

Towards a Strategy of Freedom

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President Kennedy at American University (June 10 1963)¹

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This speech was presented at the launch of the Friends for the Future, an initiative of Generation Zero, on 1 September 2014 in Wellington, New Zealand.

Generation Zero was founded with the central purpose of providing solutions to cut carbon pollution through smarter transport, liveable cities and independence from fossil fuels. These solutions will, in your own words, 'not come from one minority, one political party, or one ideology. These solutions come from real New Zealanders, from all backgrounds joining together under a central vision.'² You are called Generation Zero because you want to live in a thriving zero-carbon Aotearoa and are prepared to work hard to make this vision a reality. Your drive is a shared understanding that climate change is the challenge of your generation.

This got me thinking about whether there were occasions where previous generations had faced comparable challenges, and if yes, how they found a way forward. This brought me to the nuclear issue and in particular Kennedy's 1963 'Strategy of Peace' address,³ in which he talks of peace and freedom walking together: *Y g " o uua' mlp q' utf' c kl' h' xg u' h' xg ur' i' q' i' g' e' i' g- q' f' l' x' k' j' i' j' c' i' v' g' c' e' g' e' p' f' " l' g' g' f' q' o' j' c' m' i' q' i' g' i' j' g' t. K' h' i' j' g' f' g' u' r' q' p' u' k' l' k' e' l' q' i' h' ". i' q' x' g' t' p' o' g' p' u' ". " u' j' t' q' x' f' g' e' p' f' i' t' q' u' e' v' i' j' c' u' h' g' g' f' q' o' l' y' t' e' n' i' j' u' r' e' k' k' g' p' u' l' l' e' n' u' g' c' p' u' " y' k' j' k' p' " q' u' t' " c' u' j' q' t' k' o' l' ".⁴*

This speech was considered by Ted Sorenson (Kennedy's primary speech writer) as his favourite, and some argue that this speech was his most influential. Hence my thesis: Could Generation Zero write a 2014 'Strategy of Freedom' to deliver a zero-carbon economy? Kennedy wrote a strategy of peace to deal with nuclear disarmament; could Generation Zero write a strategy of freedom to deal with climate change? Could Generation Zero use the concept of freedom to provide a way forward not only for New Zealand, but for the world? What can we learn from 1963 that can help us in 2014?

The background to the speech is as follows: On June 10 1963, John F Kennedy outlined his thoughts on how we might prevent nuclear war through nuclear disarmament. Between the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, both Kennedy and Khrushchev made many mistakes, with their lies bringing the world closer to nuclear war and total annihilation. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, both leaders worked hard to move the world away from a nuclear exchange. Kennedy set out the context for the way forward in this 1963 speech. Jeffrey Sachs

made the following observations about this speech: 'Words can move us to great deeds. In Kennedy's case, the words inspired both Americans and Soviets to take the risk for peace by adopting a treaty on nuclear testing, which had proved elusive until then and which was opposed strenuously by hardliners on both sides. Kennedy's words shaped a common understanding of what was possible for mutual benefit, helping to break the hammerlock of fear and loathing.'⁵

Over the next 10 minutes I want to take you briefly through his 1963 speech with a view to understanding how we might apply his approach to tackling carbon pollution.

Firstly, Kennedy set out a moral purpose to deal with what he called *the most important topic on earth*. He did not focus on war, but on peace: *K' r' g' c' m' i' h' i' g' c' e' g' d' g' e' c' u' n' g' q' i' h' i' j' g' p' g' y' l' x' e' g' q' i' h' i' j' c' t. He did not focus on the past, but on the future: Total war "... o' c' n' g' u' " p' q' i' g' p' u' g' l' p' e' c' i' g' y' j' g' p' i' j' g' f' g' c' f' n' i' q' h' u' p' u' t' q' f' u' e' g' f' d' l' e' p' u' e' r' g' c' t' " g' z' e' j' c' p' i' g' y' q' u' f' d' g' e' c' t' i' g' f' d' l' i' j' k' p' f' e' p' f' y' c' u' g' t' e' p' f' i' q' h' i' j' p' f' i' g' g' f' i' q' i' j' g' " l' x' t' e' q' t' p' g' t' u' i' h' i' j' g' i' u' d' g' e' p' f' i' q' i' j' g' p' g' t' c' u' k' p' u' i' g' u' i' p' d' q' t' p. He was firm in his resolve that this topic was not only important, but urgent: "Y g " j' c' x' g' " p' q' " o' q' t' g' " u' t' i' g' p' v' i' c' u' m*

Generation Zero also focuses on the solution: a zero-carbon economy. You focus on the future and how carbon pollution will affect the environment for future generations. Changing the language from 'carbon pollution' to 'climate change' (and 'global warming') was an ideal outcome for the fossil fuel industry but not for society. It changed the focus of the discussion from carbon reduction (debating the solution) to climate change and global warming (debating the projections). The latter means policy discussion centres increasingly on adaptation, instead of mitigation.⁶ It places the responsibility on communities to adapt rather than on government and industry to mitigate. Therefore, while we focus on 'climate change', we fail to deal with the real problem. The problem is carbon pollution.

Secondly, Kennedy talked to his audience about the current situation. He identified three key audiences: the American people, the government of the Soviet Union, and other nations. Let us examine each in turn.

Initially, he spoke to the American people:

First examine our attitude towards peace itself. Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable ... We need not accept this view. Our problems are manmade; therefore, they can be solved by man.

Kennedy needed the support of the American people. He was asking them not to accept that war was inevitable, instead he called for their support for an ultimate goal: genuine peace. To not believe peace was possible, by implication, was to guarantee failure. Kennedy was asking Americans to be both optimistic and realistic – optimistic in terms of his vision for genuine peace and realistic in terms of the Cold War. Similarly, Generation Zero is asking for the people of New Zealand to be both optimistic in terms of freedom for future generations and realistic in terms of our current carbon dependence. Generation Zero's message is therefore both logical and powerful.

Kennedy then spoke to the Soviet Union:

And second, let us reexamine our attitude towards the Soviet Union ... No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue ... So let us not be blind to our differences, but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by which those differences can be resolved ... For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal.

Here Kennedy offers an olive branch. He is looking for common ground. Most importantly, he makes it clear that he does not believe the government or the people of the Soviet Union are evil and that differences cannot be resolved.

In 2014 the enemy is, for all intents and purposes, the fossil fuel industry – a zero-carbon economy is not in its interest. Government needs to play a key role in developing policy that brings the goals of the fossil fuel industry in line with the goals of society. Steve Coll, an author and President of the New America Foundation in Washington, looked into the role that climate change policy might play in oil's medium-term future. He refers to ExxonMobil's 2030 exercise⁷ and suggests, by implication, that their in-house scientists did not believe there would be a change before 2030 unless one unexpected development occurred. This black swan event was 'a decision by governments to limit greenhouse gas emissions by heavily taxing or capping the use of carbon-based fuels'.⁸ To bring this black swan event to fruition will require strong leadership at the top. Like Kennedy, our leaders need the support of the people.

Lastly, he spoke to other nations:

Third, let us reexamine our attitude to the cold war, remembering we're not engaged in a debate, seeking to pile up debating points. We are not here distributing blame or pointing the finger of judgement ... We must conduct our affairs in such a way that it becomes in the Communists' interest to agree on a genuine peace. And above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy—or of a collective death-wish for the world.

Here Kennedy is delicately warning others not to lead the world into binary conversations that could push the Soviet Union into aggressive behaviour. This is perhaps where Generation Zero has been most effective, canvassing the wider community to not only share their vision but to demand and support real change in local and central government.

Then Kennedy set out his strategy – connecting his vision with the reality discussed above. He did this in five ways:

(i) He made clear what continuing along the same course would deliver (the status quo)

Where a fresh start is badly needed, is in a treaty to outlaw nuclear tests. The conclusion of such a treaty, so near and yet so far, would check the spiralling arms race in one of its most dangerous areas. It would place the nuclear powers in a position to deal more effectively with one of the greatest hazards which man faces in 1963, the further spread of nuclear arms ... [A treaty] would increase our security; it would decrease the prospects of war.

(ii) He outlined two decisions he had made to move the world away from nuclear war (his contribution)

· He would conduct high-level discussions with the Soviet Union, UK and US on a comprehensive treaty to ban nuclear testing.

· He promised the US would not conduct nuclear weapon tests so long as other states did not do so.

(iii) He appealed to our sense of equality and human rights

Peace and freedom walk together ... And is not peace, in the last analysis, basically a matter of human rights: the right to live out our lives without fear of devastation; the right to breathe air as nature provided it; the right of future generations to a healthy existence?

(iv) He recognised treaties were not invincible

No treaty, however much it may be to the advantage of all, however tightly it may be worded, can provide absolute security against the risks of deception and evasion.

(v) He recognised it was not going to be easy

Confident and unafraid, we must labor on—not towards a strategy of annihilation but towards a strategy of peace.

Kennedy's strategy of peace contained conflicting elements. It was at the same time optimistic and realistic; conceptual and practical; aggressive and conciliatory. Interestingly, Kennedy called on the advice of Churchill over this time; Churchill advocated 'negotiation through strength', also known as his 'double-barrelled strategy'. Churchill is quoted as saying 'I do not hold that we should rearm in order to fight. I hold that we should rearm in order to parley'.⁹

What then does 'rearm' mean for Generation Zero in 2014? I think Kennedy and Churchill would suggest strength is about numbers – Generation Zero, you need a strong membership in order to negotiate.

Your new 'Friends for the Future' initiative is a great step in this direction. As a 'Friend for the Future', I see our role is to help you move from the backseat to the passenger seat and to share the steering wheel. The terrain will be tricky but with a willing driver and a willing passenger the impossible can become possible. I think in the room we have both. Our leaders' moral purpose is to act in the best interests of present and future citizens. We cannot afford for our leaders to fall asleep at the wheel; we have a responsibility to keep them focused on their moral purpose – not towards a strategy of annihilation but towards a strategy of freedom.

So to close I wish to thank Generation Zero for inviting me to speak. What you are doing and are capable of doing is extraordinary – you can be an example to the world. The last word goes to Churchill: 'I hold that we should rearm in order to parley.' Thank you.

For complete references and to find out more, visit our website: www.mcguinnessinstitute.org

If you want to learn more about Friends for the future, please email friends@generationzero.org.nz or see the Generation Zero website www.generationzero.org.nz.



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