**REMARKS OF JOHN F. KENNEDY AT AN INDUCTION CEREMONY FOR NAVY RECRUITS, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, JULY 4, 1942**

**FOR WHAT WE FIGHT**

A number of years ago in a room in Philadelphia, a group of men signed their names to a Declaration. For that, they could have been hanged. For that Declaration was revolutionary. It said that all men were created equal and were possessed of certain inalienable rights. That was treason and the penalty for treason was death. And yet, these men signed. Today, as we read that Declaration, there seems nothing particularly revolutionary, nothing particularly treasonable in it; nothing for which to be hanged. Listen:  “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Today, we have indeed come to hold these truths to be self-evident – indeed, so self-evident and so obvious that we sometimes forget the courage it took for those men to take their stand. It took indeed great courage. But it took even greater faith. By their signatures, these men pledged with their very lives their unity of conviction and their firm belief in the truth of their principles.

Today, 166 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we, in America, are faced with a similar decision. We must decide whether the allegiance which we profess to the principles upon which this government is based is mere lip service, or whether we truly believe in them to the extent that we are ready to die for them.

The men who signed the Declaration of Independence met their issue squarely, and with their lives, they affirmed their beliefs. You men, today, by stepping forward have pledged a similar faith.

Some may argue that the principles set down in the Declaration of Independence have never been really achieved in this country – that while all men may have been created equal, they have not been allowed to live equally; that while they may have been allowed life and a certain degree of liberty, their pursuit of happiness has been merely a pursuit.

Some may argue that the ideals for which we fight now, those embodied in the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms, are likewise impossible to achieve. Indeed, some men argue that Christianity itself has failed. They point to a world aflame with war, and they say that the principles that Christ taught are too high, that men will never live their lives according to his precepts.

The men who say these things may be right. Perhaps men throughout the world can never live according to those principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence, in the Four Freedoms, in the Atlantic Charter, in Christianity itself. But that does not mean we should throw these principles aside. They represent ideals and goals worth working for – worth fighting for. A world which casts away all morality and principle – a hopeless idealism, if you will – is not a world worth living in. It is only by striving upward that we move forward.

For those who feel we have set our goal too high, let them consider the cause for which our enemies fight. Whatever their crimes, they cannot be accused of idealism. We say that all men are created equal. They deny it. They believe in the theory of the Master Race, in government by the elite – a government of a chosen few, by a chosen few, for a chosen few. We believe that man has certain inalienable rights. They say that man has no rights – he has duties. Only the State has rights. They fight for "lebensraum" – living room – living room for them – and for no one else. This may be realism – but if it is – of it, we want no part. Against it we will fight.

This war will not be easy. It may be very long. We have only begun to taste its hardships, and when it is over, all will not be green fields and rolling pastures. It is then that we will really face our greatest task. Now, our job is comparatively simple. We know our objective – the defeat of our enemies. After the war, the path will not be so clearly set. Weary of war, we may fall ready victims to post-war cynicism and disillusionment, as we did at the end of the last war. We had fought that war to make the world safe for democracy. Because it appeared that our victory might not be complete, that the world would not overnight become really safe for democracy, that we were not going to gain everything for which we had fought, we turned away from Europe in bitterness and lost completely our victory. Let not that happen again. Let us realize that the victory will be only half won when the fighting ends. We must finish the job in the years of peace that follow. Once more, we fight for a high cause. Once more, at the end of the fighting, we may find we have not won all that we had hoped. But let that not discourage and dishearten us.

Even if we may not win all for which we strive – even if we win only a small part – that small part will mean progress forward and that indeed makes our cause a worthy one.

Other men at other times have been willing to make great sacrifices for causes which have appeared difficult and sometimes impossible. We have received from them a heritage, some of it evil and bad, but more of it good. Now it has become our turn to renew that heritage, to give testimony to our belief in it.

The sacrifice is not too great. As young men, it is, after all, for our own future that we fight. And so with a firm confidence and belief in that future, let us go forward to victory.

*Source*: [David F. Powers Personal Papers](https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/DFPPP), Box 28, "'For What We Fight', 4 July 1942." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.