



JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Jan. 20, 1961 — 65 years ago — John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as the 35th president of the United States. His inaugural address is regarded as one of the best inaugural speeches of all time and an example of how well Kennedy could articulate his thoughts, goals and wishes to the American people.

AN INAUGURAL ADDRESS FOR THE AGES

Although his term officially began at noon on Jan. 20, President-elect John F. Kennedy wasn't administered the oath of office until 12:51 p.m. He wore no overcoat despite the wind chill of 7degrees on the recently refurbished East Portico of the U.S. Capitol.

Kennedy's address consisted of 1,366 words, which he delivered in under 14 minutes. Kennedy had begun shortly after Election Day discussing with his speechwriter, Ted Sorensen, the thoughts he wanted to include.

In his third paragraph, Kennedy emphasized the facts that he was the first elected president born in

the 20th century and that he had served in the Second World War.

"Let the words go forth from this time and place," he said, "to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans — born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage — and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world."

He followed that by issuing

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

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.

a warning of sorts: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

Over the next few minutes Kennedy promised to "assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty," to support "our last best hope" the United Nations, and to "begin anew the quest for peace."

Kennedy then extended a hand to Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev: "Let us begin anew," Kennedy said, "remember-

ing on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness and sincerity is always subject to proof."

"Let us never negotiate out of fear," Kennedy said. "But let us never fear to negotiate."

Kennedy then closed with the words his address is best remembered: an urge to the nation and the world to work for a greater good.

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

... BUT NOT EVERYTHING WENT WELL

The night before Kennedy's inauguration, Frank Sinatra and Peter Lawford organized a pre-inaugural ball — what was considered one of the largest parties ever held in Washington, D.C. A number of Hollywood luminaries were on hand to help raise money to cover outstanding campaign bills for the Democratic party.

One member of Sinatra's famed "Rat Pack" and a Democratic supporter,

actor and singer Sammy Davis Jr., found himself uninvited. Kennedy's father, former Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, disapproved of Davis' impending marriage to a white women, Swedish actress May Britt. So the president-elect asked Davis if he'd agree to not come to the festivities.

Davis agreed, but he was greatly offended. In the early 1970s, he'd switch his party affiliation and would support Richard Nixon for president.



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The Kennedys at the pre-inaugural ball.

Kennedy asked poet Robert Frost if he would become the first poet to read at a presidential inauguration. Frost agreed to read Kennedy's favorite of his works, "The Gift Outright."

Frost also decided to compose a new piece he called "Dedication," to read as a preamble to his poem. But things didn't work out like he had hoped.

The sun was shining brightly when it was Frost's turn to approach the

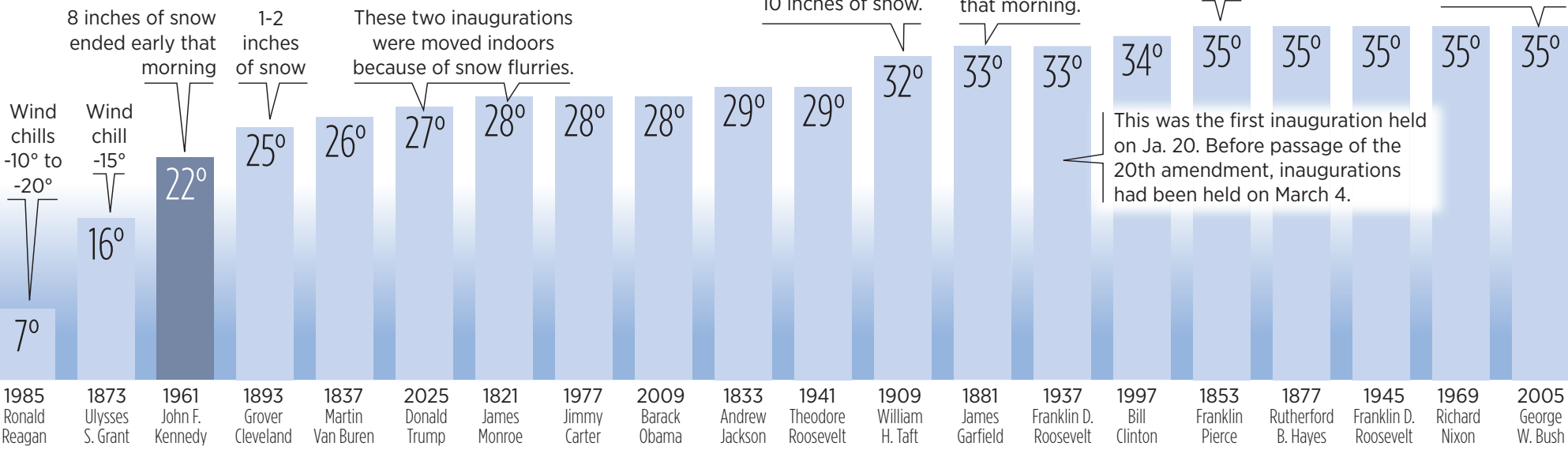
podium. The sun's glare, reflecting off the nearly piles of snow, proved too much for Frost's aging eyes. Vice President Lyndon Johnson attempted to help by leaping to his feet to block the sun with his top hat.

That didn't work out either. So Frost gave up trying to read "Dedication" and settled for reciting "The Gift Outright" from memory.

Frost ended by thanking "the president-elect, Mr. John Finley."



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS



Sources: "Ask Not: The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech That Changed America" by Thurston Clarke, "One Brief Shining Moment: Remembering Kennedy" by William Manchester, "To the Best of My Ability: The American Presidents" edited by James McPherson, National Archives, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, National Weather Service, the New Yorker, Vanity Fair, the Swamp, Biography.com, History.com