

Ask What You Can Do: Kennedy's Call to Service

Topic: Public Service and Civic Action

Grade Level: 1- 6

Subject Area: Social Studies and Language Arts

Time Required: 1-2 class periods

This lesson is modified from a longer lesson plan, [Ask not what your country can do for you.](#)

Goals/Rationale

John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address inspired children and adults to see the importance of civic action and service. His historic words, "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country," challenged every American to contribute in some way to the public good. In this lesson, students learn about the themes of community service and civic action in President Kennedy's Inaugural Address and reflect on their own contributions to the public good.

Essential Question: What is community service and civic action and why are they important?

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- analyze and interpret a primary source to gather information about President Kennedy's Inaugural Address.
- explain the quote, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."
- create artwork to show how they have contributed positively to their family, school, or community.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National Standards for Civics and Government

V. What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

National History Standards: Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.

B. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.

MA Standards for History and Social Science Practice

Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12

1. Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should be familiar with the concept of the inauguration of a president. Use the [Picture Book Biography of John F. Kennedy](#) or the [Life of John F. Kennedy](#) for background information.

Historical Background and Context

On January 20, 1961, a clerk of the US Supreme Court held the large Fitzgerald family Bible as John F. Kennedy took the oath of office to become the nation's 35th president. Against a backdrop of deep snow and sunshine, more than twenty thousand people huddled in 20-degree temperatures on the east front of the Capitol to witness the event. Kennedy, having removed his topcoat and projecting both youth and vigor, delivered what has become a landmark inaugural address.

What many consider to be the most memorable and enduring section of the speech came towards the end when Kennedy called on all Americans to commit themselves to service and sacrifice: "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." He then continued by addressing his international audience: "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." Introducing students to Kennedy's call to service is an effective way to discuss the value of civic action and to raise students' awareness about their own role in contributing to the public good.

Materials

[Video of President Kennedy's Inaugural Address](#)

[Ask What You Can Do Activity Sheet](#)

Art materials such as crayons, markers, colored pencils, paints

Materials for collage such as colored paper, magazines, natural materials (optional)

Procedure

Part I: Examining the Evidence

1. Begin the activity with a discussion about presidential inaugurations. Are there students who have attended or watched a presidential inauguration? What is the purpose of an inauguration? What is an inaugural address?
2. Explain that on January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy, the youngest US president ever elected, gave an inaugural address which is now well-known for its powerful language and message. They will be listening to Kennedy's Inaugural Address to identify a famous quote that has an important message for today.
3. Have students watch the [video of the Inaugural Address](#). Preview the quote, "And so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country."

Note: The entire address is 15:30 minutes and has complex language. For an abbreviated

version, play the oath of office and the introductory paragraphs of the speech. Then skip the middle during which Kennedy focuses on foreign policy, and then view the end of the speech in which he calls on the American people and those in other countries to public service. This section of the speech starts at 11:00 and runs to the end of the video. The quote “And so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” occurs at 13:53.

4. If time and interest allow, share additional resources: photographs of the inauguration from the [media gallery](#), the [transcript of the speech](#) (translated into 14 languages!), the video [The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy - A Curator's View](#) and [original documents](#) (including an early draft) related to the speech.
5. Explain that many people remember the cold that day, but they also remember the “Ask not what your country can do for you” quote from Kennedy’s speech. In the next activity, they will discuss the quote and see how it applies to their own lives.

Part 2: “Ask what you can do”

Participate in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library’s #AskWhat YouCanDo2020 social media campaign.

1. Explain that students will be reflecting on the “Ask not” quote and then creating artwork to share on social media as part of a nationwide challenge to elementary students sponsored by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
2. Challenge students to recite the famous quote from Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. After students respond, write the quote on a blackboard or chart paper: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” Explain that these words are some of the most well-known from Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. Can they put the quote in their own words? What does it mean? Can they give some examples of what people can do for their country?
3. Discuss the concepts of community service and civic action. Explain that when a person contributes to a community, it is called “community service.” Community service means serving the community, that is, working for the benefit of a group of people, whether it is a small or large group. Civic action is one type of community service. Examples of civic action include keeping informed with reliable information, making one’s voice heard, helping to make decisions, and working towards improving the community.
4. Have students brainstorm examples of how they have responded to John F. Kennedy’s call to service. In what ways have they participated in or positively contributed to various communities: their family, friends, school, neighborhood, city, state, country, the world? Why did they participate or serve? What was the goal of their action? What was the impact? What happens when people do not participate in or contribute to a community? What happens when many people take the initiative to serve the public?
5. Have students use the [Ask What You Can Do Activity Sheet](#) to create an artistic representation of their civic action. It may be a collage, a painting, a drawing, or any other type of image using available art materials. The *Artists' Tips* will help guide the creations. Have students write a response to the prompt, “Here’s what I’m doing to help my family, neighborhood, or community:” below their artwork. If possible, have students include their first name, age, and town, city, or state.

6. Post the artwork to #AskWhatYouCanDo2020. You can also create a real or virtual bulletin board entitled, “Ask What You Can Do” and post the students’ artwork.

Assessment

Evaluate students' artwork and writing to assess how well they understood the concept of public service and civic action.

Accommodations

- Provide a re-wording of the quote.
- Provide examples of ways students may have helped their communities.