



Ask Not: The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech That Changed America

Thurston Clarke

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A close-up on one of American history's most magical events, JFK's inaugural week, and the creation of the speech that inspired a generation and brought hope to a nation

"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." On the January morning when John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency and stood to speak those words, America was divided, its citizens torn by fears of war. Kennedy's speech-called the finest since Lincoln at Gettysburg and the most memorable of any twentieth-century American politician-did more than reassure: it changed lives, marking the start of a brief, optimistic era of struggle against "tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself."

Ask Not is a beautifully detailed account of the week leading up to the inaugural which stands as one of the most moving spectacles in the history of American politics. At the heart of the narrative is Kennedy's quest to create a speech that would distill American dreams and empower a new generation. Thurston Clarke's portrait of JFK during what intimates called his happiest days is balanced, revealing the President at his most dazzlingly charismatic-and cunningly pragmatic. As the snow covers Washington in a blanket of white, as statesmen and celebrities arrive for candlelit festivities, the perfectionist Kennedy pushes himself to the limit, to find the words that would capture what he most truly believed and which would far outlast his own life. For everyone who seeks to understand the fascination with all things Kennedy, the answer can be found in *Ask Not*.

Ask Not: The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech That Changed America Details

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Ginny says

I listened to this in audio tape and for any John F Kennedy lover, it's wonderful. Mr. Clark give the background and history of the time around President Kennedy's inauguration and what went into writing his historic speech. The portions with his voice as he is giving this speech, again, brought me to tears. What a waste his assassination was!!!

Erica says

More of a social history of the week leading to Kennedy's inaugural than a textual analysis. Clarke seems to go out of his way to mention Kennedy's indiscretions, as if mentioning them will give him latitude to exult the text. An interesting look into those surrounding Kennedy during this week-long period, as well as into what drove him to perform the of writing the inaugural address, while remaining secretive about its contents. I still can't quite place my finger on that which impedes my admiration of Clarke's work, but I do know that at the conclusion of both his books I found myself somewhat dissatisfied. Perhaps it's the unhappy wedding of adulation and self-conscious over-critique of his subjects.

Steve says

Any history buff, fan of JFK, and political junkie should own this book.

Subtitled "The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech that changed America", this book uses the inauguration and the speech as the focal points for the time period between and including January 10 through January 21, 1961.

And what Thurston Clarke does is quite remarkable. He has culled all kinds of research to put you there. With perspectives and opinions from just about everyone involved, you feel the tension the president-elect is under trying to get off memorable speech after delivering a book full of them during the campaign. You can just about see the Kennedy family trying to put their best foot forward while an open war wages between Rose Kennedy and Jackie.

You get the press looking for evidence that the president-elect is actually writing a speech in-between tanning sessions and not handing the whole thing off to Ted Sorensen. You get the bitterness that Mamie Eisenhower has at the new administration.

In short, you get all the gossip, all the stories, and all of the play-by-play action in a fabulous narrative that doesn't read like a schedule.

Bobby says

This was one of the more interesting history books I have read. In this book, Thurston Clarke focuses on JFK's inauguration speech and the moments that lead to it. It chronicles everything from January 10, 1961 to January 21st of that year, but also dives deep into John F. Kennedy's life and every moment or influence that may have led to what appeared in the final draft of his famous speech.

What I enjoyed most about this book was its honesty. Thurston Clarke is not afraid to highlight Kennedy's personal transgressions despite the fact that this book is very much a flattering portrayal of the man overall. I think any history buff, especially those fond of the Kennedy era (such as myself), should read this book.

Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says

I never before knew there was such a hubbub about Kennedy's speech and how much Sorenson wrote. Am also currently reading Profiles in Courage and didn't know there was controversy about how much of that he wrote either. People seem to forget he was one of the most highly educated presidents we've had, why couldn't he have written either?

Full review to come.

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Rating: 4 Stars

"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

Perhaps among the most recognized speeches in history, Kennedy's inaugural words were viewed by many as the dawn of a new era filled with optimism, with a stunning young family now living at one of the most famous addresses in the world.

This book details the week prior to Kennedy speaking those very words, and we are given a glimpse of how his mind worked as he wrote and re-wrote, added to and changed his speech. This was all-consuming for him and Kennedy was determined to make it the best of his career. Papa Joe did not help matters much, constantly telling Jack that he had already wasted his best speech prior to this - but Jack never took the bait and would keep his inaugural address a secret even from the family patriarch. Kennedy wanted his words to reflect the changing of the times and usher in an era of hope in the bleak Cold War landscape. I think we might consider him a success, seeing as how this speech and the Gettysburg Address are the most well-known speeches in the history of American politics.

Before the prologue we are treated to Kennedy's address in its entirety and even 56 years on they hold their

own weight. I can read the words and hear them inside my head with JFK's voice. I have seen footage of the address, but never in its entirety. It is not a long speech, but it is powerful. Reading about all the work that went into it makes the speech even grander. I never knew before that there was such hubbub over the speech to begin with, or arguments/misremembering about how much Kennedy wrote himself vs how much his speechwriter, Ted Sorensen, contributed. The author makes a very important point early on, that "...The issue of whether Kennedy composed his own inaugural address, or simply delivered Sorensen's beautiful words, is not some arcane historical footnote. The speech is generally acknowledged to have been the greatest oration of any twentieth-century American politician" (page 9). This speech was a big deal, and still is. It marked the moment in time when America was moving forward into this state of being, and the myth Kennedy was creating was a big part of that. If it were to turn out that Kennedy did not write it, one can only imagine how devastating that would be. Luckily, it would seem that according to the author and evidence we have in the form of Kennedy's secretary's shorthand notes, Kennedy did in fact dictate to her, "...the most immortal and poetic passages of his inaugural address" (page 13).

(As a side note, I am also currently reading Kennedy's 'Profiles in Courage' and I never knew there was also controversy as to how much of that book he wrote himself as well. People seem to forget that Kennedy was one of the most highly educated presidents we'd had up to that point, so why couldn't he have written it himself?)

Beyond the prologue and debate over who wrote which parts and whether the most important and memorable passages were from Kennedy's brain or Sorensen's, the book is broken up into chapters that detail every day leading up to his delivery of the address. We see not only Kennedy's work on the speech, but the physical work he put into his own appearance (I firmly believe he would have eventually died of skin cancer had he not been assassinated). This was key to pushing the myth of the Kennedy mystique - to always appear youthful and carefree - especially following the administration of Eisenhower. Despite the fact that we now know of the myriad of health problems that Kennedy suffered from nearly all his adult life, on that blustery, cold day in January, he looked to be a picture of perfect health. despite the cold, Kennedy did not even wear an overcoat, though much later it would be reported that he stayed warm due to the long underwear he wore beneath his clothing. Image was everything to the Kennedys.

As with most other Kennedy books, this one too touches on some of the Kennedy/Johnson friction. I do not know enough yet about the two men and their politics to understand why there was such aggravation or why Bobby and LBJ especially did not get along. I guess I don't yet understand why LBJ was the VP if the Kennedys could not stand him, or if that was even true, and so on. Every other book I have read about Kennedy so far as mentioned this at least in specific situations and there is much I have yet to understand about this dynamic between the president and vice president.

I was mildly creeped out by the extent of Evelyn Lincoln's devotion to Kennedy, though perhaps it is not entirely fair based on one author's assertions - or maybe it is, who knows. But she kept many of his papers and such, some of which could only have been retrieved from the garbage after he had tossed them out. So, kind of creepy. But at the same time, anything a president wrote could have been historical so perhaps we should also thank her for preserving what she did.

Overall, as with many books about the Kennedy family, I really like this one. It was not sensational, as some books about the family tend to be, and stays focused on the speech and Kennedy's preparations for it in those final ten days before addressing the nation. Definitely recommended for anyone with an interest in Kennedy, the speech, or US history in general.

Two quotes that amused me:

Page 142: "Neither Evelyn Lincoln's appointment book nor the newspapers tell us how long Kennedy stayed at Mahoney's party. We only now he woke up at 6:45 AM on January 19th to the roar of a motorcycle, threw open his second-floor bedroom window, and shouted down, "How about a little more quiet on my last day as a private citizen!"

Page 182: "Grudged and politics go together. Still, so many of the VIPs at the Kennedy inauguration had such a long and contentious history of slights and rivalries that had their thoughts been vocalized, the air would have crackled with a Babel of competing voices, like dozens of broadcasts jammed onto a single shortwave radio band."

Joshua says

I read this book for a class on the presidency. Clarke paints a great picture of the drafting of the address by Kennedy. He provides more than adequate evidence that the address was composed primarily by Kennedy also. The book as a whole is extremely interesting and filled with how Kennedy was inspired by the people he looked up to and the events he experienced. It also outlines the effects and impacts of such a rousing inaugural address. As an admirer of Kennedy, this book only helped to solidify his place in my mind as one of the greatest presidents this country has ever seen. The book also includes various anecdotes and stories of Kennedy's lifestyle in general, talking about his affairs, his quirks, and his habits. Quite an interesting guy. Sadly, and SPOILER ALERT, Kennedy is assassinated. I can't imagine how the people around him must have felt. What potential he had. It's a shame how all the great ones aren't allowed to live out their legacy.

Tom says

"Ask not, what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country" and "I have a dream" defined that time. This book is an excellent account of how JFK's speech took its literary shape as one of the greatest of American speeches. And it offers a wealth of context about the America of 1961. I especially liked the anecdote about James Meredith taking inspiration from this speech as he submitted his application for admission to the University of Mississippi.

Ronnyjane Goldsmith says

I have read this book 3 times. It is as beautifully written as was the inaugural speech of President Kennedy.

columbialion says

The author draws the interesting analogy between the impact of JFK's "ask not" and the his funeral some 1038 days later. Clarke brilliantly describes both as a passage from which the American people travel through, a sort of historic membrane, delineating one age from another. JFK's inaugural deliverance ushered the country into an era of optimism and hopefulness, in the realm of world peace, nuclear disarmament, space exploration and economic prosperity. His tragic and premature death brought the realization of the end of Camelot, the death of youth in our leadership, and somehow the cold reality that perhaps dark forces

inside our governing body had been unleashed...never to be controlled, and the country since has never been the same.

Joan Snodgrass Callaway says

This fits in with my current thinking that perhaps it is time to reinstitute a draft of some sort - two years of public service, Peace Corps, or military service. I feel quite certain that there would be more of a hue and cry to end the wars that some people seem so eager to get us into...current Libya conflict right now. "Ask not what your country can do for you..." This would serve the dual purpose of giving young people jobs in an economy where jobs are not easy to come by. Just a thought...

I'm also reading Allison Stanger's *One Nation Under Contract: The Outsourcing of American Power and the Future of Foreign Policy*...America's shadow government.

Mary says

This analysis of the inaugural address offers a rich depth of understanding of the man and his times. An excellent addition to our understandings about Kennedy, his family, and his friends.

Bookmarks Magazine says

Clarke has two purposes in *Ask Not*: to examine the Kennedy Inauguration in precise detail and to determine J.F.K.'s role in writing the speech. Clarke uses newly discovered primary source material to make his case for the ex-President's authorship over speechwriter Ted Sorenson. Critics disagree about the efficacy of his argument, but in the end, it veers in his favor. Does this event deserve the intense scrutiny of an entire book? *The Washington Post* calls *Ask Not* padded (how much, really, do you want to read about Jackie's dresses?); *The San Francisco Chronicle* relishes the personalities and small details that set the stage for Camelot.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Sadie (formerly known as Lennongirl) says

Surely one of the most creative and extraordinary ideas for a memoir I've read so far. This book is based on JFK's iconic inaugural address and the events surrounding the speech and the inauguration itself: How the speech was written and edited again and again and then some by JFK and Ted Sorensen; how JFK and those surrounding him (family and close friends) spent those final days before the inauguration (tanning, partying, editing, worrying) and what happened on inauguration day (and who sat next to whom and what they were really thinking about each other - best part of a really good book overall, hands down).

The way Clarke tells all this is so entertaining and fun, such a perfect mix of serious analysis, light gossip and wonderful snark here and there made his book a real treat.

Geoff says

"Ask Not" shows how John F. Kennedy's entire life up until January of 1961 culminated in the genesis of his inauguration address. It was a revolutionary speech - Kennedy called for the resolution of differences between America and the Soviet Union so that "both sides" could explore solutions to the world's greater problems ("tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself"). Moreover, he instilled Americans with a sense of responsibility, calling upon them to sacrifice for these greater causes ("the trumpet summons us once again"). The book is a fascinating look at the creation of the address and at the days leading up to the inauguration. The author picks the speech apart line by line and shows how the ideas of Lincoln and Churchill influenced Kennedy's visions. Of the books I've read on JFK this one is my favorite. While the author details the creation of one of the most beautiful speeches in American history, he also effectively communicates the aura and mystique of JFK's inauguration while shedding light on the character of the man himself. Both newcomers to JFK and seasoned Kennedy historians will enjoy it.

Justin says

This is the most creative biography I've ever read. It's a story told through the writing of an inaugural address. The stories told around Kennedy's inauguration are a must for any Kennedy buff.
