

# The Oval Office

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*performance time: 22 minutes*

## Narration

### Episode One: introduction

[Narrator:] We call him by many names: our nation's Chief Executive...The Commander in Chief...Mr. President.

He is also called the most powerful man in the world.

When national events hold the nation transfixed, when our country is shaken by disaster, it's to the president that we look for leadership. It's to the president that we turn for explanation, direction, reassurance.

The most powerful man in the world.

What of this power? His real power comes not from his command of a great military. His real power comes not from his influence in congress, or his management of the executive branch.

The President's real power comes from words. And ideas.

Ideas forged in the blast furnace of American experience, polished bright with optimism.

And words. Words that give wing to ideas, words that lift us up, words that connect, words that inspire, words that bring hope.

Listen and consider the magnificent weight and power of these words: "We the people..."

Or these: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal..."

Or these: "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States."

## Episode two: words and leadership

“We come here today to commemorate one of the epoch-making events of the long struggle for the rights of man – the long struggle for the uplift of humanity.

Our country – this great republic – means nothing unless it means the triumph of a real democracy, the triumph of popular government, and, in the long run, of an economic system under which each man shall be guaranteed the opportunity to show the best that there is in him...” Theodore Roosevelt, 1910

And Franklin Roosevelt in 1937 said, “Shall we pause now and turn our back upon the road that lies ahead? Shall we call this the promised land? Or, shall we continue on our way? For ‘each age is a dream that is dying, or one that is coming to birth.’

“Many voices are heard as we face a great decision. Comfort says, ‘Tarry a while.’ Opportunism says, ‘This is a good spot.’ Timidity asks, ‘How difficult is the road ahead?’

“If I know aught of the spirit and purpose of our Nation, we will not listen to Comfort, Opportunism, and Timidity. We will carry on.”

## Episode Three: then and now

“It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes...Many of our rich men have not been content with equal protection and equal benefits, but have besought us to make them richer by act of Congress... We can...take a stand against all new...monopolies and exclusive privileges, against any prostitution of our government to the advancement of the few at the expense of the many...” Andrew Jackson, 1832

“...Our government...must be freed from the sinister influence or control of special interests...the great special business interests too often control and corrupt the men and methods of government for their own profit. We must drive the special interests out of politics...”

“I believe that the officers, and especially, the directors of corporations should be held personally responsible when any corporation breaks the law...” - Theodore Roosevelt, 1910

## Episode Four: wartime presidents

“There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny...”

“They will be sore tried, by night and by day, without rest – until the victory is won. The darkness will be rent by noise and flame. Men’s souls will be shaken with the violences of war.

“For these men are lately drawn from the ways of peace. They fight not for the lust of conquest. They fight to liberate. They fight to let justice arise, and tolerance and goodwill among all Thy people. They yearn but for the end of battle, for their return to the haven of home.

“Some will never return. Embrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants into Thy kingdom.

“And for us at home...help us, Almighty God, to rededicate ourselves in renewed faith in Thee in this hour of great sacrifice...

“Lead us to the saving of our country, and with our sister nations into a world unity that will spell a sure peace...A peace that will let all of men live in freedom, reaping the just rewards of their honest toil...Thy will be done, Almighty God. Amen.” Franklin Delano Roosevelt

“We are not enemies, but friends...Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” Abraham Lincoln, 1861

And four years later, President Lincoln pleaded, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations...”

“So we voice our hope and our belief that we can help to heal this divided world...

“This, nothing less, is the labor to which we are called and our strength dedicated.

“May the light of freedom, coming to all darkened lands, flame brightly ~ until at last the darkness is no more.

“May the turbulence of our age yield to a true time of peace, when men and nations shall share a life that honors the dignity of each, the brotherhood of all.” Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1957

## Episode Five: humorous one-liners

Harry Truman: “I never gave anybody hell. I just told the truth, they thought it was hell...”

John F. Kennedy: “Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in...”

Martin Van Buren: “As to the Presidency, the two happiest days of my life were those of my entrance upon the office and my surrender of it.”

Abraham Lincoln: “Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”

Calvin Coolidge: “When a great many people are unable to find work, unemployment results.”

Grover Cleveland: “Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote.”

Thomas Jefferson: “If I had more time, I could write shorter letters...”

William Howard Taft: “What’s the use of being President if you can’t have a train with a diner on it?”

Chester Arthur: “I may be President of the United States, but my private life’s nobody’s damn business.”

John F. Kennedy: “Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names.”

## Episode Six: inspirational

“In...future days...we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms...Freedom of speech...freedom...to worship God in his own way...freedom from want...[and] freedom from fear...

“That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a...basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation...

“This nation has placed its destiny in the hands and heads and hearts of its millions of free men and women; and its faith in freedom under the guidance of God. Our support goes to those who struggle to gain those rights or keep them. Our strength is our unity of purpose. “To that high concept there can be no end save victory.” Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1941

In 1945, Roosevelt said, “We shall strive for perfection. We shall not achieve it immediately ~ but we still shall strive. We may make mistakes ~ but they must never be mistakes which result from faintness of heart or abandonment of moral principle...”

On January 20th, 1961, John Fitzgerald Kennedy sounded the clarion call: “Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans - born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage - and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world...

“Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty...

“...Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce...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’...

“...With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.”