by Ted Sorenson, Kennedy's main speech writer. It resonated with the whole nation, especially younger generations.

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