

Remarks given upon receipt of the John F. Kennedy New Frontier Award from the Kennedy Library Foundation and Harvard's Institute of Politics at the Kennedy School of Government  
Los Angeles Council President Eric Garcetti  
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Thank you, Ms. Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, Governor Shaheen, Ambassador Shattuck, and Dean Ellwood.

It is an honor for me to be asked here today to America's oldest university by the keepers of President Kennedy's legacy to accept this award.

In 1960, standing in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, John F. Kennedy accepted his party's nomination for President of the United States.

In that moment in history, facing west to the Pacific, he called upon a nation to join him in his vision for a new American frontier.

But John F. Kennedy also spoke that evening about where he stood: a place, in his words, that "was once the last frontier" of this nation.

Today, that last frontier—Los Angeles—is an American gateway—a place where more than 140 languages are spoken, where 20 nations find their largest population outside their countries of origin, and where 43 percent of all the nation's goods come into the country through our ports.

In L.A., I live in the neighborhood of Echo Park, a beautiful corner of America, close to downtown Los Angeles. Spanish, Mandarin, Tagalog, and Khmer all mix with English on our streets. My neighbors face the same challenges felt by too many Americans these days—can they find an affordable and safe place to live, can their children receive a good public education, and can they find a job that rewards their hard work with decent pay, health care and time off with their families.

But Echo Park and in turn, Los Angeles, is a place of immense promise and hope, a place where the ideals embedded in this award today are played out every day by everyday people.

So today, I come to you from that place John Kennedy described as America's last frontier, inspired by the call to action given by a young candidate to a hopeful nation forty-six years ago.

In 1960, America confronted an epic struggle between the ideals of freedom and democracy and the advance of totalitarianism.

We were also a nation struggling to reconcile our own ideals with the domestic divisions of our society, rich and poor, white and black, man and woman.

With his vision of a new frontier, President Kennedy began to replace a nation's fear with hope, its doubt with self-sacrifice, its weakness with strength.

Today our nation faces fears that are more confounding, an enemy less fixed, weaknesses less clear, and a future less known.

Within Kennedy's New Frontier were four calls to action: "uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus."

I believe that our call as a nation today is also fourfold.

In this unsure but hopeful moment in our nation's history, we are called to reclaim safe and secure lives in our neighborhoods and nation alike; to restore the health of the earth through science and technology; to renew an economy that builds wealth for the those most in need around the world and across America; and to rebuild an inclusive society from a fractured and fractious multitude: as ever, out of many, one.

I offer each of these from my own experience as a public servant.

Neither travels nor studies could have taught me as much as I have learned from my service to the eighteen neighborhoods and the quarter-million souls in the thirteenth council district in the city of Los Angeles.

Los Angeles' city hall bears quotations from the classics that praise the highest ideals of *civitas*.

But the civic must never be separated from the humbly municipal.

A public servant who spends more time gazing into the distance than looking for cracks in the street has no real vision.

Too often, politics flies by us at 50,000 feet, as pundits analyze the next field of presidential candidates and shoehorn states into red and blue territory instead of engaging at the ground level in the difficult and necessary work of building communities.

Never forget that people live their lives in neighborhoods, that change happens in communities first, that hope, in the words of poet Marge Piercy, "sleeps in our bones like a bear waiting for spring to rise and walk."

It is on the streets of my own city and in the lives of my neighbors that I have heard this hope, and seen the struggle of a new American Frontier that I share with you today.

A safe nation comes first.

We must be unafraid to protect our country from threats abroad, using strong but smart power that stops terrorism and helps nations develop.

But in our efforts to protect our country, we must remember that some of the biggest threats we face are in our own neighborhoods.

We have driven crime in Los Angeles down to the lowest level since 1956, but by engaging the community as well as abating crime.

In 2001, just around 9/11, one corner of my district had thirteen homicides in less than ninety days. We eventually arrested the perpetrator of the killings, but we also began to organize the community—one apartment, one house, one block at a time.

At one community meeting, a senior citizen said in Spanish that this was the first time that anyone from government had ever visited her neighborhood. She said she was so scared to go outside her house that she did not even realize that there was a park two blocks north of her home until that evening's meeting.

True security means a safe nation with safe neighborhoods.

Even with these arduous challenges, another threat confronts us.

Our earth is not an enemy to be defeated.  
Our abuse of it is.

It is not enough now to admit that we have damaged our planet -- we must inspire ourselves to heal it. And for a generation that is growing up green, we must use this call to action as a way to renew our nation's education system.

Just as President Kennedy called for us to race to the moon, today we must race back here to earth, to rediscover and renew the planet.

In the southern and central part of my city, we have launched the Apollo Alliance, bringing green sector CEOs together with working people and community-based organizations, in order to help train Angelenos in skills to retrofit and build new buildings in an environmentally sustainable way. In a country where 40 percent of the waste in our landfills comes from construction and where too many buildings consume more energy than they need, this initiative is educating a city, providing for a community, and restoring a planet.

Third, we must treat our global economy with equal breadth of vision and depth of purpose.

In Los Angeles, the local economy is not separate from the global economy; they are one and the same.

Jane Leu's work, which gives hope and purpose to those who come here from the push of global dislocation and from the pull of America's call, reaffirms this truth.

In Los Angeles, we see the world economy as the engine for our growth. We are expanding our port and transportation infrastructure, selling our movies and video games around the world, and we are protecting workers in our city and abroad with the nation's largest anti-sweatshop ordinance that ensures that hard work is rewarded.

There is a cliché about my city that on the streets of Los Angeles, you see the face of the world. Growing up in Los Angeles, I found the opposite—whenever I left my hometown to go abroad, I would see the face of Los Angeles and of America wherever I went.

The challenge of globalization should be embraced by understanding our common destiny and by showing that a globalized world does not need to leave people behind.

We stand here in the weeks following an historic election.

Let this change in national government open up a change in our national approach.

Let us restore the virtue of national sacrifice and national service, and call young people from across our whole society to serve their world and to serve their communities. Let us demand that Americans sacrifice for one another and for the world again—through service by every young American in our armed forces, the Peace Corps, and in local communities as teachers and service providers.

As an officer in the reserve component of the United States Navy, I proudly wear the uniform of our nation's armed forces. We should be equally proud of those who are teaching at struggling schools or helping stem the spread of AIDS in Africa.

For the last two decades, America has been increasingly articulate about the things that divide us. We have seen fear become the primary motivator for our politics and for our discourse.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to find what unites us again.

Back in my hometown, that last frontier perched on the edge of our continent, poised on the precipice of possibility, President Kennedy said "we do not come here to curse the darkness, but to light a candle."

Today, a new American is being born and another raises her hand to swear allegiance to our nation for the first time. Across our nation and in our neighborhoods, let us find the light of the new frontier: a light of safety, of sustainability, of sustenance, and of service that can and will illuminate this land once again.

Thank you.

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