

# “Ask not what your country can do for you...”

**Topic:** Inaugural Address

**Grade Level:** 3- 6

**Subject Area:** Social Studies and Language Arts

**Time Required:** 2 class periods

## Goals/Rationale

John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address inspired children and adults to see the importance of civic action and public service. His historic words, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country,” challenged every American to contribute in some way to the public good. In this lesson, students learn about a theme in President Kennedy’s inaugural address, civic action, and consider how it applies to their own lives.

**Essential Question:** How does a leader inspire a nation or a group of people?

## Objectives

Students will be able to:

- analyze and interpret a primary source to gather information about President Kennedy’s inaugural address.
- explain the quote, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”
- propose an idea for civic action in their own school or community.

## Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

*National Standards for Civics and Government V.*

What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

*National History Standards: Standard 2: Historical Comprehension*

A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.

B. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.

## Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should be familiar with the concept of the inauguration of a president (see Additional Resources.) For a biography of John F. Kennedy, visit <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/Life-of-John-F-Kennedy>. There is a link to President Kennedy’s inaugural address on this page.

## **Historical Background and Context**

On January 20, 1961, a clerk of the US Supreme Court held the large Fitzgerald family Bible as John F. Kennedy took the oath of office to become the nation's 35th president. Against a backdrop of deep snow and sunshine, more than twenty thousand people huddled in 20-degree temperatures on the east front of the Capitol to witness the event. Kennedy, having removed his topcoat and projecting both youth and vigor, delivered what has become a landmark inaugural address.

His audience reached far beyond those gathered before him to people around the world. In preparing for this moment, he sought both to inspire the nation and to send a message abroad signaling the challenges of the Cold War and his hope for peace in the nuclear age. He also wanted to be brief. As he'd remarked to his close advisor, Ted Sorensen, "I don't want people to think I'm a windbag."

He assigned Sorensen the task of studying other inaugural speeches and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to glean the secrets of successful addresses. The finely-crafted final speech had been revised and reworked numerous times by Kennedy and Sorensen until the president-elect was satisfied. Though not the shortest of inaugural addresses, Kennedy's was shorter than most at 1,355 words in length and, like Lincoln's famous speech, was comprised of short phrases and words. In addition to message, word choice and length, he recognized that captivating his audience required a powerful delivery. On the day before and on the morning of Inauguration Day, he kept a copy handy to take advantage of any spare moment to review it, even at the breakfast table.

What many consider to be the most memorable and enduring section of the speech came towards the end when Kennedy called on all Americans to commit themselves to service and sacrifice: "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." He then continued by addressing his international audience: "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."

Having won the election by one of the smallest popular vote margins in history, Kennedy had known the great importance of this speech. People who witnessed the speech or heard it broadcast over television and radio lauded the new president. Even elementary school children wrote to him with their reactions to his ideas. Following his inaugural address, nearly seventy-five percent of Americans expressed approval of President Kennedy.

## **Materials**

Letter from Brenda Sue Wesson

## **Procedure**

### **Part I: Examining the Evidence**

1. Begin the activity with a discussion about most recent presidential inauguration. What happened that day? Were there students who watched it? Read about it? Listened to the inaugural address? What were some of the topics and ideas the president discussed in his speech? How did the crowd respond?
2. Explain that on January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy, the youngest US president ever elected, gave an inaugural address which is now well-known for its powerful language and message. They will have the opportunity to examine historical evidence from the Kennedy Presidential Library to find out more about John F. Kennedy's inaugural address and its impact on people at that moment in time.
3. Distribute copies of the letter.
4. Lead a discussion to interpret the information. Include some or all of the following questions:
  - Why do you think Brenda Sue Wesson wrote this letter?
  - What if you could speak with Brenda Sue Wesson today? How old would she be? What would you ask her about the inauguration? What might she say?
  - What was an important piece of information that you found in your investigation? What makes it important?
  - What else would you like to know about the inauguration? How could you find this information?
5. According to students' interests, share photographs of the inauguration and excerpts of the speech. Visit web pages about *Passing the Torch and Poetry and Power*, two museum exhibits about the inauguration. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Exhibits/Past-Exhibits>
6. Explain that many people remember the cold that day, but they also remember particular quotes from Kennedy's speech. In the next lesson, they will find out more about Kennedy's inaugural address.

## **Part 2: "Ask not what your country can do for you"**

1. Ask if anyone knows a famous quote from Kennedy's inaugural address. After students respond, write the quote on a blackboard or chart paper: "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Explain that these words are some of the most well-known from Kennedy's inaugural address. Can they put the quote in their own words? What does it mean?
2. Have students brainstorm a list of actions they might take in response to John F. Kennedy's call to service. What could they do to help their family, school, community, or country in some way?
3. As a class, select one action from the list that students generated. Devise an action plan and carry it out. Or, have students draw posters to publicize their civic action idea.

## Assessment

Have students imagine they watched President Kennedy's inauguration on January 20, 1961, either on television or in person. Their assignment is to write a journal entry about the event. They can write the entry as themselves or an imagined character. The entry should include:

- 1) their age,
- 2) where they live,
- 3) where they were when they watched the event,
- 4) and their response to the inaugural address.

## Accommodations

Provide a re-wording of the quote.

## Extensions

1. How might students check to see what John F. Kennedy actually said in his speech? Access President Kennedy's inaugural address by selecting "Historic Speeches" under "JFK." Have students read a transcript as they listen to the speech (translations of the inaugural address are also available in this section). Ask them to highlight the parts of the speech that might have inspired Brenda Sue Wesson to write a letter to the president. (Since the speech has many words that are unfamiliar to elementary students, it is best to preview vocabulary and concepts with them before reading the speech.)
2. Have students study and present quotes from the speech. Divide the class into small groups. Have each group put the quote into their own words. Challenge students to memorize the quote, present it to the class, and explain what they think the quote means.

"If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."

"All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin."

"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."

"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."

3. Read and/or listen to all or part the most recent inaugural address. What message do students hear? What part of it is most important to them? As individuals, or as a class, write a letter to the president responding to the speech.

## **Additional Resources**

### ***Books***

Hossell, Karen Price, *John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Speech*. Heinemann-Raintree: 2005, 48 pages.

*In addition to dense text written for upper elementary and middle-school students, this account describes in detail JFK's inaugural ceremony. It breaks down the speech into sections and gives a detailed explanation with photographs to explain each excerpt. It also includes historical context leading up to the 1960 election and major events of Kennedy's presidency.*

### ***Websites***

<http://www.jfklibrary.org>

Access President Kennedy's inaugural address by selecting "Historic Speeches" under "JFK." (To find more of his speeches, select "Research Aids" under "Research.")

To access online resources on the inauguration, including memos and early drafts of the speech, visit the *Poetry and Power* and *Passing the Torch* special exhibits in "Past Exhibits" under "Exhibits."

[http://edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=333](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=333)

"Presidential Inaugurations: I Do Solemnly Swear" guides you through a series of lessons that introduce students to presidential inaugurations using primary source material.

<http://inaugural.senate.gov/index.cfm>

The website of the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies includes videos, charts, and narratives on all aspects of the inaugural ceremony. A student-friendly chart listing the date and location of every inauguration has links to each president with information on who administered the oath of office, what bible was used, the length of the inaugural address, attire, weather, and other interesting facts.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/pihtml/pihome.html>

From the American Memory collection at the Library of Congress, "I Do Solemnly Swear" guides you to photographs and documents from inaugurations throughout history, oath of office information, and interesting facts about these ceremonies.

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Kendall Home School  
Rt. 4 Box 1090  
Miami, Fla

Dear President John F. Kennedy,

We saw you on T. V. when you were inaugurated. We wished you would put on your coat, so you wouldn't get a cold.

Mrs. Hansen is our Teacher, and she brought her portable T. V. We watched the parade, too.

We know you will be our best President, and wish you good luck.

Love To Caroline and John Jr.

Love

Brenda Sue Wesson

3 grade.