Abraham Lincoln

GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

1863

Heralded as one of the most profound and compelling of President Lincoln’s orations during the American Civil War, the Gettysburg Address is noted for its very brief but convincing appeal for resolving the nation’s most divisive conflict. Lincoln’s composition of 272 words was delivered on a Thursday afternoon on November 19, 1863 at the dedication ceremony of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The site exemplified the bloody consequences and devastation wrought by warfare between the Union and Confederate forces: the Battle of Gettysburg claimed the highest toll of casualties of all the war’s battles combined (estimated at between 46,000 and 51,000 soldiers killed, wounded, or missing in both armies).

President Lincoln’s words memorializing those “who here gave their lives that that nation might live” illuminated the meaning of sacrifice and of conviction to a greater purpose that all on American soil would come to cherish and defend. A free people and their government would endure the challenges that had confronted them, as they would come to recognize the principles of liberty, equality, and justice that had echoed throughout nearly a century since the nation’s founding. As the Civil War thereafter came to an end, President Lincoln too would be forever memorialized as one of the most popular and respected figures in American history.

November 19, 1863

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met here on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of it as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they have, thus far, so nobly carried on. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Headnote: Diana Jonmarie