

150 years since Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

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One hundred and fifty years ago today, Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address. He spoke at the dedication of a national cemetery on the site of the bloodiest battlefield of the Civil War, where less than five months earlier some 46,000 soldiers had been counted dead, wounded or missing.

In just 271 words, comprising ten sentences, in remarks lasting scarcely over two minutes, Lincoln placed the battle, the war and history itself in the context of the struggle for human equality.

It is politically significant that President Barack Obama has spurned invitations to the event being held today at Gettysburg National Cemetery commemorating the historic and beloved speech. This follows his decision not to attend the July gathering marking the 150th anniversary of the battle itself.

Obama, after all, attempted to attach his name to that of Lincoln in his first campaign for the presidency, and he seldom misses the chance to drape himself in the mantle of “military glory—that attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood,” to borrow a phrase from a speech Lincoln delivered in 1848 opposing American military aggression against Mexico.

The words of the Gettysburg Address, however, cannot settle comfortably in the ears of a president who has done more to advance inequality and eviscerate democratic rights than any other in American history.

Lincoln was acutely aware of the importance of summing up the democratic and revolutionary significance of the Battle of Gettysburg and the war as a whole. Though the battle, fought on July 1, 2 and 3 of 1863, had been a victory, forcing Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia to abandon its invasion of the North, the commander of the Union forces in Pennsylvania, Gen. George Meade, had failed to pursue Lee's shattered forces, then trapped in Maryland above the flooded Potomac River.

Meade's folly ensured that the war would drag on for nearly two more years. An exasperated Lincoln penned the general a letter he ultimately decided not to mail. “I

do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape,” Lincoln wrote. “He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely.”

What gives the Battle of Gettysburg its transcendent quality is, in large measure, Lincoln's speech, which appeared on the dedication program that day under the unassuming heading “Dedicatory Remarks, by the President of the United States.” Lincoln's “remarks” were given second billing. They were delivered only after the keynote speaker, Edward Everett, had given a two-hour oration.

There have been bloodier battles, but none has become so closely identified with progressive ideals as Gettysburg. For the most part, their meaning has resided precisely in the senselessness of the carnage. The slaughters at Somme and Verdun in World War I come to mind.

All of this makes somewhat ironic Lincoln's assertion in the address that “the world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they [‘these honored dead,’ who gave ‘the last full measure of devotion’ to the cause of freedom and equality] did here.”

Lincoln had not initially been invited to the dedication, and it was no accident that Everett, the nation's most famous orator, got top billing. The poets Bryant, Longfellow and Whittier turned down opportunities to speak. But so interested was Lincoln in the event that he countermanded his secretary's travel schedule, giving himself an extra day so as to be certain to arrive on time. This was wise. The train system was choked with the thousands of people arriving for the dedication. The governor of Minnesota, who had left a week early, failed to make it at all.

Lincoln was, in the period of Romanticism, precocious in prose style, anticipating Twain and later Hemingway in his generally spare and studied use of words. Not a

syllable in the Gettysburg Address was there by chance. This makes all the more intriguing the speech's lack of detail. Lincoln mentioned no dates, proper names or places. He never even said "Gettysburg."

This was intentional. Lincoln was lifting Gettysburg above its time and place and locating the Civil War in the sweep of American and world history. He invoked the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, though neither by name—"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"—and immediately bound them to the Civil War and to the worldwide struggle for equality: "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."

The struggle to defeat the slave owners' rebellion had begun in 1861 as a war to preserve the Union and return it to the *status quo ante*. On January 1, 1863, with Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil War became a revolution to destroy slavery and the old social order in the South. The Gettysburg Address places the war on a still higher and more global level. It was a war for "a new birth of freedom," fought in order "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

By destroying chattel slavery, the Civil War did indeed give freedom a new birth. It would also bring the class struggle to a new and higher stage.

"In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic," Karl Marx wrote. "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours' agitation that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California."

Marx wrote Lincoln one year after the Gettysburg Address, on behalf of the First International, to congratulate him on his reelection: "The workingmen of Europe felt instinctively [that when] an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe, for the first time in the annals of the world, 'slavery' on the banner of Armed Revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to

the European revolution of the eighteenth century... their hopes for the future, even their past conquests, were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic."

Though Lincoln did not, and could not, recognize the class struggle, he did believe that the Declaration of Independence's assertion of human equality was "put there for future use." Thomas Jefferson had included it, even though it would have "no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain."

For what future use did Lincoln see in the Declaration? It provided, he said, "a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression."

This must have been his overriding aim in the Gettysburg Address, so clearly in dialogue with Jefferson and the Declaration, just as the Civil War—the Second American Revolution—moved to complete the first.

In warning of "reappearing tyranny and oppression," Lincoln could never have predicted the America of 2013, in which a tiny layer of aristocrat billionaires, whose obscene wealth puts in the shade that of the old slavocracy, rules by means of lies, conspiracies, theft, spying and military terror.

While Lincoln spoke as a representative of the bourgeois democratic revolution, his words and ideals resonate today.

But government of, by and for the people is incompatible with degenerate capitalism. The democratic ideals have been repudiated. The American financial aristocracy of today has much in common with the old slavocracy. It despises the very notion of social equality.

Today, the realization of Lincoln's ideals is possible only under socialism. The new revolution that will be fought in the interests of mankind will be directed against the capitalist system.



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