

ORIGINS OF THE "Ask Not" INAUGURAL ADDRESS

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If any person today is asked to recite a line from a Presidential Inaugural Address --- It is quite likely that President Kennedy's "Ask not.." speech will come to mind. However, few people realize that President Kennedy was a student of history, as well as a brilliant speechmaker himself. He re-worked a speech that President Warren G. Harding gave in 1916 in Chicago, Illinois. That revision became a crescendo point of President Kennedy's Inauguration in Washington DC, in 1961.

The official website of The White House describes President Harding as a "leader in fraternal organizations". Harding was a "joiner" of most of the Lodges and fraternal orders of the day. Specifically, he was initiated an Entered Apprentice on June 28, 1901 ...then, a rival newspaperman in Marion Ohio blocked Harding's advancement to the Fellow Craft Degree until the year he was elected President of the United States. (Harding was Raised to the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason on August 27, 1920. In 1921, he became a Knight Templar in Marion Commandery No.36, a 32nd degree in the Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite of Columbus, Ohio. Harding became the first U.S. President to become a member of The Shrine (Aladdin Shrine in Columbus, 1921; Honorary Member of Almas Shrine in Washington DC in 1921; Honorary Member of the Imperial Council AAONMS in June 1923). Kallipolis Grotto in Washington DC made him a "Prophet at Sight" at the White House, May 11, 1921. Warren Harding was also a member of Washington Chapter No.3 of National Sojourners. He was scheduled to receive the degrees of Cryptic Masonry in Marion Council No 22 R&SM, but died before the conferral. This was also the case of Harding being elected to receive the 33° of The Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite of the Northern Jurisdiction of the USA, but died before he could attend its conferral. In addition, Harding was also a member of the Elks Lodge # 32 of Marion, OH, and the Knights of Pythias Lodge.

At a cornerstone laying in Birmingham, Alabama, Harding said, "I have been a better citizen for being a Mason. There is nothing in Masonry that a free, religious, and just American could not be proud to subscribe to, and be a better citizen for so doing."

The White House website lists the 'memorable injunction' of President John F. Kennedy at his Inaugural Address: "**Ask not what your country can do for you --- Ask what you can do for your country.**"

In his 1916 speech, President Harding said, "**In the great fulfillment, we must have a citizenship less concerned about what the government can do for it, and more anxious about what it can do for the nation.**"

President John F. Kennedy on his 21st birthday joined the Elks Lodge and was a member of Boston, MA #10 at the time of his death November 22, 1963. Since both Harding and Kennedy were "Lodge men" in the Elks Lodge....both had experienced



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a "can do" spirit. And, I feel that the common link in both of their appeals is the patriotic spirit of selflessness instead of selfishness. Both men would urge us today ask ourselves how we can help our neighbor...Ask how we can help our communities...and how we can help the world at-large.

In July, 1923, President Warren G. Harding officiated at the Laying of the cornerstone of the Masonic Hall in Ketchikan, Alaska. On August 2, 1923 he was scheduled to give an address to Hollywood Commandery No.56, K.T., Hollywood, Calif., on the occasion of his home Commandery delivering to them the International Traveling Beauceant, the night of August 2, 1923.

His delegation made it back to San Francisco, California, but Harding was unable to give the speech (which was delivered by Harding's secretary Sir Knight George B. Christian at the Knights Templar gathering). At approximately the same hour as that event, 7:30 pm, August 2, 1923, Harding died from a stroke.

When John F. Kennedy delivered his "Ask not..." speech in 1961, it was some 45 years after Harding had delivered his own slightly different version in 1916. I find it striking that I am writing this Article in 2006, which is precisely another interval of exactly 45 years.

As Freemasons, we are accustomed to re-working a rough ashlar to make it a more perfect ashlar, fit for the builder's use. As Rosicrucians, we are accustomed to the ongoing refinement of certain materials and substances to increase their worth or value. President Harding's rough original draft was the "seed" which grew and was later polished, revised, and refined to form the final draft of President Kennedy's speech.

If I were to paraphrase both men, I think I'd say something to the effect, "Let us, as citizens, reduce our rhetoric of complaining about what is wrong with the country, and set out to increase what we can do (and WILL do) to help our neighbors."

Let us honor the memory of Presidents Harding and Kennedy. It is significant that the "Ask not" speech tells us to focus on those things we **can do**. By helping our neighbors, we are helping ourselves.

Sources:

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- Archives of Aladdin Shrine Center, Columbus, Ohio
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- The New York Times, Obituary, Warren Harding

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