

On 50th Anniversary of Kennedy's Inauguration, JFK's Call to Service Still Resounds

John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address Inspired a New Generation of Statesmen
[Including interviews with Cokie Roberts, Gerald Blaine and Donald Lawn]



By **HUMA KHAN**

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Fifty years ago on this day, a young, dapper American president rose to the podium and delivered an inaugural address that would resonate for decades to come.

"And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country," said John F. Kennedy in a riveting call to service. "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."

For those who witnessed it, Kennedy's inauguration day was anything but smooth. A snowstorm wreaked havoc in Washington, nearly canceling the inaugural parade.

The U.S. Army was put in charge of clearing the streets and former president Herbert Hoover missed the swearing-in ceremony because he couldn't fly into the city. When the ceremony did start, a lectern caught fire during the invocation, which some complained was too long, and Vice President Lyndon Johnson fumbled his words during his swearing-in.

Yet the mood surrounding the event was one that Americans hadn't felt in years.

"There was this tremendous sense of vigor and yes, hope and optimism. It was also a time when we were entering a huge economic boom," remembers ABC News contributor Cokie Roberts, a college freshman at the time who was unable to make it to the inauguration because of the snow.

"A lot of people who are the senior statesmen of today were the kids in that era who came because of Kennedy, and they came because they were asking what they could for their country," she said.

Kennedy's uplifting inaugural address, remembered by some historians as one of the best in the nation's history, challenged Americans to serve their country at a time when the Cold War simmered overseas and the civil rights struggle grew at home.

"The inaugural address was certainly incredibly well-received. And the whole gravity, the credence and the whole business of the torch has gone forth to a new generation, that was absolutely true," Roberts said. "The visual image of the turnover from Eisenhower to Kennedy, it was very striking -- a man who was a

general in World War II versus this man who was the second youngest president, who was a kid on a PT boat."

Kennedy's election marked many firsts for the United States. At age 43, he was the youngest president to be elected. Teddy Roosevelt came to the White House at 42, but he replaced William McKinley, who was assassinated. Kennedy was also the first, and to this date, the only Catholic elected as commander-in-chief and he brought a sense of excitement among American Catholics that hasn't been seen since.

Those close to him also remember him as an amiable, funny president, a marked departure from his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

"President Kennedy, the first time he met you he asked your name and he never forgot it. The second time, he asked your wife's name and your children's names, and he was personable with the agents and very much a free spirit compared to President Eisenhower," said Gerald Blaine, a Secret Service agent in Eisenhower and Kennedy's security detail and co-author of the "The Kennedy Detail: JFK's Secret Service Agents Break Their Silence."

"It was such a contrast because he was so young and was totally different."

Kennedy also brought youth and intrigue to the White House. His fashionable and glamorous wife,

Jackie Kennedy, and two young children, captured the fancy of Americans in a way that no other first family had done before.

"To have that after the years of Eisenhower and Truman and Roosevelt, suddenly to have this young

energetic family was just a complete shot of adrenaline into the city, and tons and tons of young people came to town to participate in government," Roberts said.

Kennedy ascended the White House at a time of great economic prosperity, but his presidency wasn't without its challenges. He had to deal with the Cuban Missile Crisis and growing racial tensions that would eventually turn very violent.

Much of the hope and optimism felt during Kennedy's inauguration 50 years ago resonated two years ago at the same time this year, when President Obama -- the first African-American president to be elected -- took his oath of office.

The optimism of the Obama White House, however, has quickly faded amid economic discontent and political partisanship.

Though it was a different era, historians say the parallels between now and then are not widely different.

"It doesn't seem like the political environment was as caustic but it was still quite difficult. There was a definite political schism between what would be called liberal and what would be called a more

military conservative version, but it was different than it is now," said Don Lawn, author of "The Memoirs of John F. Kennedy: A Novel." "The schism has gotten a lot nastier and it's becoming a lot more difficult to talk about and discuss anything."

It may have been over a lifetime ago, but there are still lessons to be learned from that time.

"The idea of public service is not as valued as it was back then. It was almost a popular position to be someone who gave their life over to public service, the Peace Corps for instance," said Lawn. " It was quite a different attitude then and he was trying to promote that. He had been a public servant his whole life, he didn't have to. He was rich but he chose a pretty daunting environment to challenge his abilities."