



The Gettysburg Address

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In November 1863, President Abraham Lincoln was invited to deliver remarks, which later became known as the Gettysburg Address, at the official dedication ceremony for the National Cemetery of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, on the site of one of the bloodiest and most decisive battles of the Civil War. Though he was not the featured orator that day, Lincoln's 273-word address would be remembered as one of the most important speeches in American history. In it, he invoked the principles of human equality contained in the

Declaration of Independence and connected the sacrifices of the Civil War with the desire for "a new birth of freedom," as well as the all-important preservation of the Union created in 1776 and its ideal of self-government.

Burying the Dead at Gettysburg

From July 1 to July 3, 1863, the invading forces of General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army clashed with the Army of the Potomac (under its newly appointed leader, General [George G. Meade](#)) at Gettysburg, some 35 miles southwest of Harrisburg, [Pennsylvania](#). Casualties were high on both sides: Out of roughly 170,000 Union and Confederate soldiers, there were 23,000 Union casualties (more than one-quarter of the army's effective forces) and 28,000 Confederates killed, wounded or missing (more than a third of Lee's army). After three days of battle, Lee retreated towards [Virginia](#) on the night of July 4. It was a crushing defeat for the Confederacy, and a month later the great general would offer Confederate President [Jefferson Davis](#) his resignation; Davis refused to accept it.

Did you know? Edward Everett, the featured speaker at the dedication ceremony of the National Cemetery of Gettysburg, later wrote to Lincoln, "I wish that I could flatter myself that I had come as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

As after previous battles, thousands of Union soldiers killed at Gettysburg were quickly buried, many in poorly marked graves. In the months that followed, however, local attorney David Wills spearheaded efforts to create a national cemetery at Gettysburg. Wills and the Gettysburg Cemetery Commission originally set October 23 as the date for the cemetery's dedication, but delayed it to mid-November after their choice for speaker, Edward Everett, said he needed more time to prepare. Everett, the former president of Harvard College, former U.S. senator and former secretary of state, was at the time one of the country's leading orators. On November 2, just weeks before the event, Wills extended an invitation to President Lincoln, asking him "formally [to] set apart these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks."

Gettysburg Address: Lincoln's Preparation

Though Lincoln was extremely frustrated with Meade and the Army of the Potomac for failing to pursue Lee's forces in their retreat, he was cautiously optimistic as the year 1863 drew to a close. He also considered it significant that the Union victories at Gettysburg and at Vicksburg, under General [Ulysses S. Grant](#), had both occurred on the same day: July 4, the anniversary of the signing of the [Declaration of Independence](#).

When he received the invitation to make the remarks at Gettysburg, Lincoln saw an opportunity to make a broad statement to the American people on the enormous significance of the war, and he prepared carefully. Though long-running popular legend holds that he wrote the speech on the train while traveling to Pennsylvania, he probably wrote about half of it before leaving the [White House](#) on November 18, and completed writing and revising it that night, after talking with Secretary of State William H. Seward, who had accompanied him to Gettysburg.

The Historic Gettysburg Address

On the morning of November 19, Everett delivered his two-hour oration (from memory) on the [Battle of Gettysburg](#) and its significance, and the orchestra played a hymn composed for the occasion by B.B. French. Lincoln then rose to the podium and addressed the crowd of some 15,000 people. He spoke for less than two minutes, and the entire speech was only 272 words long. Beginning by invoking the image of the founding fathers and the new nation, Lincoln eloquently expressed his conviction that the [Civil War](#) was the ultimate test of whether the Union created in 1776 would survive, or whether it would "perish from the earth." The dead at Gettysburg had laid down their lives for this noble cause, he said, and it was up to the living to confront the "great task" before them: ensuring that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

The essential themes and even some of the language of the Gettysburg Address were not new; Lincoln himself, in his July 1861 message to Congress, had referred to the United States as “a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people.” The radical aspect of the speech, however, began with Lincoln’s assertion that the Declaration of Independence—and not the Constitution—was the true expression of the founding fathers’ intentions for their new nation. At that time, many white slave owners had declared themselves to be “true” Americans, pointing to the fact that the [Constitution](#) did not prohibit slavery; according to Lincoln, the nation formed in 1776 was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” In an interpretation that was radical at the time—but is now taken for granted—Lincoln’s historic address redefined the Civil War as a struggle not just for the Union, but also for the principle of human equality.

Gettysburg Address: Public Reaction & Legacy

On the day following the dedication ceremony, newspapers all over the country reprinted Lincoln’s speech along with Everett’s. Opinion was generally divided along political lines, with Republican journalists praising the speech as a heartfelt, classic piece of oratory and Democratic ones deriding it as inadequate and inappropriate for the momentous occasion.

In the years to come, the Gettysburg Address would endure as arguably the most-quoted, most-memorized piece of oratory in American history. After Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865, Senator [Charles Sumner](#) of [Massachusetts](#) wrote of the address, “That speech, uttered at the field of Gettysburg...and now sanctified by the martyrdom of its author, is a monumental act. In the modesty of his nature he said ‘the world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; but it can never forget what they did here.’ He was mistaken. The world at once noted what he said, and will never cease to remember it.”

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