

LET THE WORD GO FORTH

(The JFK Speeches)

By David Pitts

(Note to reader: The following was originally written as an appendix for Inclusion in "Jack and Lem: John F. Kennedy and Lem Billings: The Untold Story of an Extraordinary Friendship." Since it was ultimately decided not to include it in the book, it is offered here.)

"Where our strength and determination are clear, our words need merely to convey conviction, not belligerence." (JFK, November 22, 1963)

(Lem Billings saw John Kennedy give his first public speech. The year was 1942, the place, Charleston, South Carolina. Lem was visiting JFK, who was in the Navy at the time, and went to see him speak to a small audience about a rather narrow and dull topic - the differences between two kinds of incendiary bombs. JFK was only twenty-four and had not yet overcome his shyness. He was not an impressive speaker on that day, or for that matter during his early years in Congress after the war. But by the time he reached the presidency, he had mastered the art of speechmaking and knew, as few who occupied the office have, that words mattered - and not only what was said, but how.)

When we think of John Kennedy, we remember not only the images but also the words -- the speeches and news conferences that entranced the nation and the world for two years, ten months, and two days beginning with his Inaugural Address.

His mastery of the English language arguably was greater than that of any president, certainly since Roosevelt and perhaps since Lincoln. No one since has been his equal and this, no doubt, adds to his allure. His formal speeches are remembered for their power and eloquence, his news conferences -- the first to be broadcast live on television (sixty-one in total) -- for their wit and lucidity.

Of course, Kennedy employed speechwriters, Ted Sorensen chief among them. But Sorensen, whose role in making the Kennedy administration shine has been insufficiently recognized, has written that Kennedy was not a passive participant in the process. "Without claiming to have written every word of every draft -- indeed, often generously acknowledging the assistance he received from others -- he played a major role in every major speech, selecting subject matters and themes, arguments and conclusions, quotations and phrases." Sorensen added: "He consistently took care to choose the

right words in the right order that would send the right message. He did not regard old-fashioned eloquence as unsophisticated or unimportant, nor did he ever rise to speak in public indifferent or unprepared."

In looking back at the speeches today well over forty years later, one is struck by how many focused not on policy or politics (dealt with in Appendix B and C) but instead on timeless issues of war and peace, life and death, myth and reality, hope and despair, chance and possibility, fate and destiny, purpose and fulfillment, power and responsibility, memory and time, and love and friendship. Therefore, much of what he said still speaks to us today. He had a philosopher's interest in the nature of truth, however broadly it might be defined.

On one occasion, the topic was, of all subjects, economics. But Kennedy turned what could have been a dull oration into a fascinating discussion of the nature of reality. "The great enemy of the truth is very often not the deliberate, contrived and dishonest -- but the myth -- persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often, we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought. Mythology distracts us everywhere -- in government as in business, in politics as in economics, in foreign affairs as in domestic affairs." (Yale University, June 11, 1962)

At a dinner later that same year, his topic was the liberation of the human mind. "Genius can speak at any time and the entire world will hear it and listen. Behind the storm of daily conflict and crisis, the dramatic confrontations, the tumult of political struggle -- the poet, the artist, the musician, continues the quiet work of centuries, building bridges of experience between peoples, reminding man of the universality of his feelings and desires and despairs, and reminding him that the forces that unite are deeper than those that divide. Thus art, and the encouragement of art, are political in the most profound sense, not as a weapon in the struggle, but as an instrument of understanding of the futility of struggle between those who share man's faith."

He continued: "Aeschylus and Plato are remembered today long after the triumphs of imperial Athens are gone. Dante outlives the ambitions of thirteenth-century Florence. Goethe stands serenely above the politics of Germany. And I am certain that, after the dust of centuries has passed over our cities, we, too, will be remembered not for our victories or defeats in battle or in politics, but for our contribution to the human spirit." (Washington, D.C. November 29, 1962) When is the last time you heard a president mention Aeschylus, Plato, Dante and Goethe in one speech, or in

any speech? Certainly not in the last forty years.

It was a rare Kennedy speech that was not framed with quotations from poets and authors. On his trip to Ireland in the summer of 1963, accompanied by best friend Lem Billings and his sister Jean, Kennedy quoted both Joyce and Yeats in his address to the Irish parliament in Dublin. Referring to the Irish who fled to America, he said, "They left behind hearts, fields, and a nation yearning to be free. It is no wonder that James Joyce described the Atlantic as a bowl of bitter tears and that an earlier poet wrote, 'They are going, going, going, and we cannot bid them stay.' There are those who regard this history of past strife and exile as better forgotten. But, to use the phrase of Yeats, let us not casually reduce 'that great past to a trouble of fools.'" (Dublin, June 28, 1963)

Kennedy's administration did more to promote the arts than any other in the Republic's history. He telegraphed the importance he attached to artistic accomplishment by inviting Robert Frost to speak at his Inauguration. Just a month before the end of his administration, on a day devoted to the memory of the great poet, Kennedy spoke these unforgettable words. "A nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces, but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers. The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested. For they determine whether we use power, or power uses us. Our national strength matters, but the spirit, which informs and controls our national strength, matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost. He brought an unsparing instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and pieties of society."

And then, perhaps thinking of his own ordeals as well, Kennedy added: "His sense of the human tragedy fortified him against self-deception and easy consolation. 'I have been,' he wrote, 'one acquainted with the night.' And because he knew the midnight as well as the high noon, because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair...When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitation. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses." (Amherst College, October 26, 1963)

A perennial theme in Kennedy's speeches was the quest for peace. His most extensive comments came in a speech at American University in Washington in June 1963. Much of it dealt with relations with the Soviet Union, but part

of it centered on his definition of peace in the nuclear age. Calling on Americans to "re-examine our own attitudes," he asked? "What kind of peace do I mean? What kind of peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children -- not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women -- not merely peace in our time but peace for all time." (Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963)

The speech reflected Kennedy's essential optimism regardless of all his disappointments, both personal and political. Despite the flawed record of governments, he still believed that radical change is possible, that struggle is ennobling, that better days always were within reach. "Our problems are manmade. Therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable -- and we believe they can do it again...So let us not be blind to our differences -- but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

Kennedy's comments on peace were framed against the backdrop of the nuclear era that had grown steadily more dangerous with the increasing stockpiles of nuclear weapons accumulated by the United States and the Soviet Union. The development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) dramatically reduced warning times and the ability of each country to act in a prudent and rational manner. Kennedy sought not to obscure the increasing peril, but to publicize it. "Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when the planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman, and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment, by accident or miscalculation or madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish mankind." (JFK, New York, September 25, 1961) But in the same speech he also counseled against futility. "However close we sometimes seem to the dark and final abyss, let no man of peace and freedom despair. For he does not stand alone. If we all can persevere, if we can in every land and office look beyond our own shores and ambitions, then surely the age will dawn in which the strong are just, and the weak secure, and the peace preserved."

Since Kennedy had become president in the age of television, and videotape had only recently been invented, most of his speeches are preserved on tape, much clearer than the earlier kinescopes from Eisenhower's time. Those who didn't see the speeches live frequently saw excerpts on news broadcasts and on other programs. There were far fewer news shows in those days of just three major broadcast networks. The main evening newscasts were fifteen minutes until CBS broke the mold in September 1963 with the first half-hour CBS Evening News. Even then, Kennedy was concerned about news clutter and the public's ability to sift through all the information to ascertain what was really important. "I sometimes think that we are too much impressed by the clamor of daily events. The newspaper headlines and the television screens give us a short view. They so flood us with the stop-press details of daily stories that we lose sight of the great movements of history."

He continued: "I am reminded of the story of the great French Marshal Lyautey who once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener objected that the tree was slow growing and would not reach maturity for a hundred years. The marshal replied: 'In that case, there is no time to lose; plant it this afternoon.' Today a world of knowledge -- a world of cooperation -- a just and lasting peace -- may be years away. But we have no time to lose.

Let us plant our trees this afternoon." (Berkeley, California, March 23, 1962)

Although Kennedy exercised enormous power as the leader of one of only two superpowers, he also believed that American power was limited. He thought that the United States could never be the world's self-appointed judge and executioner. And he said so. "We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient," he said, "that we are only six percent of the world's population, that we cannot impose our will upon the other ninety-four percent of mankind, that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem." (University of Washington, Seattle, November 16, 1961).

Despite his hopes, he remained an idealist without illusions, as he once described himself. He was keenly aware that politics had limitations. He remained interested in the full range of human experience, of which politics was only a part. All his life, he had a love of the sea and on one occasion he spoke about it. "I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea, except I think it's because in addition to the fact that the sea changes, and the light changes, it's because we all came from the sea. And it is an interesting biological fact that all of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the

ocean, and therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, and in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea, whether it is to sail or to watch it, we are going back from whence we came."
(Newport, Rhode Island, September 14, 1962)

John Kennedy's last speech was prepared for delivery on November 22, 1963 at the Dallas Trade Mart. He never got the chance to read it. These are the final words. "We, in this country, in this generation, are -- by destiny rather than choice -- the watchmen on the walls of world freedom. We ask, therefore, that we may be worthy of our power and responsibility, that we may exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint, and that we may achieve in our time, and for all time, the ancient vision of 'peace on earth, goodwill toward men.' That must always be our goal, and the righteousness of our cause must always underlie our strength. For as was written long ago, 'except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh in vain.'"