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America's Great Purposes As the President Spoke Them

In his speeches, messages, interviews and other papers, President Kennedy left his countrymen a large volume of eloquent words and phrases defining and illuminating the political, economic and social issues of our time.

Here are some of the many things he said that are particularly meaningful in this time of national mourning and of national rededication to the great purposes of America for which he spoke, fought and gave his life.

A Nation Founded in Law

Our nation is founded on the principle that observance of the law is the central safeguard of liberty and defiance of the law is the surest road to tyranny. The law which we obey includes the final rules of the courts, as well as the enactments of our legislative bodies. Even among law-abiding men few laws are universally loved, but they are uniformly respected and not resisted. Americans are free, in short, to disagree with the law but not to disobey it . . .

The Responsibility of Americans

My fellow Americans: Ask not what your country will 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.

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.

We are Americans. That is a proud boast. That is a great privilege, to be a citizen of the United States, and we must meet our responsibilities.

I do not believe that any of us would exchange place 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.

Our Role as Free World Leader

Our historic task in this embattled age is not merely to defend freedom. It is to extend its writ and strengthen its covenant.

Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right—not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom, here in this hemisphere, and, we hope, around the world. God willing, that goal will be achieved.

I think we must prove to a watching world that we are the way of the future and the Communist system is as old as the Pharoahs.

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America's Great Purposes

Our strength as well as our convictions have imposed upon this nation the role of leader in freedom's cause. No role in history could be more difficult or more important . . . This nation was born of revolution and raised in freedom. And we do not intend to leave an open road to despotism.

We Live With Challenges

Peace and freedom do not come cheap, and we are destined . . . to live out most if not all of our lives in uncertainty and challenge and peril.

If someone thinks we should have a nuclear war in order to win, I can inform them that there will not be winners in the next nuclear war, if there is one, and this country and other countries will suffer very heavy blows. So that we have to proceed with responsibility and with care in an age where the human race can obliterate itself.

The new preparations that we shall make to defend the peace are based on our needs and to meet a worldwide threat . . . Our primary purpose is neither propaganda nor provocation—but preparation.

The United States cannot withdraw from Europe, unless and until Europe should wish us gone. We cannot distinguish its defenses from our own. We cannot diminish our contributions to Western security or abdicate the responsibility of power.

Together we shall save our planet or together we shall perish in its flames.

It is . . . our intention to challenge the Soviet Union, not to an arms race, but to a peace race; to advance step by step, stage by stage, until general and complete disarmament has actually been achieved.

Beyond the Realm of Party or Self

Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer.

The fundamental call to greatness is coming not from any party or any person but from history and the hard logic of events.

Of those to whom much is given, much is required. And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment of each one of us—recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities to the state—our success or failure, in whatever office we may hold, will be measured by the answers to four questions—were we truly men of courage . . . were we truly men of judgment . . . were we truly men of integrity . . . were we truly men of dedication . . .

I have asked quite a lot of the American people—and I am grateful at their response. There is much more to be done. But I do not wish to be misinterpreted. I think we have the will as well as the resources to prevail. And I think we will.