“Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident, or miscalculation, or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.”2

On September 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy addressed the United Nations and voiced these words. He used a similar reference to the Sword of Damocles in March 1960, when he said to farmers in Shawano, Wisconsin, while on the campaign trail: “Supply and demand are now in rough balance. But our wheat and corn surpluses hang over the dairy industry like the sword of Damocles.”3 Whether discussing the United States economy or global concerns like nuclear weapons, President Kennedy favored the Sword of Damocles reference. I was struck by the reference last year while chaperoning students at the JFK Library and Museum, in not only the beauty of the word choices in Kennedy’s speeches, but also the echoes of classical rhetoric evident. How exciting for a classicist to behold an allusion to a story told by Cicero in his Tusculan Disputations!4 In digesting selections of other Kennedy addresses and writings, such as Profiles in Courage, I recognized additional examples of deliberate insertion of classical allusions, as well as a strong rhetorical style reminiscent of the ancients. Conversations with colleagues then, and later, inspired me to research this topic further. I am intrigued by not only the craft employed in the creation of these works, but also the application of such works towards instructing our students in the present.

In examining Kennedy’s speeches, we cannot help but be drawn first to his inaugural address delivered January 20, 1962. Most notable are these two examples of chiasmus:

“Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”

“Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.”5

In recently re-reading Profiles in Courage, published in 1956, I was moved by the intent and the flow of the book. Others have compared it to Plutarch’s biographies, notably Hammer’s “Politics of Courage: Kennedy’s Profiles as Political Thought,”6 where the influences of Cicero are also considered. The concepts libertas and virtus are thoroughly explored by Kennedy through the lives

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1 This paper’s origins stem from an interest in rhetoric and politics, both ancient and modern. Thanks to Professors Blaise Nagy and Thomas Martin at Holy Cross for always encouraging me to pursue the issues of libertas and virtus; St. Sebastian’s School for providing me the time and resources to develop this paper; my colleagues at St. Sebastian’s for being sounding boards during this process; and my wife and daughter for their love and support.


3 Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at Shawano, Wisconsin, March 11, 1960”. JFK Library (online: http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/)


5 Let The Word Go Forth, pp. 13-14.

of such men as John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, and Sam Houston, much like Plutarch 
examined these values through an examination of the lives of Alcibiades, Alexander the Great and 
Mark Anthony. We can also compare Kennedy’s Profiles with Livy’s recounting of the heroics of 
Horatius Cocles and Mucius Scaevola.

In his book Ask Not, Thurston Clarke notes Kennedy’s introduction to Profiles in Courage: “But in 
public life we expect individuals to sacrifice their private interests to permit the national good to 
progress.” Clarke observes: “He had saved in a notebook the following line from Pericles’ Funeral 
Oration: ‘If a man takes no interest in public affairs, we alone do not condemn him as quiet but 
condemn him as useless.’”

In the final chapter of Profiles, Kennedy posits: "In whatever arena of life one may meet the 
challenge of courage, whatever may be the sacrifices he faces if he follows his conscience – the loss 
of his friends, his fortune, his contentment, even the esteem of his fellow men - each man must 
decide for himself what course he will follow. The stories of past courage can define that ingredient 
– they can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration. But they cannot supply courage 
itself. For this each man must look into his own soul.”

Kennedy again addressed the United Nations on September 20, 1963. He referenced his 1961 
speech and its result, a limited test ban treaty. Echoing a familiar classical reference, one he had 
used while on the presidential campaign trail in an address at Earlham College in April 1960 and in 
November 1960 when proposing the Peace Corps, Kennedy observed: “It will not put an end to war. 
It will not remove basic conflicts. It will not secure freedom for all. But it can be a lever, and 
Archimedes, in explaining the principles of the lever, was said to have declared to his friends: "Give 
me a place where I can stand--and I shall move the world." My fellow inhabitants of this planet: Let 
us take our stand here in this Assembly of nations. And let us see if we, in our own time, can move 
the world to a just and lasting peace.”

The Archimedes lever quotation has been used in speeches since that address, notably in Robert 
Kennedy’s 1966 Day of Affirmation Address in Capetown, South Africa; Albert Gore’s 1995 address 
during the White House Forum on Role of Science & Technology in Promoting National Security & 
Global Stability; and Edward Kennedy’s 2000 Commencement Speech at Bentley College. More 
recently, and interestingly, Ted Sorenson was asked by Washington Monthly to draft an imaginary 
acceptance speech for the next Democratic presidential nominee. The speech was published in their 
July 2007 issue, and Sorenson concludes: “I’m told that John F. Kennedy was fond of quoting 
Archimedes, who explained the principle of the lever by declaring: ‘Give me a place to stand, and I 
can move the world.’ My fellow Americans-here I stand. Come join me, and together we will move 
the world to a new era of a just and lasting peace.”

Ted Sorenson was Kennedy’s senatorial assistant in the 1950s and then special counsel and adviser 
while Kennedy was president. We arrive now at a potential problem: the question of authorship. 
How much of Kennedy’s speeches did Sorenson actually write? Did the two men share the work 
50/50? Were some speeches drafted by Sorenson, others by Kennedy? When Profiles in Courage

Co., 2004. p.79 
9 Let The Word Go Forth, p.305 
was published, speculation persisted on whether Sorenson was responsible for the book in its entirety. Kennedy’s detractors asserted that Sorenson was its sole author, and the accusations were ultimately retracted. The question has continued to the present day, and I admit that a good deal of time researching this paper was spent on determining who authored not only Profiles in Courage, but also Kennedy’s speeches. Discussions with archivists at the JFK Library amounted to the understanding that we can only speculate on which portions of speeches were inserted or edited by either man, or even by another member of Kennedy’s staff. Sorenson attempted to respond one final time to these speculations in his 2008 memoirs Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History, declaring, “Like JFK’s speeches, Profiles in Courage was a collaboration, and not a particularly unusual one, inasmuch as our method of collaboration on the book was similar to the method we used on his speeches.”  

Earlier in the same chapter, Sorenson asks: “Is the author the person who did much of the research and helped choose the words in many of its sentences, or is the author the person who decided the substance, structure, and theme of the book; read and revised each draft; inspired, constructed and improved the work?" We cannot know for certain which portions of speeches were penned by Sorenson. We have only his repeated assertions that the process was collaborative. We can compare this process to the give-and-take between Presidents Bush or Obama and their respective speechwriters. The speechwriter strives to match the style, language and intent of the speaker with a well-crafted speech, discussing the speech prior to and following the multiple drafts. Sorenson describes the collaboration between him and Kennedy as a continual process, discussing and writing repeated drafts until the time to stand and deliver the speech.

While Hammer and others perceive a strong Ciceronian influence on Kennedy’s writing style, it is evident that Kennedy used an Athenian model for his presidency, rather than a Roman one. Citing Pericles in his speeches leads me to conclude that “Camelot”, as his administration was named, was founded less on Arthurian legend than Athenian ideal.

In his “City Upon A Hill” speech to the Massachusetts Legislature (January 9, 1961), Kennedy said: “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 of the Athenians has long been true of this commonwealth: ‘We do not imitate – for we are a model to others.’”

More than a year later, in November 29, 1962, to those gathered to celebrate the National Cultural Center in Washington, Kennedy expounded on the importance of the arts: “Today, Sophocles speaks to us from more than two thousand years... Aeschylus and Plato are remembered today long after the triumphs of imperial Athens are gone... It was Pericles’ proudest boast that mighty Athens was the school of Hellas. If we can make our country one of the great schools of civilization, then on that achievement will surely rest our claim to the ultimate gratitude of mankind.”

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12 Counselor, p.151
13 “Let The Word Go Forth”, p.56
14 “Let The Word Go Forth”, p.207
Barnes & Noble Review Editor-in-Chief James Mustich interviewed Sorensen in April 2008, on the occasion of the publication of his memoirs Counselor. The conclusion below reveals Sorensen’s thoughts on the usefulness of rhetoric, when employed correctly:

**JM:** I wonder if you might expand a little bit on your views of the importance of eloquence to leadership, and the cost of its lack.

**TS:** Two things. In Kennedy’s case, his mere words, his rhetoric, his speeches, not only helped elect him president of the United States, but also were essential to his success as president of the United States...

The second item is the ancient comparison between Cicero and Demosthenes: when Cicero spoke, the people said, "How wise he speaks;" when Demosthenes spoke, they said, "Let us march." That’s the difference.¹⁵

What then of the relevance to today’s students in our middle and secondary schools, or in college? While not current history, these speeches from half a century ago can be utilized to connect our students with the writings of Thucydides, Plutarch, Livy, and Cicero, works from 20 to 25 centuries past! In an ancient history course, students may compare Pericles’ Funeral Oration to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Or, students can read Samuel’s warnings against monarchy in the Old Testament in conjunction with Otanes, Megabyzus and Darius arguing political philosophy in Herodotus. As teachers, we understand that we must take different approaches in conveying the ancient world to the modern day student. I am reminded of Ray Starr’s recent article in NECJ on methods of teaching the Res Gestae to his own students.¹⁶ In providing them with speeches such as those I have placed before you, our students can explore the importance of rhetoric in the ancient past and in their own times. They also are able, most importantly, to reflect on the concepts of liberty and encourage, as evinced in Profiles in Courage and in several of Kennedy’s speeches.

I leave you with a quote from President Kennedy given at Vanderbilt University in May 1963: “Liberty without learning is always in peril and learning without liberty is always in vain.”¹⁷

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¹⁷ "Remarks in Nashville at the 90th Anniversary Convocation of Vanderbilt University.” May 18, 1963. JFK Library (online: http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/)


