President Kennedy's Inaugural Address

On January 20, 1961, President John F. Kennedy delivered one of the most quoted speeches in U.S. history. The new president’s address arrived in the early years of the Vietnam War, which would not end until 1975. Facing a growing lack of support for the war both at home and abroad, the popular president’s memorable speech attempted to unite both American citizens and international allies against the spread of Communism in Asia.

Read this excerpt of Kennedy’s speech. On a separate sheet of paper, write your answers to the questions below.

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than in 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 surround the globe.

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation”—a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

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. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. 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.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

1. In Kennedy’s words, what are the “common enemies of man”?

2. Though never mentioned by name, the Vietnam War is the main focus of Kennedy’s speech. Why do you think he chose not to address the war directly?

3. List one allusion to the Vietnam War.

4. About how many years will the country be at war with Vietnam after this address?

5. What do you think Kennedy means by “twilight struggle”?

6. “Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation” is a passage from the Bible. How does this reference elevate the war beyond the conflict in Vietnam? Explain.

7. “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country” is one of the most famous quotes in U.S. history. What do you think Kennedy meant?

8. What do you think was the purpose of Kennedy’s speech? Was it effective? Explain your answer.