



---

### TIMELESS STANDARDS OF DEMOCRACY: JFK QUOTES ANCIENT ATHENS

Anastasios Chamouzas

[chamouzas@aegean.gr](mailto:chamouzas@aegean.gr)

**ABSTRACT.** The political views of John Fitzgerald Kennedy seem to be deeply inspired by the ideals of liberty, equality and democratic governance of classical Greece, established and widely accepted in the western world as the “cradle of democracy”. His persuasive rhetoric often includes quotes and symbolism from the legacy and splendour of ancient Athens, its standard values and democratic principles, as well as its legal and political institutions. Kennedy quotes the encomium of Pericles’ Funeral Oration to the exemplary democratic system of Athens to juxtapose it to the values of liberty of his homeland, which differentiate it from other states in the eyes of the world; both Athens and Massachusetts are proved to be a special example, a “City upon a Hill”, because of their unique political achievements (for freedom and against tyranny).

**KEY WORDS:** John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Pericles, classical Greece, persuasion, democracy of ancient Athens, freedom, City upon a Hill.

*“For no man about to enter high office in this country can ever be unmindful of the contribution which this state has made to our national greatness. Its leaders have shaped our destiny long before the great republic was born. Its principles have guided our footsteps in times of crisis as well as in times of calm. Its democratic institutions--including this historic body--have served as beacon lights for other nations, as well as for our sister states. For what Pericles said to the Athenians has long been true of this commonwealth: “We do not imitate--for we are a model to others.” And so, it is that I carry with me from this state to that high and lonely office to which I now succeed more than fond memories of firm friendships... “We must always consider,” he said, “that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” (John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 1960)*

John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) was the 35th President of the United States (1961-1963). As a Senator from Massachusetts, he was elected President in 1960. As the president-elect JFK returns to Massachusetts to thank the Commonwealth and delivers the speech known as “City Upon A Hill”, which could be described as a set of informal policy statements, because it refers to the leadership model he is going to follow during his administration. Moving the audience, JFK refers to the special qualities<sup>1</sup> of the State of Massachusetts that deserve this high praise; its past and collective identity are portrayed as “unique” and highly “exceptional” in and for the entire American national history<sup>2</sup>. In the above extract JFK openly refers to the emblematic personality of Pericles of ancient Athens using almost the same narrative structure, methodology and rhetorical technique of the funeral oration in the history of Thucydides. First Kennedy, like Pericles, pays tribute to the American Founding Fathers<sup>3</sup> and the glorious past of his homeland: the ancestors are idealized for their achievements, spirit and courage, since they fled an oppressive political regime to settle in America and adopted the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, the first written

---

<sup>1</sup> “Massachusetts is unique among states because its history and culture predate and epitomize the experiences of the country as a whole. It is commonly known that the Puritans and Pilgrims set the stage for eventual liberty of religious belief when they fled an oppressive government to settle in the New World. With such documents as the Mayflower Compact (1620) and the Body of Liberties (1641), an early code of law, they provided the basis for the concept that governments should rule by consent of the governed and with guarantees to protect individual expression”.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Massachusetts> (accessed: 20-02-2021).

<sup>2</sup> The term “exceptionalism” is part of the field of international relations and political science. Botsiou (2012): 38, notes that the term refers to the “sense of uniqueness” of the United States, the principle that they represent a higher system of moral and political principles that ultimately prevailed over anyone else. See David Fromkin, *In the Time of the Americans: FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Marshall, MacArthur: The Generation That Changed America's Role in the World* (New York: Vintage, 1995) · Richard Hofstadter, “The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR”, *American History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1985): 462-480. See also O’Connor (2020): 134,136. “At a press conference in Strasbourg, Obama was asked by Ed Luce from the Financial Times whether he subscribed, as many of his predecessors had, “to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world.” Obama replied: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism”. In many ways this contrived panic over Obama’s I’m enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world”. many this would seem a sensible political response but given the exaggerated nature of partisan politics in the US, Obama’s comparison of American exceptionalism to exceptionalism elsewhere unleashed a torrent of conservative condemnation, which argued that Obama did not fully subscribe to the American exceptionalist tradition”. Also, J.D. Sachs (2018): 169-178, focusing on the Trump administration claims that “American exceptionalism has led to America’s growing rejection of cooperative solutions and diplomatic approaches to global challenges. For the past quarter-century, the United States has turned its back on almost all UN treaties, refusing to sign or ratify several important agreements reached by all or almost all other UN member states. We have gone from being the creator and inspirer of the United Nations to a rogue nation that rejects UN initiatives for the perverse reason that most other nations endorse them”. O’ Connor (2020) referring to exceptionalism considers absolutely necessary for the United States that it keeps off stereotypes and focuses on more specific and fertile discussions on the future regarding American policies and politics.

<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, R. B. (2009): 9,10. “The founding fathers still draw the attention not only of scholars but of Americans in all walks of life; their words are still accessible to us, and the challenge of understanding what they meant or should have meant is irresistible and urgent. Major constitutional crises, spawning disputes over whether and how “original intent” can resolve them, intersect with public uncertainty about the lessons that the “usable past” can or should teach”.

fundamental legal statute, which was established before the American Revolution and Constitution, on the common conviction that governments should rule by consent of the governed. Then he makes a solemn mention of democratic principles, individual liberties, equality and citizen participation in the political life of Massachusetts. According to the speaker these general principles -on the basis of freedom for all - continue to be a source of inspiration for democratic governance and are still used as interpretive criteria in verifying the ideas and content of fundamental institutional regulations in the United States, as well as the western world. Massachusetts, like Athens, is actually the “City upon a Hill” that just cannot hide from the eyes of the world due to its prominent -if not dominant- and leading position. It is not just merely a matter of national prestige, but of the United States foreign policy as well. So, Madeleine K. Albright, the 64th Secretary of State of the United States underlines that “the success or failure of the American people’s foreign policy remains the single greatest factor shaping our own history and the future of the world”. In the very same way Pericles in his Funeral Oration delivered in 431 B.C., i.e., in the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, emphasizes on the exceptional spirit and quality of Athens because it gives laws and example to other states by its sovereign political institutions. Pericles’ speech according to Robinson is “perhaps the most famous speech to survive from antiquity, and its patriotic praise tells us much about the ideals of the Athenian democracy”<sup>4</sup> and its collective achievements. Highlighting the similarities and differences between the epideictic rhetoric of the two statesmen one may notice the following: both speakers seek to raise the spirit of pride and patriotism of their audiences by means of their collective and common heritage of πολιτεία and form of democratic government. They both speak before an audience composed of their fellow citizens, the Legislature of Massachusetts and the πολίται of Athens respectively. They are both seen by their audiences as eminent political personalities, because of their ἀρετή, and true leaders with effective rhetoric and communicative skills; they both speak within the political and legal framework of their democratic system of government based on the free will of the majority, not on the orders of the few. Ideology and military power are nearly identified in the era of Pericles, as Athens and its allies had to confront Sparta as the ἀντίπαλον δέος : it is a matter of Democracy vs Oligarchy. The situation in the international relations during the Cold War is similar; America as a leading democratic superpower has to confront with confidence and sense of purpose the ideological and nuclear threat of the Soviet Union and its Eastern block. Both Pericles and JFK have to handle bipolarity issues because of war or cold war . So, in terms of political oratory and democratic greatness the phrase “City

---

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, E.W., (2004): 156. Ancient Greek democracy: readings and sources, Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

upon a Hill” chosen by Winthrop is indeed, beyond any doubt, identified with the words of Pericles: “Χρόμεθα γὰρ πολιτεία οὐ ζηλούση τοὺς τῶν πέλας νόμους, παράδειγμα δὲ μᾶλλον αὐτοὶ ὄντες τισὶν ἢ μιμούμενοι ἑτέρους”. The model/παράδειγμα of JFK and Pericles is based on principles, practices, customs, culture and traditions, legal constructs and norms of the democratic πόλις and, thus, we may conclude it consists of both written and unwritten laws, which make up a unified whole of the democratic culture of their homeland as a free state/πολιτεία and a hegemony.

According to Rodgers “in the 1980s, Winthrop’s text suddenly swept from the domains of the scholars into the White House and the rhetorical center of modern American politics. No presidents before Ronald Reagan had used the phrase “city on a hill” to define the very character of the American nation and its place in the world. After Reagan, virtually no serious political figure could escape the obligation to quote it”. Outside the United States, in the same path, Katerina Sakellaropoulou, President of the Hellenic Republic, quoted the phrase in her message marking Europe Day in the year 2020: “In a world that is ever darker, Europe despite all its flaws, mistakes and failings, remains the Shining House on the Hill”<sup>5</sup>. The very same παράδειγμα of Thucydides as a free variant of the “City upon A Hill”, was used in 2003 in the preamble of the European Union Draft Treaty “Establishing a Constitution for Europe”<sup>6</sup> published in all the twenty-four languages of the European citizens it addressed. However, after the referenda of France and Holland in 2005, this extract of the Funeral Oration of Pericles was not included in the final version of the European Constitution<sup>7</sup>. This resulted in contrasting and diverse opinions on the interpreting of ideas and meanings hidden behind the words of Pericles<sup>8</sup>. According to Hansen, whose opinion seems to be the right one, “the view that the term demokratia was pejorative, and that Pericles praises liberty at the expense of democracy and so was misunderstood by the EU-convention, misreads the Funeral

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/252522/on-europe-day-president-says-region-needs-real-not-just-rhetorical-solidarity/> (accessed: 20-02-2021).

<sup>6</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EL/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2003:169:FULL&from=EN> (accessed: 20-02-2021).

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides’ Description of Democracy (2.37.1) and the EU-Convention of 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Canfora, L., (2006): 7,8. In the chapter titled “A Constitution imbued with Hellenism: Greece, Europe and the West” he writes: “The belief that democracy is a Greek invention is rather deeply rooted. One consequence of this crude notion was apparent when the draft preamble to the European constitution was published on May 28, 2003. Those who, after much alchemy, drew up that text one of the most authoritative of them being the former French president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing - had the idea of putting a Greco-classical stamp on the nascent constitution by placing before the preamble a quotation from the epitaph that Thucydides attributes to Pericles (430 B.C.). In the preamble to the European constitution, Pericles’ words appear in this form: “Our Constitution ... is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole of the people.” This is a falsification of the words Thucydides attributes to Pericles - and it is important to try to understand why the authors resorted to such linguistic duplicity”. “Democracy in Europe, A History of an Ideology”, translated by Simon Jones, Blackwell Publishing.

Oration and is contradicted by instances of Athenian praise of democracy”<sup>9</sup>.

The passion of JFK for the ideas of ancient Greece and especially democratic Athens seems to be an essential part of his communication and rhetorical arsenal. Using repeatedly the ideas and political culture of ancient Athens as an instrument of persuasion throughout his political speeches JFK verifies that the power of the ancient Greek past, apart from influential, is widely known and accepted. Frost<sup>10</sup> presents a compilation of quotations of JFK from speeches and public addresses among which the civilization of classical Greece, democratic Athens and the Acropolis actually stand on the top of the hill together with the United States:

- *“We cannot mistake the nature of the struggle [with the Communists]. It is not for concessions or territory. It is not simply between different systems. It is an age-old battle for the survival of liberty itself. And our great advantage—and we must never forget it—is that the irresistible tide that began ... in ancient Greece is for freedom, and against tyranny. And that is the wave of the future—and the iron hand of totalitarianism can ultimately neither seize it nor turn it back.”* Address Before the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa (May 17, 1961).
- *All of us as Americans are constantly bemused and astounded by this extraordinary golden age in our history which produced so many men of exceptional talent. I have not heard, nor I suppose is there a rational explanation for the fact that this small country, possessed of a very limited population, living under harsh circumstances, produced so ... many brilliant and extraordinary figures who set the tone for our national life and who really represent the most extraordinary outpouring of human ability devoted to government, really, than any time since the days of Greece.”* Remarks at a Luncheon Marking the Publication of the First Four Volumes of the Adams Papers (October 3, 1961).
- *“No man can hope to prophesy with precision the outcome of the great struggle in which our generation is now engaged. Yet we do know that the cause of human freedom has been threatened on many occasions since the system of free choice and democracy was developed in sunlit Greece more than twenty-four hundred years ago. And yet from each threat and indeed from each defeat ... it has ultimately emerged unconquered.”* Address at the 39th

<sup>9</sup> Hansen, M. H. (2008): 15-26. Thucydides' Description of Democracy (2.37.1) and the EU-Convention of 2003. Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies. See also Ντόλης, Σ. (2018) prologue at : “Η δύσκολη Ευρώπη”.

<sup>10</sup> Frost, D.B., (2013). “John F. Kennedy in quotations : a topical dictionary, with sources” /

Annual Convention of the National Association of Broadcasters (May 8, 1961).

- *“It is an extraordinary fact in history that so much of what we are and so much of what we believe had its origin in this rather small spear of land stretching into the Mediterranean. All in a great sense that we fight to preserve today had its origins in Italy, and earlier than that in Greece.”* Remarks on the Occasion of the Celebration of the Centennial of Italian Unification (March 16, 1961).

Sultan argues that the short tenure of JFK - which has a shaping effect on American collective identity in depth and duration - runs mainly through the classical thought of Greece<sup>11</sup> and especially that of Pericles' Athens. JFK saw Pericles as the model from which he was inspired and wished and sought to achieve for America what Pericles had achieved for Athens. She also refers to a “Hellenization of the cultural program of the Kennedy Administration”. This may justify the frequent references of JFK to the personality of Pericles<sup>12</sup>.

As a final observation the Ancient Greek past, with all its political, legal and aesthetic values, narratives and humanistic ideas is a commonly accepted standard of persuasion in the speeches of JFK. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the struggle for defending democracy is still connected to the idea of the “City upon a Hill”, either as ancient Athens or JFK's Massachusetts with its freedom, eunomia, equality and democratic governance.

---

<sup>11</sup> Κοντογιώργης, Γ. (2017): “The political thought and *λόγος* of ancient Greece are necessary for the modern man to achieve self-consciousness”. Introduction of “Γνώση και μέθοδος 29 ερωτήματα για την κοσμοσυστημική γνωσιολογία”.

<sup>12</sup> Sultan, N., (2012): “Jackie Kennedy and the Classical Ideal” (2012). Scholarship. 5. [https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/grs\\_scholarship/5](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/grs_scholarship/5) (accessed: 10-05-2020).



## WORKS CITED

Κακριδής, Ι.Θ., (1962). Ερμηνευτικά σχόλια στον Επιτάφιο του Θουκυδίδη. Η βιβλιοθήκη του φιλολόγου.

Κοντογιώργης, Γ., (2017). Γνώση και Μέθοδος, 29 ερωτήματα για την κοσμοσυστημική γνωσιολογία. Εκδόσεις Παρουσία.

Μπότσιου, Μ., (2012). Η έναρξη του Ψυχρού Πολέμου, 1941-1950: στρατηγικά ή ιδεολογικά αίτια; Επιμ. Ήφαιστος, Π. Κολιόπουλος, Κ., Χατζηβασιλείου Ε., Ινστιτούτο Διεθνών Σχέσεων, Πάντειο Πανεπιστήμιο.

Ντάλης, Σ. (2018)., *Η Δύσκολη Ευρώπη*, εκδ.Παπαζήση.

Συρόπουλος, Σ., (2018). *Το παρελθόν ως πολιτικό δεδομένο. Μύθος και ιστορική παράδοση στην πολιτική σκέψη της Αρχαίας Ελλάδας*. Gutenberg.

Albright, M.K., (1998). *The Testing of American Foreign Policy*. Foreign Affairs.

Bernstein, R. B., (2009). *The founding fathers reconsidered*. Oxford University Press.

Bremer, F.J., (2003). *John Winthrop, America's Forgotten Founding Father*.

Canfora, L., (2006). *Democracy in Europe: A History of an Ideology*, translated by Simon Jones. Blackwell Publishing.

Department of State Newsletter, January 1975.

Ferguson, Y.H., (1992). “*Hegemonic rivalry: from Thucydides to the nuclear age*”, International Affairs, Volume 68, Issue 2.

Ferguson, Y.H & Mansbach ,R.W, (2008). *A World of Politics*. Routledge.

Fromkin, D., (1995). *In the Time of the Americans: FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Marshall, MacArthur: The Generation That Changed America's Role in the World*. Vintage.

Frost, D.B., (2013). *John F. Kennedy in quotations: a topical dictionary, with sources*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Hansen, M. H., (2008): 15-26. *Thucydides' Description of Democracy (2.37.1) and the EU-Convention of 2003*. Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies.

Hofstadter, R., (1985): *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*. American History, Vol. 13, No. 3

O'Connor, B., (2019). *Anti-Americanism and American Exceptionalism-Prejudice and Pride about the USA*, Routledge.

Robinson, E.W., (2004). "Ancient Greek democracy: readings and sources", Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Rodgers, D.T., (2018). *As a city on a hill: The story of America's most famous Lay Sermon*, Princeton University Press.

Sachs, J. D. ,(2013). *To move the world. JFK's quest for peace*, Random House.

Sachs, J. D. ,(2018). *A New Foreign Policy. Beyond American Exceptionalism*, Columbia University Press.

## **WEBSITES**

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Massachusetts> (20-02-2021)

<https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/252522/on-europe-day-president-says-region-needs-real-not-just-rhetorical-solidarity/> (accessed: 20-02-2021)

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EL/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2003:169:FULL&from=EN> (accessed: 20-02-2021).

Thucydides' Description of Democracy (2.37.1) and the EU-Convention of 2003.

<https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/19/the-other-gettysburg-address/> (accessed: 20-02-2021)

Sultan, N., (2012): "Jackie Kennedy and the Classical Ideal". *Scholarship*. 5.

[https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/grs\\_scholarship/5](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/grs_scholarship/5) (accessed: 10-05-2020)

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Anastasios Chamouzas is an LLB graduate (Law School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), a B.A. Graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy -Department of English Studies (University of Athens). He holds an M.A. Degree in Models of Educational Planning and Development (University of the Aegean) and he is a doctoral candidate of the Department of Mediterranean Studies (School of Humanities of the University of the Aegean).



## **ΔΗΛΩΣΗ**

Δηλώνω υπεύθυνα ότι το άρθρο αυτό δεν έχει δημοσιευτεί προηγουμένως και επί του παρόντος δεν εξετάζεται για δημοσίευση από άλλο περιοδικό.

