

'window on washington' — by ken scheidel

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Late, great inaugural addresses...



WASHINGTON — The former Hollywood actor who will take the oath of office as President of the United States Monday, can make history by uttering memorable words when he is inaugurated at the Capitol at noon.

Or, Ronald W. Reagan can let the moment slip by without any notable statements to mark his inaugural day. Time will tell.

Noted editor Wesley Pedersen, of the Public Affairs Council, recalled some memorable inaugural speeches by presidents in the past.

The lofty phrases spanned 200 years of history and today many school boys and girls can identify them, even repeat many excerpts.

Perhaps it can be said America has enjoyed some of its finest moments through the words of new presidents who touched the heartstrings of millions, as did Woodrow Wilson in the climax of his 1913 address when Europe tottered on the brink of war.

"This is not a day of triumph," Wilson said. "It is a day of dedication. Here muster not the forces of party but the forces of humanity. Men's hearts wait upon us; men's lives hang in the balance; men's hopes call upon us to say what we will do. Who shall live up to the great trust — Who dares fail to try? I summon all honest men, all patriotic, all forward-looking men, to my side. God helping me, I will not fail them, if they will but counsel and sustain me."

Wilson's eloquence was moving and its impact was profound.

But perhaps the most memorable few words of any President at any inauguration were those of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933.

Editor Pedersen recalled that America was in the grips of the Depression. Millions of men and women were

unemployed. Soup lines flourished all across America. Wall Street stock brokers and investors jumped out of the windows of skyscrapers in New York City. Banks verged on bankruptcy. Farmers were broke — plagued by low prices and dust storms.

And at a crucial moment in American history when the crisis was at its height came a voice from Washington — not just any voice — but one which was reassuring, consoling, gentle yet goading. In measured tones, Roosevelt by radio soothed trouble Americans in their "dark hour of national life." He rallied America, deep in despair, in ringing, challenging, terms.

"The only thing we have to fear," he said, "is fear itself." America was to wait a long time to find its way out of the Depression. But on that cold March day in 1933 when it heard Roosevelt's words the nation knew it had a leader of great stature and courage.

John F. Kennedy in 1961 inspired millions around the world. He summoned new generations to the fight for freedom and democracy.

He said: "Let the word go forth from this time and place, 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.

“... 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.”

John F. Kennedy



Kennedy concluded with these remarks, already among the most famous in American history:

"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."

Abraham Lincoln achieved immortality in many ways. But nothing so moved men and women all over the

world as his second inaugural address in 1865.

The Civil War President wrote his name in the history books for all time.

"With malice toward none," he said, "with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans, to do all which they achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."