Interpretative Summary: Topics, Tone, Style, and Qualities

Mayor Edward Koch begins his speech by voicing his intention to do the best job he can do for the city. He then continues to praise the city and highlights that New York is not a problem. The issue is that it faces many problems. Koch describes the city as one that has many characteristics, good ones, but New York has made mistakes. He points out these mistakes are mainly due to a mismanaged treasury and programs that do not help the needy.

Mayor Koch then transitions the speech to the people of New York and how they can bring New York back to where it should be. He states that money alone won’t solve the problems rather the people of New York can. The people need to put in the work as well, not only government. In this section of the speech he appears to be rallying the spirit of New Yorkers.

His speech comes back to highlight the specialness of New York and its people. He notes that times have been rough but that New York is not just any other city. He makes a call to those New Yorkers that have left the city to come back to the city in order to help restore that special New York was known to be. He calls for them to “Come East, and grow up with the new pioneers, grow up with the new City of New York” (Koch 1978).

While there is no footage of Koch’s inaugural address, one can make note of the tone. His main purpose was to be direct and speak directly the people of the New York. He didn’t specify what he planned to do with his Administration. Instead he focused on identifying why New York is such a great place and how it can be restored. This is the most unique quality of this speech. For the most part, politicians tend to explain what they plan to do, but this inaugural speech was one that intended to uplift and inspire New Yorkers to regain control of their city; to get back on it’s feet.

Mayoral Race of 1977

Koch decided to run on the Democratic ballot which was quite competitive considering the other candidates were well-known within New York City. In the Democratic primaries he faced “the incumbent, Abraham D. Beame; Mario Cuomo, then New York’s secretary of state; Representatives Herman Badillo and Bella S. Abzug; the Manhattan borough president, Percy E. Sutton; and Joel W. Hartnett, a businessman and civic watchdog” (McFadden). Koch ended up winning the Democratic primaries (Rudin) and the mayoral race. His biggest contender was Mario Cuomo who after losing the democratic primary, ran as an independent. Koch beat Cuomo in the mayoral election but it was a “narrow win”: 50% versus 42% (Schoen and Penn).

New York City was not a great and magnificent city during this time. The greatest issues were the fact that it was in a fiscal disaster, too much was being spent on social programs and crimes were practically the norm (McFadden). The Summer of Sam (serial murders), a blackout which led to vandalism and thefts, as well as riots were the events that summarized 1977 (Farrell) and they all had to be dealt with by the new mayor. New York needed not only fiscal stability and crime control, but neighborhoods needed to be rebuilt as they were physically not in the best conditions (Farrell).

Koch Political Career

While Edward Koch won the election of 1977, he was the unexpected winner. Koch’s political career preceding his mayoral victory began as the Greenwich District Representative in 1963, moving on to City Council in 1966, then on to Congress in 1969 (Farrell). Koch always had a liberal agenda (anti-poverty and pro-rent control) yet took surprising stands such as supporting the death penalty (Farrell). While serving in Congress he learned that New York City was literally going broke, prompting him to run for Mayor (Farrell). Ed Koch served as the Mayor of New York City for three terms (twelve years) (McFadden).

Inaugural Ceremony

Unlike his predecessors and even future mayors, Edward Koch has been the only one to arrive at his inauguration address via public transportation (Herszenhorn); he rode the bus to City Hall (Dembart). The inaugural ceremony lasted one hour and the All City High School Chorus sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (Dembart). Also to be noted at this inauguration, is the presence of a sign language interpreter (Dembart).

After his inauguration speech in City Hall, he attended a breakfast in the Blue Room followed by a light lunch (Dembart). Koch was administered the oath in his new office before noon by State Supreme Court Justice Sandler. Former mayors Wagner, Lindsay and Beame, Governor Carey, Senator Moynihan and Chief U.S. Representative to the UN, Andrew Young were present (Dembart). In the afternoon once Koch was done with his oath as well as swearing in his appointees, he left in order to attend “open-house parties” in each of the boroughs.

Speechwriter/Political Campaign Manager

Mayor Koch’s political campaign was run by consultant David Garth (McFadden). He did have speech advisors but their names cannot be identified. What is known is that his speech advisors had told him to begin his speech with the urban pioneer theme but instead, Koch placed this towards the end (Dembart).

Reactions to the Speech/Media Spin

Koch is one of those individuals that you either love or hate. He was a unique man with his own personality. The same can be said of his speech. The media’s reaction to his inaugural address was that he didn’t have those high moments where the audience was full of emotion, or rose out of their seat. Dembart, a writer for the New York Times, described Koch’s delivery as “somewhat wooden, and there were few lines in his speech that would bring a crowd to its feet.” It was quite obvious, that for some Koch was not who they envisioned to be their mayor. He received only two scattered applauses and the audience did not stand. This was evident as it was noted that the chorus was the one that received the greatest applause throughout the entire ceremony (Dembart).

3-5 Passages Needing Explanation

“We have been tested by fire, we have been drawn across the knife edge of poverty, we have been inundated by problems, and we have been shaken by troubles that would have destroyed any other city.”

Only those living in New York would understand what Mayor Koch was referencing in this passage. The troubles he was referring to were the serial murders that occurred in the Summer of 77 (the Summer of Sam), the riots in which neighborhoods were vandalized, and the blackout that occurred (loss of power). These would have destroyed any other city but his point is that New York can still bounce back, it has not been destroyed by these events/troubles.

“That is why I ask those who are not with us now, those who are seeking a challenge, to come East and join us. Come East, and grow up with the new pioneers, grow up with the new City of New York” and “During the last 300 years, New York City sent millions of Americans on a westward trek to ‘grow up with the country.’ Descendants of those New Yorkers are scattered throughout the nation”.

Both passages refer to the fact that many New York City residents had left the city due to the horrid conditions it was in. There was a rise in crimes, and poverty had taken over. Neighborhoods had been vandalized. As a result, people had fled the city seeking a better life. That is why in these passages, Mayor Koch calls on those New Yorkers to come back home, “come back East”.

People and Places Mentioned in Speech

Mayor Koch mentions President JFK’s speech in which he said “Ask not what your country can do for you”. This is significant because the Mayor was hinting that New Yorkers shouldn’t expect government alone to solve its problems. The people had to be willing to put in the work as well in order for things to change.

Throughout the speech he mentions New York City neighborhoods. The significance of mentioning these different places is for the audience to know that as Mayor he plans to help all New Yorkers; he isn’t only concentrating on the people of one borough.

Quotations from speech

“But, most of all, we are a special people because we are the trustees of a national treasure – The City of New York itself.”

Mayor Koch believed in New York and his goal was to bring the city back to where it should be. He wanted to make the lives of New Yorkers better (McFadden). This quotation sums up his faith in New York since he calls it a national treasure.

Key Terms Related to the Speech

“urban pioneers”

“new pioneers”

Recommended bios/autobios

If one wants a true sense of how Koch spoke, his attitude (unique attitude) and tone, one should watch his interview with the New York Times by Sean Patrick Farrell. For his thoughts on certain issues he felt strongly about read “His Eminence and Hizzoner” written in 1989 by Koch and John Cardinal O'Connor. Mayor An Autobiography written by Koch himself in 1984 is also highly recommended.

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