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Timing is Everything

On the cold morning of January 20, 1961, John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) was sworn in as the President of the United States of America. He was the youngest and first Catholic president in history. He was also the first president to be born in the twentieth century. The presidency was narrowly won against, then vice president, Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential race. During the campaign, JFK was criticized for his youth and religion. It was believed that he did not have enough experience and that the Pope would control his presidency. He began his presidency during the midst of the cold war when tensions were high. We had just lost Cuba to the communists, the Soviet Union had beaten us to space, and the Soviet Union was leading in the arms race. It looked like dark times for America. This left the perfect stage for JFK's historic inaugural speech. JFK's use of kairos, deixis, and pathos are what make this speech iconic.

JFK used the kairos to create an exigence for his message. As previously mentioned, American was in the midst of the cold war against the communists of the world, more in particular the Soviet Union. People were very focused on mutually assured destruction as opposed to peace. This meant that JFK had to create the exigence for peace. He does this by saying things such as, "Divided there is little we can do—for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder," and "To those people in the huts and villages of the half

globe struggling to break bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right” (“Inaugural Address”). He is pointing out that we as a country and as a planet need to help others rather than being solely focused on ourselves or what our “enemies” may be doing.

JFK’s use of deixis draws the audience into his message. For example, his most iconic lines from this speech, “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” (“Inaugural Address”). Another example of deixis is at the beginning of JFK’s speech when he says, “We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end as well as a beginning—signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago” (“Inaugural Address”). Using deixis helps JFK make his argument more persuasive because he is using it to connect to his audience. Throughout the entire speech he is attempting to connect to the people of the United States and then to the people of the world by using a lot of pronouns and adverbials of place. He is thus setting this time and situation as the prime time to come together and work for world peace.

JFK’s use of deixis helps create pathos appeals which were essential to his speech. As I previously mentioned, JFK’s use of deixis was to attempt to connect to his audience. He knew that everyone was watching him so, he tried to address everyone. He is trying to appeal to the emotions of the world with lines such as, “Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce,” and “Let both

sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah—to ‘undo the heavy burdens...(and) let the oppressed go free’ (“Inaugural Address”). He wants to invoke everyone to care and to fight for world peace.

This speech was iconic in its time because JFK created a need to focus on peace by using the kairos of the time and he appealed to not just Americans but the entire world. The lines “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,” are what make this speech so iconic and relevant to today (“Inaugural Address”). This message is still incredibly relevant today because the world is still not at peace and even more divided than ever. It also plays off one of Americans age old ideals, individualism. JFK is asking individualistic Americans to forget about their own needs and wants and think about how they can each individually better America. I believe that that is something that Americans still need to do today to affect change.

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