Poetry and Power: John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address

On January 20, 1961 a clerk of the U.S. 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.

Cold War rhetoric had dominated the 1960 presidential campaign. Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon both pledged to strengthen American military forces and promised a tough stance against the Soviet Union and international communism. Kennedy warned of the Soviet’s growing arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles and pledged to revitalize American nuclear forces. He also criticized the Eisenhower administration for permitting the establishment of a pro-Soviet government in Cuba.

Having won the election by one of the smallest popular vote margins in history, Kennedy wanted his address to inspire the nation and 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.”

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.