

# A New REPUBLIC *of* LETTERS

Fall 2018

Jack Miller Center Fellows on  
America's Founding Principles and History

## LINCOLN AT GETTYSBURG

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*Lincoln uses the occasion of dedicating the cemetery at Gettysburg, in November 1863, to rally the North to stay the course in the war. At stake was the possibility of government premised on liberty and equality.*

*A close study of the substance and structure of Lincoln's brief speech enables us to appreciate all the more his extraordinary accomplishment.*

THE MOST OBVIOUS problem in approaching Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is that we know it so well. If you've received a good education, you might even be able to recite it from memory. Everyone knows the irony of that line where Lincoln says "the world will little note, nor long remember what we say here"—ironic because his brief dedicatory remarks have become the most famous American speech.

In fact, the Gettysburg Address must rank high among the greatest speeches anywhere. It is right up there with

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the Apology of Socrates and the Funeral Oration of Pericles, with the added benefit that Lincoln's was actually written and delivered by him, whereas the speeches by Socrates and Pericles come to us secondhand, so to speak, from Plato and Thucydides. By contrast, Lincoln's speech arrived at its fame without editorial assistance. Phrases from the Gettysburg Address crop up all over. Article 2 of the French Constitution, for instance, states that "The principle of the Republic shall be: government of the people, by the people and for the people." American presidents pay homage to Lincoln's formulations by borrowing shamelessly from him, sometimes with attribution, sometimes not.

To understand the significance of the Gettysburg Address, we need to go beyond the *noting* and *remembering* that Lincoln modestly said would not happen. We want



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to *understand* what he accomplished and how he did it, and maybe especially how he did what he did in such brief compass. The Gettysburg Address contains three paragraphs, ten sentences, and 272 words. Astonishingly, since many words are used more than once, the speech is comprised of only 130 distinct words. Lincoln would have excelled at writing sonnets or maybe even sound bites and tweets. To truly understand how a statement so brief could run so deep and last so long, we must carefully consider its substance and structure. To do so is to appreciate all the more Lincoln's extraordinary accomplishment.

#### A GREAT BATTLEFIELD

**B**EFORE TURNING TO the text itself, it might help to say just a bit about the occasion for the speech. The three-day battle of Gettysburg took place at the beginning of July 1863. It was a Union victory (with the Confederates fleeing the field on July 4th), and in retrospect we know that it was a turning point of the war, though that was not so evident at the time.

The casualties were like those of so many Civil War battles: staggering belief. Those three days left behind 51,000 American dead, wounded, or missing. To gain a sense of the scale of the carnage, we might contrast it with numbers we are more familiar with: During our 20-year involvement in Vietnam, 58,000 Americans died. Remember that the population in 1863 was one-tenth of what it is now. If one were to translate the death toll from the Civil War into today's population figures, it would not be in the thousands, or the tens of thousands, or the hundreds of thousands. It would be 7.5 million men dead.

We are familiar today with the tendency of democratic peoples to tire of war, to quail before its terrible blood price. Politically, Lincoln was confronting just this problem of war-weariness—the way in which grief saps morale and commitment. But the problem was not limited to the passivity or hopelessness of grief. There was active resistance to the continuance of the war. In the immediate wake of the victory at Gettysburg, riots over the draft broke out in New York City. Over four days in the mid-

dle of that July, 120 civilians were killed, including 11 black citizens who were lynched by angry mobs; hundreds of blacks fled the city; upwards of 2,000 people were injured; and 50 buildings burned to the ground. It took the arrival of thousands of federal troops—who were diverted from their pursuit of Lee's Confederate army and marched instead 250 miles north—to restore order. Some said the New York draft riots turned the Union victory into a Confederate one.

The Gettysburg Address is emphatically a war speech—a speech designed to rally the North to stay the course. Many college students today do not pick up on this fact. Not knowing much history, but aware that Lincoln is beloved for his kindness and his summons “to bind up the nation's wounds,” they tend to read Lincoln's Second Inaugural back into the Gettysburg Address. They assume that he is commemorating all the fallen (and they like him for his supposed inclusiveness, especially in contrast to the bombast and arrogance of Pericles). Perhaps their misreading might be excused, since a most unusual war speech it is.

Lincoln never mentions the enemy, or rather he mentions them only by implication. When he speaks of “those who here gave their lives that that nation might live,” his audience then would have been acutely aware that there were others who gave their lives that that nation might die, that it might no longer be the United States. The cemetery that was dedicated at Gettysburg was exclusively a Union cemetery. In fact, in the weeks before the dedication, the townspeople had witnessed the re-interment process, as thousands of the battle dead were exhumed from the shallow graves in which they had hastily been placed by those same local citizens back in the sweltering days of July. As they were uncovered, Union bodies were painstakingly identified and separated from Confederate bodies. While the rebels were simply reburied, coffinless, deeper in the ground where they were found (to be reclaimed later by their home states), the loyal dead were removed, further sorted into their military units, and placed in coffins and tidy lines, awaiting honorable burial in the new cemetery.

Lincoln's abstraction from the enemy highlights the very abstract character of the entire speech. No specifics are given. There isn't a proper noun to be found, with the single exception of God. Thus, there is no mention of Gettysburg, just "a great battle-field." There is no mention of America, just "this continent." There is no mention of the United States, just "a new nation" and "that nation" and "this nation." There is no mention of the parties to the conflict, no North or South, no Union or Confederacy, just "a great civil war." Lincoln speaks of "our fathers," but no names are given. And although the opening clause, "four score and seven years ago," does refer to a specific date, Lincoln has obscured it by giving the lapse of time in Biblical language and then by requiring the listener to subtract 87 from 1863 in order to arrive at the date of 1776.

The tremendous abstraction or generality of the speech is part of what explains its ability to speak to people in different eras and cultures who have no connection to the events at Gettysburg, and yet feel, as Lincoln might say, that they are "blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh" of those spoken of there, or more accurately of those spoken *to* there. The addressees of the speech are identified simply as "we," "the living." Refusing to dwell long among the dead, since words are inadequate to the act of consecration, Lincoln redeploys his words, turning them from mere saying into their own form of deed. He summons the living to "the unfinished work" and swears them to "the great task remaining." He turns an elegy into a call of duty.

### OPENING WORDS

**T**HE FIRST PARAGRAPH of the Gettysburg Address consists of only one sentence, but it's a doozy. It describes the past, the nation's beginnings. What Lincoln called "the birthday of the United States of America" in the serenade speech has been transformed into a sophisticated, poetic metaphor that refers to three distinct moments: conception, birth, and baptism. The past that Lincoln refers to is a past that stretches back before living memory. "Four score and seven years ago" exceeds the individual's allotment of "three score and ten," the Biblical phrase for the natural span of a human life. Lincoln's de-

cision to formulate the date in this way accentuates the fact that the founding is now beyond anyone's direct experience.

The Lyceum Address, delivered a quarter-century earlier by a young Lincoln, was also about the founding. There, Lincoln reflected on the difficulties the nation would face once those who had personally participated in the revolution were gone. He noted how "the silent artillery of time" destroys "*living history*"—the kind of history that bears "the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received." He argued that a more enduring substitute for patriotic attachment had to be found, since the memory of "the scenes of the revolution" was fading.

Our own time is like Lincoln's in this sense, as we daily experience the loss of the living history of the 20th century: The last surviving American veteran of World War I, Frank Buckles, died in 2011, and our "forest of giant oaks"—the World War II vets—will soon follow. In keeping with this insight into impermanence, Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address does not try to conjure up the drama of the revolution. Instead, he

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substitutes more peaceful, natural imagery: What happened in 1776 was that "our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation." As the date indicates, it was a document, the Declaration of Independence, that announced our nativity. A document, unlike historical memory, is permanent—there to be read and fully understood by each successive generation. While Lincoln is the greatest of constitutionalists, he considers the Declaration our foundational text.

Note that although Lincoln acknowledges the land ("this continent"), he does not suggest that the nation emerges from out of the soil. Our founding is not like the old myths of autochthony where the people were said to spring forth from the earth, like the Spartoi of Thebes sown from the dragon's teeth. Our nation is "on" the continent, not "from" or "out of" it. Ours is a uniquely ideational founding, based on declaratory words, which Lincoln in his fragment on "The Constitution and the Union" calls "*the word, fitly spoken.*"

A number of commentators have argued that Lincoln's language suggests that we have the founders for our fathers and the continent for our mother; they regard "brought

forth on” as equivalent to beget or sired. But “to bring forth” is another common Biblical phrase that, from Genesis forward, refers to the female role of parturition, or in the case of plants, to the visible appearance of fruit. There are even verses that apply the obstetrical metaphor politically, describing the national destiny of Israel, as in Micah 4:10: “Be in pain, and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail . . . there [in Babylon] the LORD shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies.” In the New Testament, the promise of redemption through birth is repeated and transfigured, as in Matthew 1:21: “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.” Accordingly, we might suspect Lincoln of a bit of metaphorical gender-bending: Our fathers are really our mothers, for they birthed a new nation.

Lincoln’s next two clauses mention two key ideas: liberty and equality, each of which is linked to the dominant metaphor of birth. Casting back before the advent

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moment in 1776 to the moment of conception, Lincoln says the nation was “conceived in Liberty.” What could that mean? How literally should this language of sexual congress be taken?

Of course, “to conceive” can denote either a physical or a mental phenomenon: becoming pregnant or taking a notion into the mind. Before the nation could be brought forth into practical realization, it had to be thought of or imagined. Whence arose the concept? According to Lincoln, it originated “in Liberty.” Of the handful of common nouns that appear mid-sentence throughout the speech, this is the only one Lincoln capitalized, although he might have capitalized “people” (as he did in both the Lyceum and Temperance Addresses, as well as in some of his Thanksgiving Proclamations) or “freedom” (since it is the proper name, so to speak, of the new birth prophesied at the end of the speech). The result is that “Liberty” and “God” are, in effect, the only capitalized words, since none of the sentence-starting words would normally be capitalized.

Why does Lincoln incarnate liberty in this way and

what does it mean to be “conceived in Liberty”? Whenever the interpretation of Lincoln is at issue, the Bible is a good starting place. Psalms 51:5 speaks of being conceived in sin: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” The passage takes one back to Genesis 3:16: “Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.” Quite different is the Gospel description of the virgin conception. In Luke 1:31, the angel tells Mary, “And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son,” and in Matthew 1:20, the angel assures Joseph that “that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.”

According to Lincoln’s redaction, the new nation was conceived not in sin or sorrow but in liberty, although given the use that humans make of their liberty, there might not be much difference between the terms. Beneath the beautiful thought that the nation was conceived in the pure womb of liberty there lurks the afterthought evoked by the distant resonance of Psalm 51’s conceived in sin. That psalm, known as the *Miserere*, is the most famous of the seven penitential psalms. In it, a contrite King David prays for a clean heart and a renewed spirit after his unjust taking of Bathsheba, the wife of the humble Uriah. The old Adamic/Davidic conception in sin and the new salvific one in the womb of Mary are explicitly linked through the genealogy that opens the book of Matthew. The list of 41 generations (the “begats”) is interrupted only twice, once to interject that “David the king beget Solomon of her *that had been the wife* of Urias” and then to mention that 14 generations later the Israelites were “carried away to Babylon.” Among the wages of David’s sin was civil war brought on by the insurrection of his son Absalom. (William Faulkner, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, certainly saw parallels between the Biblical and American stories.)

In his very frank 1855 letter to his dearest friend, Joshua Speed, Lincoln uses a variant of “conceived in sin” when he declares that the Kansas-Nebraska Act “was conceived in violence, passed in violence, is maintained in violence, and is being executed in violence.” But while Lincoln’s poetry in the Gettysburg Address is deep enough to sound these darker echoes of sin and sorrow, the surface meaning of “conceived in Liberty” is altogether positive, although not perfectly clear. John Channing Briggs, in his wonderful 2005 book, *Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered*, stresses the obscurity of Lincoln’s phrasing: “Certainly, if one presses the metaphor to its sensible limit, the nation had parentage; but the manner and precise timing of its

conception . . . is hidden as well as enacted in Liberty.”

Leon Kass, in his admirable 2007 speech, “The Gettysburg Address and Lincoln’s Reinterpretation of the American Founding,” tries once again to plumb the mysteries of the nation’s generation. He develops three scenarios. Perhaps Lincoln means to suggest that, just as a child might be conceived in love, the nation was conceived in liberty. Liberty, or maybe love of liberty, was the seminal passion that eventually produced the nation. Or perhaps “conceived in Liberty” indicates that the idea of a new nation was freely formed and chosen. While the Declaration itself insists on the force of “necessity,” Lincoln instead highlights the operation of free will; the nation was conceived in an act of liberty. One final possibility is that Lincoln means to refer further back, even centuries back, into the colonial period. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, argues that the spirit of liberty was present from the first in the English colonies. He explains how the aristocratic liberty of the mother country assumed a new more democratic form in the New World. If so, then British liberty was the womb (the Latin is *matrix*) within which the new nation gestated.

These three speculations are not, in fact, incompatible with one another: A love of liberty, long present among the colonists, did flare up in one decisive, freely chosen act, transforming British subjects into founders.

The organic, “gentle” character of Lincoln’s account of the nation’s origins suggests a further concern. Perhaps Lincoln did not want to come anywhere near words like “revolution” or “independence” while in the midst of putting down “a gigantic Rebellion.” For him, there is a crystal-clear distinction between a justified revolution, undertaken in response to well-documented violations of rights, and an unjustified rebellion in which one portion of a democratic people, unhappy with the results of a perfectly constitutional election, attempts to nullify that election by secession. The secessionists were in no way comparable to the American revolutionaries.

Lincoln didn’t have time in this speech to explain the theoretical difference, as he did at length in other speeches, especially his First Inaugural. Instead, he found euphemisms for the American Revolution like “brought forth” and “conceived in Liberty.” He uses the language of generative congress to describe an act of political separation. Given that he was resisting those who wanted a further separation, it was not the time to praise the dissolution of political bands.

## CREATED EQUAL

**A**FTER LIBERTY, the other feature of the founding that is highlighted is equality. Lincoln says the nation is “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Whereas liberty is linked backwards to the nation’s conception, equality is more prospective; it involves dedication. As in the moment of christening or baptism, the infant nation is placed on a certain path. Although Lincoln quotes (accurately) from the Declaration, he puts his own gloss on it, famously introducing some key changes.

The Declaration speaks of equality as a truth held to be “self-evident” by the American people. They knew that this self-evident truth was unfortunately not evident to everyone the world over, but they expected that, in time, the scales would fall from the eyes of others (temporarily blinded by false teachings, such as that about the divine right of kings).

“Self-evident” is a term borrowed from geometry. A self-evident truth is an axiom. An axiom doesn’t require proof and, in fact, it can’t be proved. You just see it or you don’t. If  $a = b$  and  $b = c$ , then  $a = c$ . According to the Declaration, human equality is like that; it is axiomatic. All men—black and white, male and female—simply are equal in the relevant sense of being endowed by their creator with natural rights to life and liberty. This is the essential truth of the human condition. This foundational truth is not invalidated by the harsh fact that most human beings, in most times and places, have lived under political orders that violate their natural rights, slavery being the most dramatic instance. According to the Declaration, despotic regimes and unjust institutions are illegitimate. It follows that people may exercise their right of revolution in order to establish new governments founded upon the consent of the governed and respectful of the individuals’ pre-existing natural rights.

Although there are plenty of places where Lincoln uses the orthodox language of “axiom” or “self-evident” to describe the primary, capital “T” truths of the Declaration, his most famous formulation, here in the Gettysburg Address, calls human equality a “proposition.” “Proposition” is another term borrowed from geometry. A proposition, unlike an axiom, requires a proof. That’s why one must be “dedicated” to it. It’s a theorem that must be demonstrated in practice.

As early as the Lyceum Address, Lincoln described the founders as experimental scientists or mathematicians

drawn to an unproven proposition. “Their ambition,” he said, “aspired to display before an admiring world, a practical demonstration of the truth of a proposition, which had hitherto been considered, at best no better, than problematical; namely, the capability of a people to govern themselves.” In that formulation, it was self-government—the corollary of equality—that needed to be proved. The current crisis, however, was more severe. At the time of the founding, there was general agreement that all were created equal, even if there was no political ability on the part of the very weak federal government to do much about the domestic institution of slavery in the states. Nonetheless, all then understood that slavery was an evil; even those who argued that slavery was necessary (and there were many of those) at least called it “a necessary *evil*.” But subsequent generations had fallen away from this view. Led by John C. Calhoun, Southerners had taken to openly repudiating the truths of the Declaration, calling equality a “self-evident lie” and slavery a “positive good.”

In the 1850s, as the crisis of the “house divided” escalated, Lincoln argued that the crisis had arisen because a substantial portion of the American people had lost sight of the truth on which their own rights depended. Lincoln put it concisely in his 1854 Peoria speech: “When the white man governs himself that is self-government; but when he governs himself, and also governs *another* man, that is *more* than self-government—that is despotism.”

Since the Civil War was brought on by a serious departure from the meaning of both equality and consent, it seems right for Lincoln, when speaking in the midst of that war, to imply that a truth once firmly held as self-evident had now moved into the ranks of a propositional truth that must be proven in action—that action being the restoration of a Union dedicated to the principle of equality. We see here, perhaps, that the language of mathematics is not perfectly suited to (or congruent with) politics, since political truths depend on being held in the heart as true. Thus, the Gettysburg Address superimposes religious language (dedicate, consecrate, hallow) on its

Euclidean substrate.

In his opening paragraph, in 30 words, Lincoln has performed an act of remembrance. His description of “our fathers” is meant to make his audience reverential.

But, at the same time, the generative imagery conveys the message that each successive cohort of Americans is essential to the maturation or completion of the founding. The necessary proof is ongoing. It’s up to us to live out the timeless truth to which the nation has been pledged. With this single sentence, Lincoln formed the nation’s self-understanding, a self-understanding that unites filial piety with progress. Action here and now is mandated by fidelity to the past. Lincoln’s political stance manages to combine liberal elements with profoundly conservative elements.

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#### CONCEIVED AND DEDICATED

THE GLOSS HE puts on the Declaration of Independence thus leads directly to the next paragraph and its opening word: “Now.” This paragraph explains the meaning of the “great civil war.” The war is a “test”; and what is being tested is “whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” Note that Lincoln does not say “our nation”; he says “that nation”—in other words, “that nation” described in the opening paragraph. He doesn’t want the audience to stray outside the bounds of the idea he so carefully shaped there. What is at stake is the survival of that new nation that sought to combine liberty and equality. And more than that: At stake is the very possibility of political life based on such premises. Lincoln enlarges the stakes beyond national survival. The failure of the American experiment would constitute the failure of popular government altogether.

It is striking how similar this language in the Gettysburg Address is to the language of Lincoln’s 1861 Message to Congress in Special Session. There he asserted that,

this issue embraces more than the fate

of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man, the question, whether a constitutional republic, or democracy—a Government of the people, by the same people—can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity, against its own domestic foes. It presents the question, whether discontented individuals . . . can . . . break up their Government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth.

And again later in that address:

Our popular government has often been called an experiment. Two points in it, our people have already settled—the successful *establishing*, and the successful *administering* of it. One still remains—its successful *maintenance* against a formidable internal attempt to overthrow it. It is now for them to demonstrate to the world, that those who can fairly carry an election can also suppress a rebellion—that ballots are the rightful, and peaceful, successors of bullets; and that when ballots have fairly, and constitutionally, decided, there can be no successful appeal, back to bullets; that there can be no successful appeal, except to ballots themselves, at succeeding elections. Such will be a great lesson of peace; teaching men that what they cannot take by an election, neither can they take by a war—teaching all, the folly of being the beginners of a war.

These lengthier passages, addressed to Congress in the first months of the war, help to explicate the more condensed, poetic rendering at Gettysburg, where Lincoln, speaking to a grieving public, conveyed the purpose of the war. This “great lesson of peace” must be midwifed by the war power of the government. With a sublimity that may never be surpassed, Lincoln pleads for public support to stay the course.

As Lincoln understood, there was a perverse logic that led from the theoretical denial of equality, as expressed in the South’s heretical view that slavery was just, to the denial of majority rule, as expressed in the South’s attempted secession. The Declaration’s truths are intertwined.

Deny one and the others crumble too. The dynamic of despotism was such that the rejection of first principles led inexorably to an assault on constitutional rights, as the defenders of slavery sought to undermine the rights of speech, press, assembly, and petition (whenever they were exercised by slavery’s opponents, that is). The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass offered a graphic image of the policy:

I understand the first purpose of the slave power to be the suppression of all anti-slavery discussion. . . . One end of the slave’s chain must be fastened to a padlock in the lips of Northern freemen, else the slave will himself become free.

Lincoln echoed Douglass when, at the close of his 1860 Cooper Union Address, he wondered what precisely would “satisfy” the South. His conclusion: “This, and this only: cease to call slavery *wrong*, and join them in calling it *right*.” The real demand of the South, in other words, was to silence the moral sense of the nation. One is reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous line: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Aware of this linkage—aware of the inescapable reciprocity of rights—Lincoln always insisted that it was imperative to restore the belief in universal human equality for the sake of white citizens, as well as for the sake of black slaves.

In the second paragraph of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln homes in on the present moment. The purpose for which they have gathered, “now” and “here,” is the dedication of a cemetery to those who upheld the nation’s dedication to equality. Lincoln concludes that “[i]t is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But . . .”

## RESOLUTION AND DEVOTION

STRICT GRAMMARIANS of the middle-school-English-teacher variety warn against starting sentences with “but”; how much more shocking to start a paragraph this way as Lincoln does. Of course, the sticklers have their reasons; because “but” is a coordinating conjunction, it should be used to join parts of a sentence. Not having had more than 12 months of formal schooling, perhaps Lincoln hadn’t gotten this message. Or perhaps his independent reading of the Bible—“But I say unto you . . .”—had taught him there was no such “rule.” Or perhaps he had far more in mind. Indeed, Lincoln’s “but” may be the most significant use of the word in all of

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English literature.

A resort to “but” always indicates that the speaker is seriously qualifying what he has just said. So, what is Lincoln retracting in this third paragraph?

He tells the audience they cannot do what they came to do. The language of lamentation is inadequate to the task of commemoration. Lincoln pivots from words to deeds, and at the same time he pivots from “this ground” wherein the dead lie buried to “that cause” for which they died. What the soldiers advanced through their struggle and blood sacrifice, the living must see through to victory. Lincoln, like Pericles before him in his Funeral Oration, must redirect the energies of his audience to something more productive than eulogizing and grieving.

Lincoln's two final sentences, and especially the very long last one, explain what the living ought to do instead of tarrying amidst the graves. They should “rather” be “dedicated to the great task remaining.” That dedication has four components, expressed in four clauses. Fascinatingly, these four clauses, each beginning with “that,” seem to parallel the famous “that” clauses of the Declaration of Independence. If Jefferson's sentence can be said to have invented the nation, Lincoln's parallel sentence will reinvent it.

To be effective, dedication and devotion must take the form of “resolve.” In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln calls upon the living to resolve three things: one, “that these dead shall not have died in vain”; two, “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom”; and three, “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Although all three resolutions are, as they must be, in the future tense, the first and third are also formulated in the negative. We have two “shall nots” and a “shall” (again suggestive of a balance between the conserving and progressing tendencies).

The first “shall not” looks backward. We must push on

to victory for the sake of the fallen. We do this in remembrance of them, so their sacrifice will not have been needless. Lincoln binds his listeners not just to the fathers in piety, but devotedly to one another: the brave men “here,” the honored dead “here.” F. Scott Fitzgerald concluded his short story “The Swimmers” by saying that America, “having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter—it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men. . . . It was a willingness of the heart.” Of course, there are times when more “patriot graves” are not the solution. The reason more of that “last full measure of devotion” is called for “here” is entwined with “that cause” for which “these honored dead” died.

Skipping for the moment over the second resolution, the final resolution explains “that cause” as the fate of self-government. We continue the fight so that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Although Lincoln uses the future tense, his words do not soar into the empyrean. Not perishing is the aim. Lincoln is concerned as much with the survival as the perfection of democracy. Yet, survival isn't a small aim; it might even be earth shaking, since the Union preserved will constitute the needed proof that a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition of equality can indeed endure. The Union has moral content and is worth saving.

What do Lincoln's weighty prepositions (government *of*, *by*, and *for* the people) tell us about that moral content? In Lockean terms, government of the people refers to the initial formation of the body politic—legitimate government is based on the consent *of* the governed; government *by* the people refers to the specific form that consent takes in a constitutional democracy, where there is ongoing consent through regular elections by the people; finally, government *for* the people means for their benefit—government must pursue the common good.



## A NEW BIRTH

WHAT THEN of the central resolution, the “shall” rather than the “shall not”: “[T]hat we here highly resolve . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.” It is natural and predictable for us today to hear in “the new birth of freedom” a foreshadowing of the perfected Constitution containing the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. It is certainly true that, by November 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation had been in effect for almost a year, which meant that if the Union prevailed, slavery in the rebel states would be abolished. The fate of black citizenship and suffrage, however, was more uncertain.

The movement of the Gettysburg Address is at once linear (transitioning from past to present to future) and cyclical (revolving from birth to death to rebirth). And yet, it doesn’t inscribe quite a full circle. We might wonder how the “new birth,” which is a birth “of freedom,” differs from the original birth, which was the birth of “a new nation.” Is the liberty spoken of in the opening the same as or different from the freedom spoken of at the end? The liberty of the opening was associated with conception, not birth, whereas freedom itself is now the thing born. Why this intriguing shift from “conceived in Liberty” to “a new birth of freedom”? And how does the new birth of freedom relate to equality?

In the earlier speculations about the meaning of “conceived in Liberty,” three possibilities were floated: conceived in love of liberty, conceived in an act of liberty, or conceived in the setting of English liberty. None of those possibilities implied that all men would secure their natural right to liberty in the new nation. In other words, “conceived in Liberty” did not guarantee equality of liberty. Of the authors of the Declaration, Lincoln said (in his Dred Scott speech): “They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it imme-

diately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit.”

During the Civil War, circumstances had changed dramatically—such that the original conception in liberty could progress toward the actual birth of freedom as a consequence of the renewed dedication to equality. Freedom was a long time in gestation, and it seemed like the nation might miscarry. Walt Whitman picked up on this obstetrical imagery in his great oration on the “Death of Abraham Lincoln.” There, Whitman spoke of emancipation as “that parturition and delivery of our at last really free Republic, born again, henceforth to commence its career of genuine homogeneous Union, compact, consistent with itself.”

It is important for us to remember that this is an infant freedom, in need of further maturation. In part, this means freedom will grow and spread as it did in the 15th, 19th, and 26th Amendments, but maturation also means the acquisition of moral and intellectual virtue through the disciplines of habit and study. As a nation, we have done better in extending freedom than in educating it. In any case, as Lincoln foresees, there will always be plenty for future generations to do. This may be one of the reasons the speech is so beloved: It rallies us today just as it rallied the nation then.

## UNDER GOD

IN CLOSING, we shouldn’t overlook the presence of the phrase “under God.” According to Lincoln, the superintendence of God plays a role in the new birth of freedom. The divinity, of course, was present in the opening proposition that “all men are *created* equal.” According to the Declaration, our equality is connected with our creatureliness.

The God of the Declaration (or at least the God of its

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opening paragraph) is explicitly “Nature’s God,” not necessarily the God of Abraham or the triune God. One can believe in species-based human equality without believing in divine providence or God’s ongoing benevolent care for his creation. Lincoln’s civic religion, however, brings God closer.

During his presidency, Lincoln issued three proclamations calling on citizens to observe a Day of National Humiliation, Prayer, and Fasting, in addition to his four

Thanksgiving proclamations. “This nation”—this rededicated and reborn nation—is “under God.” Lincoln’s hint of a politically active, justice-seeking, providential order, setting certain limits upon human action, will come to fruition in his Second Inaugural.

That speech, Lincoln knew, was his greatest, outvying even the extraordinary Gettysburg Address. ■

*The Jack Miller Center is grateful to National Affairs for permission to reprint this essay, which can be found in its entirety at <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/lincoln-at-gettysburg>.*

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