Kennedy's New York Liberal Party Nomination Acceptance Speech
Sept. 14, 1960

John Fitzgerald "Jack" Kennedy (May 29, 1917 – November 22, 1963), often referred to by his initials JFK, was the thirty-fifth President of the United States, serving from 1961 until his assassination in 1963.

After Kennedy's military service as commander of the Motor Torpedo Boat PT-109 during World War II in the South Pacific, his aspirations turned political, with the encouragement and grooming of his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. Kennedy represented the state of Massachusetts in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1947 to 1953 as a Democrat, and in the U.S. Senate from 1953 until 1960. Kennedy defeated then Vice President and Republican candidate Richard Nixon in the 1960 U.S. presidential election, one of the closest in American history. To date, he is the only practicing Roman Catholic to be president. He was the second-youngest President (after Theodore Roosevelt), and the youngest elected to the office, at the age of 43. Kennedy is also the only president to have won a Pulitzer Prize. Events during his administration include the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the building of the Berlin Wall, the Space Race, the African American Civil Rights Movement and early events of the Vietnam War.

Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas. Lee Harvey Oswald was charged with the crime and was murdered two days later by Jack Ruby before he could be put on trial. The Warren Commission concluded that Oswald had acted alone in killing the president; however, the House Select Committee on Assassinations declared in 1979 that there was more likely a conspiracy that included Oswald. The entire subject remains controversial, with multiple theories about the assassination still being debated. The event proved to be an important moment in U.S. history because of its impact on the nation and the ensuing political repercussions. Today, Kennedy continues to rank highly in public opinion ratings of former U.S. presidents. [1]

The Liberal Party of New York is a minor American political party that has been active only in the state of New York. The Liberal Party founding was spearheaded by David Dubinsky in 1944 as an anticommunist alternative to the American Labor Party whose leadership had developed
procommunist associations. Its platform supports a set of center-left policies: labor rights, improved education, and national health care. [2]

The New York Liberal Party Nomination Speech Quote
On September 14, 1960 Senator Kennedy accepted the 1960 presidential nomination of the New York Liberal Party at the Commodore Hotel, New York, NY. His famous quote in defense of liberalism comes from the fifth paragraph in the 10,000 word speech [3]:

What do our opponents mean when they apply to us the label, "Liberal"? If by "Liberal" they mean, as they want people to believe, someone who is soft in his policies abroad, who is against local government, and who is unconcerned with the taxpayer's dollar, then the record of this party and its members demonstrate that we are not that kind of "Liberal." But, if by a "Liberal," they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people - their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties - someone who believes that we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad, if that is what they mean by a "Liberal," then I'm proud to say that I'm a "Liberal."

Listen to Kennedy's famous first paragraph of his speech.

The Full Text of the New York Liberal Party Nomination Acceptance Speech
Dr. Niebuhr, Professor Hayes, Governor Stevenson, Mr. Meany, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I accept your nomination, and I am proud of it. [Applause.] I am proud to be the only candidate in 1960 with the nomination of two political parties, although I'm not certain how many tickets are now headed in how many States by Senator Goldwater. [Laughter.]

We had an interesting convention at Los Angeles, and we ended with a strong Democratic platform which we called the rights of man. The Republican platform has also been presented. I do not know its title, but it has been referred to as the power of positive thinking. [Laughter and applause.] I do not regard the title of liberal as an honorary degree; I regard it as a license to preach the gospel of liberalism across this country. [Applause.] But I think you know why this title could be conferred on my candidacy. Just before you met, a weekly news magazine with wide circulation, featured a section entitled, "Kennedy's Liberal Promises," and described me, and I quote, "as the farthest-out liberal Democrat around," unquote. While I am not certain of the "beatnik" definition of "farthest-out," I am certain that this was not intended as a compliment. [Laughter.] And last week, as further proof of my credentials, a noted American clergyman was quoted as saying that our society may survive in the event of my election, but it certainly won't be what it was. I would like to think he was complimenting me, but I'm not sure he was. [Laughter and applause.] But a more serious challenge to my
credentials, this time as a Democrat, was issued in Dallas, Tex. In his address to a large gathering of Texas Republicans, and there are no purer breed anyplace in the United States [laughter], Mr. Nixon complained that what he called the party of Schlesinger, Galbraith, and Bowles was not the party of Jefferson, Jackson, and Wilson. I do not agree, but I have no intention of issuing a similar challenge to my opponent's credentials; for I know full well that the party of Nixon, Dirksen, and Goldwater is the party of Hoover, Harding, Coolidge, McKinley, and the rest. [Applause.]

The final proof is the old political adage that you can tell a friend by the enemies that he makes; and by this standard, you and I are the closest of friends. For Mr. Nixon and Mr. Dirksen and Mr. Mundt and Mr. Goldwater don't like my liberal policies, I'm glad to say, any more than they do yours. They are fighting a rear guard action against the 20th century, and they fear that our time is coming and theirs is going. I do not mean to say that the fight is wholly between the Democratic and the Republican Parties. Those of you who are here tonight are proof of the fact that some of the best friends that the Democrats have are not in the Democratic Party. [Applause.] I think in November that some of them may be in the Republican Party, but I hold out no hope at all for the vast and impressive number of Republicans who suddenly, just before election time - those who are running for office - suddenly begin to sound like true Lincolns.

Eight years ago on this occasion, Adlai Stevenson called this quadrennial outburst of affection "that pause in the real Republican occupation known as the 'Liberal Hour.'" And he added, "It should never be confused," and he was right, "with any period when Congress is in session." [Laughter and applause.]

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But first, I would like to say what I understand the word, "Liberal," to mean and explain in the process why I consider myself to be a "Liberal," and what it means in the presidential election of 1960.

In short, having set forth my views - I hope for all time - 2 nights ago in Houston, on the proper relationship between church and state, I want to take this opportunity to set forth my views on the proper relationship between the state and the citizen. This is my political credo:
I believe in human dignity as the source of national purpose, in human liberty as the source of national action, and the human heart as the source of national compassion, and in the human mind as the source of our invention and our ideas. It is, I believe, this faith in our fellow citizens as individuals and as people that lies at the heart of the liberal faith, for liberalism is not so much a party creed or a set of fixed platform promises as it is an attitude of mind and heart, a faith in man's ability through the experiences of his reason and judgment to increase for himself and his fellow men the amount of Justice and freedom and brotherhood which all human life deserves. [Applause.]

I believe also in the United States of America, in the promise that it contains and has contained throughout our history of producing a society so abundant and creative and so free and responsible that it cannot only fulfill the aspirations of its citizens, but serve equally well as a beacon for all mankind. I do not believe in a super state. I see no magic to tax dollars which are sent to Washington and then returned. I abhor the waste and incompetence of large-scale Federal bureaucracies in this administration, as well as in others. I do not favor state compulsion when voluntary individual effort can do the job and do it well. But I believe in a government which acts, which exercises its full powers and its full responsibilities. Government is an art and a precious obligation; and when it has a job to do, I believe it should do it. And this requires not only great ends but that we propose concrete means of achieving them.

Our responsibility is not discharged by an announcement of virtuous ends. Our responsibility is to achieve these objectives with social invention, with political skill, and executive vigor. I believe for these reasons, that liberalism is our best and our only hope in the world today. [Applause.] For the liberal society is a free society, and it is at the same time and for that reason a strong society. Its strength is drawn from the will of free people committed to great ends and peacefully striving to meet them. Only liberalism, in short, can repair our national power, restore our national purpose, and liberate our national energies. And the only basic issue in the 1960 presidential campaign is whether our Government will fall in a conservative rut and die there, or whether we will move ahead in the liberal spirit of daring, of breaking new ground, of doing in our generation what Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and Adlai Stevenson did in their time of influence and responsibility. [Applause.]

Our liberalism has its roots in our diverse origins. Most of us are descended from that segment of the American population which was once called an immigrant minority. Today, along with our children and grandchildren, we do not feel minor. We feel proud of our origins and we are not second to any group in our sense of national purpose. For many years New York represented the new frontier to all those who came from the ends of the earth to find new opportunity and new freedom, generations of men and women who fled from the despotism of the czars, the horrors of the Nazis, the tyranny of hunger, who came here to the new frontier in the State of New York. These men and women, a living cross section of American history, indeed, a cross section of the entire world's history of pain and hope, made of this city and only a new world of opportunity, but a new world of the spirit as well.
Tonight we salute Governor and Senator Herbert Lehman as a symbol of that spirit [applause] and as a reminder that the fight for full constitutional rights for all Americans is a fight that must be carried on in 1961 [applause].

Many of these same immigrant families produced the pioneers and builders of the American labor movement. They are the men who sweated in our shops, who struggled to create a union, who were driven by longing for education for their children and for their children's development. They went to night schools; they built their own future, their union's future, and their country's future, brick by brick, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, and now in their children's time, suburb by suburb.

Tonight we salute George Meany as a symbol of that struggle [applause] and as a reminder that the fight to eliminate poverty and human exploitation is a fight that goes on in our own day. But in 1960 the cause of liberalism cannot content itself with carrying on the fight for human justice and economic liberalism here at home. For here and around the world the fear of war hangs over us every morning and every night. It lies, expressed or silent, in the minds of every American. We cannot banish it by repeating that we are economically first or that we are militarily first, for saying so doesn't make it so. More will be needed than good will missions or talking back to Soviet politicians or increasing the tempo of the arms race. More will be needed than good intentions, for we know where that paving leads.

In Winston Churchill's words, "We cannot escape our dangers by recoiling from them. We dare not pretend such dangers do not exist."

And tonight we salute Adlai Stevenson as an eloquent spokesman for the effort to achieve an intelligent foreign policy. [Applause.] Our opponents would like the people to believe that in the time of danger it would be hazardous to change the administration that has brought us to this time of danger. I think it would be hazardous not to change. I think it would be hazardous to continue 4 more years of stagnation and indifference at home and abroad, of starving the underpinnings of our national power, including not only our defense but our image abroad as a friend.

This is an important election. This is an important election - in many ways as important as any in this century - and I think that the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party here in New York, and those who believe in progress all over the United States, should be associated with us in this great effort.

The reason that Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and Adlai Stevenson had influence abroad, and the United States in their time had it, was because they moved this country here at home, because they stood for something here in the United States, of expanding the benefits of our society to our own people, and the people around the world looked to us as a symbol of hope. [Applause.]
I think it is our task to recreate that same atmosphere in our own time. Our national elections have often proved to be the turning point in the course of our country. I am proposing that 1960 be another turning point in the history of the great Republic.

Some pundits are saying that it's 1928 all over again. I say it's 1932 all over again. [Applause.] I say it is the great opportunity that we will have in our time to move our people and this country and the people of the free world beyond the new frontiers of the 1960's. Thank you.

Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy
Acceptance Speech for the New York State Liberal Party 1960 Presidential Nomination
The Commodore Hotel, New York, NY
September 14, 1960 [3]

References

3. Woolley, John T. and Peters, Gerhard; The American Presidency Project; University of California, Santa Barbara, CA; [online]; No date. Accessed November 14, 2008 @ http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=74012.