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## Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

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It is popularly believed that the battle of Gettysburg was the greatest battle of the War of the Rebellion. This may be true; but in the opinion of many competent to judge, there was greater carnage at Antietam and Chancellorsville was harder fought. Unquestionably, however, the battle of Gettysburg was the most important battle of the war from the standpoint of the success of the Union cause. Moreover, it was the only battle of the Civil War fought on Northern soil.

In the latter part of June, 1863, detachments of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia entered Pennsylvania and reached Harrisburg on the north and York on the east menacing Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington. The Union forces, the hitherto ill-fated Army of the Potomac, now commanded by General George G. Meade, approached Gettysburg from the south and southeast. As General Lee approached Gettysburg from the west, he realized that a battle was imminent and recalled the Confederate troops from their advanced positions in central and eastern Pennsylvania. The battle of Gettysburg followed on July 1, 2, and 3. Nearly 200,000 men were engaged in the battle, more than 40,000 of whom were wounded, and more than 5,000 were killed. Most of those who perished were hastily buried in shallow graves where they fell.

The large number of dead presented a serious problem for the community. To meet this exigency, the citizens of Gettysburg, led by Judge David Wills, purchased seventeen acres of ground on Cemetery Hill, adjoining the old town cemetery, and arranged to inter there most of the Union dead, many of whom were unidentified. Because soldiers of eighteen northern states were represented in this battle, the

national significance of this action is obvious. When Governor Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania heard of the project, he appointed Judge Wills as his representative for the state of Pennsylvania and requested the governors of the other states whose soldiers lost their lives in the battle to appoint representatives to act with Wills as an official commission to undertake the establishment of a national cemetery at Gettysburg. Judge Wills was designated as chairman of that commission, and the National Soldiers' Cemetery at Gettysburg became the first of its kind in the country.

Re-interment of the Union dead was begun late in October. About 3700 soldiers are now buried there, almost a thousand of whom are not identified. The Confederate dead were removed to their beloved Southland a few years later. There was nothing to suggest the present beauty or impressiveness of the cemetery upon the occasion of its consecration on November 19, 1863. Indeed, a cornfield was then being converted into a cemetery. William Saunders, a landscape architect who later landscaped the grounds at the Lincoln Tomb, had been employed and graves had been arranged in sections in the form of a semi-circle, and a platform had been erected in the center for the speakers and distinguished guests. The platform faced away from the semi-circle so that the vast audience would not stand on the newly made graves. A few years later the Soldiers' National Monument was built on the space occupied by the platform; and the subsequent development of the Gettysburg National Military Park, as a hallowed military shrine, was underway.

As the work of re-interment proceeded, it was proposed that memorial dedicatory exercises be held to consecrate this ground now made sacred. The date first fixed for this purpose was October 23, 1863. The Honorable Edward Everett of Massachusetts was then regarded as the greatest living American orator, and it was decided to invite him to deliver the oration. But he replied that it was wholly out of his power to make the necessary preparation by October 23, whereupon the dedication was postponed to November 19—nearly a month later—to suit Mr. Everett's convenience.

A formal invitation to be present was sent to the President of the United States and to the members of his cabinet; to Major General Meade, who commanded the Federal troops in the battle of Gettysburg; to the diplomatic corps, repre-

senting foreign governments; to the members of both houses of Congress; and to other distinguished personages. These invitations and all arrangements for the dedicatory exercises were considered and decided by the Board of Commissioners of the National Soldiers' Cemetery and were carried into effect by Judge Wills.

The decision to ask Mr. Lincoln to *speak* was an afterthought. In fact, it did not seem to occur to anyone that he could speak upon such an occasion. In addition, it was said that, with his important duties and responsibilities, he could not possibly have the leisure time to prepare an address for such an occasion. Nevertheless, with some reluctance and perhaps as a concession to his office, Judge Wills wrote to President Lincoln: "It is the desire that after the oration, you, as Chief Executive of the nation, formally set apart these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks. . . ."<sup>1</sup> But the invitation was not settled upon and sent to Mr. Lincoln until November 2, more than six weeks after Mr. Everett had been invited to speak and but little more than two weeks before the exercises were held. This hesitancy and caution, however, on the part of the Cemetery Commission mattered not to Abraham Lincoln. Here again his deep humility was manifest and, as John Bigelow once wrote in an appraisal of Lincoln: "He was so modest by nature that he was perfectly content to walk behind any man who wished to walk before him."<sup>2</sup>

The President arrived at Gettysburg on a special train on the evening before the exercises and was driven at once to the residence of Judge Wills, whose guest he was during his stay in Gettysburg. Judge Wills relates that at about nine o'clock the President sent for him and asked what was expected of him. The President had some paper in his hand and, after explaining the part which Mr. Lincoln was to take in the proceedings on the following day, Mr. Wills left him. At about ten o'clock the President sent for Judge Wills again and asked him where Seward was. Upon being informed that the secretary of state was at the home of a neighbor, the President, accompanied by Wills, called on

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<sup>1</sup> John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln, A History* (10 vols., New York, 1890), VIII, 190.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln* (6 vols., New York, 1941-1942), VI, 381.

Secretary Seward and remained with him for an hour. Obviously, the President was now engaged in the preparation of his speech. It is known to have been Lincoln's custom to consult Secretary Seward on his public utterances, and this was the first unofficial address that he had been called on to make since he had assumed the duties of the presidency.

When and where, then, did Mr. Lincoln prepare the "few appropriate remarks" he had been reluctantly invited to deliver and which, in after years, were to be given the superlative praise of being "the supreme masterpiece of the English language"? The best authority on these questions and unmistakably the one most competent to speak was John G. Nicolay, the President's private secretary. Fortunately, Mr. Nicolay published an article on this subject in which he says, "There is no decisive record of when Mr. Lincoln wrote the first sentences of his proposed address," but he does speak of Mr. Lincoln's custom of "using great deliberation in arranging his thoughts, and moulding his phrases mentally, waiting to reduce them to writing until they had taken satisfactory form." There was even greater necessity of precaution in this case because the invitation to speak specified that the address should be only "a few appropriate remarks." After speaking of the want of opportunity for Mr. Lincoln even to think leisurely, Mr. Nicolay added:

All this strongly confirms the correctness of the statement made by the Hon. James Speed,<sup>3</sup> in an interview printed in the "Louisville Commercial," in November, 1879, that the President told him that "the day before he left Washington he found time to write about half of his speech."<sup>4</sup>

Manifestly, there should be no further doubt as to when and where the first part of the speech was prepared. Mr. Nicolay continues:

It was after the breakfast hour on the morning of the 19th that the writer . . . went to the upper room in the house of Mr. Wills which Mr. Lincoln occupied, to report for duty, and remained with the President while he finished writing the Gettysburg address, during the short leisure he could utilize for this purpose before being called up to take his place in the procession, which was . . . to move promptly at ten o'clock.

<sup>3</sup> James Speed was appointed attorney-general late in 1864. See E. Merton Coulter, "James Speed," *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1928-1936), XVII (1935), 440-41.

<sup>4</sup> John G. Nicolay, "Lincoln's Gettysburg Address," *Century* (New York, 1881-1930), XLVII (1894), 597.

There is neither record, evidence, nor well-founded tradition that Mr. Lincoln did any writing, or made any notes, on the journey between Washington and Gettysburg. The train consisted of four passenger-coaches, and either composition or writing would have been extremely troublesome amid the movement, the noise, the conversation, the greetings, and the questionings which ordinary courtesy required him to undergo in these surroundings. . . . Mr. Lincoln carried in his pocket the autograph manuscript of so much of his address as he had written at Washington the day before.

Obviously, then, no fact could be more indisputably established than when and where Mr. Lincoln's address was prepared.

Mr. Nicolay's article also contains a facsimile reproduction of the first draft of the address:

The first page was written in ink in the President's strong clear hand, with one correction in pencil in the last line. The second page, written with a pencil was doubtless written at Gettysburg.

Mr. Nicolay stated that there are three versions of Lincoln's Gettysburg address:

1. The original autograph MS. draft, written by Mr Lincoln partly at Washington and partly at Gettysburg.
2. The version made by the shorthand reporter on the stand at Gettysburg when the President delivered it, which was telegraphed, and was printed in the leading newspapers of the country on the following morning.
3. The revised copy made by the President a few days after his return to Washington, upon a careful comparison of his original draft and the printed newspaper version with his own recollections of the exact form in which he delivered it.<sup>5</sup>

This latter copy, in the opinion of Mr. Nicolay, was a careful and deliberate revision and "has become the standard and authentic text." This new autograph copy was made by the President in response to a request from Judge Wills four days after Mr. Lincoln's return to Washington, "for the dedicatory remarks delivered by you here last Monday."

Following the arrival of the procession at the cemetery where many thousands had assembled—some estimates place the crowd at 30,000 to 50,000—the exercises were opened with an invocation by the chaplain of the United State House of Representatives. Letters of regret were read from General Meade, who was still in command of the Army of the Potomac, and others, after which Mr. Everett was intro-

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, XLVII, 596-97, 601.

duced. He spoke for two hours, devoting the first hour to a detailed description of the three-day battle and another hour to a discussion of responsibility for the war and dire consequences that would have followed the success of Lee. The oration was wholly worthy the occasion but is not within the purview of this paper.

At the close of Mr. Everett's address, a dirge written especially for the occasion by Mr. Benjamin B. French was sung by a hundred voices, after which President Lincoln was introduced to the multitude. Clark E. Carr, the Illinois member of the Cemetery Commission, attended the dedication and wrote of it in his book as follows:

When the President thus appeared it was the first opportunity the people really had to see him. There was the usual craning of necks, the usual exclamations of "Down in front!" the usual crowding to get places to see, and much confusion. He waited patiently for the audience to become quiet, and there was absolute silence while he spoke. He began in those high clarion tones, which the people of Illinois had so often heard, to which he held to the close. His was a voice that, when he made an effort, could reach a great multitude, and he always tried to make every one hear. He held in his left hand two or three pages of manuscript, toward which he glanced but once. He spoke with deliberation, but cannot have continued more than three or four, some said two, minutes.

A moment's reflection will convince any one that before the great multitude of people, nearly all of whom were standing, could have prepared themselves to listen intelligently . . . before their thoughts had become sufficiently centered upon the speaker to take up his line of thought and follow him—he had finished and returned to his seat. . . .

So short a time was Mr. Lincoln before them that the people could scarcely believe their eyes when he disappeared from their view. They were almost dazed. They could not possibly, in so short a time, mentally grasp the ideas that were conveyed, nor even their substance. Time and again expressions of disappointment were made to me. Many persons said to me that they would have supposed that on such a great occasion the President would have made a speech. Every one thought, as expressed by Mr. Wills four days later . . . that instead of Mr. Lincoln's delivering an address, he only made a very few "dedicatory remarks."

We, on the platform heard every word. And what did we hear? A dozen commonplace sentences, scarcely one of which contained anything new, anything that when stated was not self-evident.

I am aware, because I noted it at the time, that in the Associated Press report, which appeared in the morning papers, there were the punctuations of "applause," "long continued applause," etc., according to the invariable custom in those days. Except when he

was concluded, I did not observe it, and at the close the applause was not especially marked. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Corroborating Commissioner Carr's statements as to how the President's address was received, Major William H. Lambert, one of the earlier Lincoln collectors, said in an address before the Pennsylvania Historical Society upon the occasion of the commemoration of the centenary of Lincoln's birth:

The circumstances attending the delivery of the Address were not such as to conduce to its full appreciation. The procession that had escorted the President to the field had been greatly belated, and after his arrival upon the platform the proceedings were still further delayed, awaiting the arrival of the orator of the day. Mr. Everett's oration, that had been preceded by a prayer of some length and by music, was of two hours' duration, so that when the President spoke it was to an audience that had been standing for nearly four hours.

The brevity of the speech, the absence of rhetorical effort, and its very simplicity prevented its full appreciation. . . .

Undoubtedly there were many in the audience who fully appreciated the beauty and pathos of the President's Address, and many of those who read it on the following day perceived its wondrous character; but it is apparent that its full force and grandeur were not generally recognized then, either by its auditors or its readers. Not until the war itself had ended and the great leader had fallen did the Nation realize that this speech had given to Gettysburg another claim to immortality and to American eloquence its highest glory. . . .<sup>7</sup>

In this connection and in view of the misleading press reports, it may be only just to Judge Wills and Mr. Carr to pursue the inquiry as to how the President's address was received immediately following its delivery. Ward Hill Lamon, marshal of the District of Columbia, says:

On the platform from which Mr. Lincoln delivered his address, and only a moment after it was concluded, Mr. Seward turned to Mr. Everett and asked him what he thought of the President's speech. Mr. Everett replied: "It is not what I expected from him. I am disappointed." Then in his turn Mr. Everett asked, "What do you think of it, Mr. Seward?" The response was, "He has made a failure, and I am sorry for it. His speech is not equal to him." Mr. Seward then turned to me and asked, "Mr. Marshal, what do you

<sup>6</sup> Clark E. Carr, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (Chicago, 1909), 56-60.

<sup>7</sup> Major William H. Lambert, "The Gettysburg Address: When Written, How Received, Its True Form," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (Philadelphia, 1877- ), XXXIII (1909), 398-99.

think of it?" I answered, "I am sorry to say that it does not impress me as one of his great speeches."

In the face of these facts, it has been repeatedly published that this speech was received by the audience with loud demonstrations of approval; that "amid the tears, sobs, and cheers it produced in the excited throng, the orator of the day, Mr. Everett, turned to Mr. Lincoln, grasped his hand and exclaimed, 'I congratulate you on your success!' adding in a transport of heated enthusiasm, 'Ah, Mr. President, how gladly would I give my hundred pages to be the author of your twenty lines!'" Nothing of the kind occurred. . . .

As a matter of fact, the silence during the delivery of the speech, and the lack of hearty demonstrations of approval immediately after its close, were taken by Mr. Lincoln as certain proof that it was not well received. . . .<sup>8</sup>

That the President did not realize the surpassing excellence nor appreciate the far-reaching scope of influence of his brief address is indicated by his remark to Mr. Lamon that it did not seem to scour—a phrase he sometimes used to describe ineffectiveness. It is further indicated by his action following his speech, when he crumpled in his hand the two sheets of paper on which he had written his address and tossed them upon the floor of the stand from which he spoke, to be picked up, fortunately, by his secretary, John Hay, and subsequently deposited in the Congressional Library.

If any person then present saw, or thought he saw, the marvelous beauties of that wonderful speech, as intelligent men in all lands now see and acknowledge them, his superabundant caution closed his lips and stayed his pen.<sup>9</sup>

As Mr. Lamon presided at the dedicatory ceremonies and was an intimate personal and political friend of the President, his comments upon the address can not be disregarded.

Mr. Nicolay, in concluding his comments upon Mr. Lincoln's address, says:

They were therefore totally unprepared for what they heard, and could not immediately realize that *his* words, and not those of the carefully selected orator, were to carry the concentrated thought of the occasion like a trumpet-peal to farthest posterity.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ward Hill Lamon, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, 1847-1865* (ed. by Dorothy Lamon Teillard, Washington, D.C., 1911), 174-75.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>10</sup> Nicolay, "Lincoln's Gettysburg Address," *Century*, XLVII, 602.



Mr. Carr wrote,

My own recollection, which is more clear as to occurrences in those troublous times, especially those upon that occasion, the responsibilities of which devolved in a great degree upon a board of which I was a member, coincides with that of Mr. Lamon and Mr. Nicolay. It is true, as Mr. Nicolay says, the hearers were totally unprepared for what they heard and could not immediately realize how able and far-reaching was Mr. Lincoln's address. My recollection also confirms that of Mr. Lamon, that no one there present saw the marvelous beauties of that wonderful speech. I did not hear the expressions of Mr. Seward and Mr. Everett in regard to it, as my seat was with the members of our Commission, but from the expressions of opinion I did hear, I have no doubt that they were made.

I heard every word and every articulation of Mr. Lincoln, and had no realization that he did anything more than make "a few dedicatory remarks." His expressions were so plain and homely, without any attempt at rhetorical periods, and his statements were so axiomatic, and, I may say, matter of fact, and so simple, that I had no idea that as an address it was more than ordinary.<sup>11</sup>

R. D. Packard asks,

What did it matter that the dedicatory remarks were indifferently received? The audience destined to hear them would include all posterity. Through Lincoln's momentous words, Gettysburg was to live forever.<sup>12</sup>

As to President Lincoln's manner and bearing, Mr. Carr says:

I was very much struck . . . by the appearance of Mr. Lincoln when he arose and stood before the audience. It seemed to me that I had never seen any other human being who was so stately, and I may say, majestic, and yet benignant. His features had a sad, mournful, almost haggard, and still hopeful expression. Every one was impressed with his sincerity and earnestness.

In his analysis of Mr. Lincoln's address, Mr. Carr thus characterizes its rhetorical excellence:

Short as [it] is . . . it contains all the elements of an elaborate and finished oration,—exordium, argument, climax, and peroration. While each of these divisions is far more extended in Mr. Everett's oration, they are not more marked than in Mr. Lincoln's.

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<sup>11</sup> Carr, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 65-67.

<sup>12</sup> R. D. Packard, "When Lincoln Spoke at Gettysburg," *The Sohioan* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1929- ), XI (1939), 4-9.

In his exordium, consisting of five simple sentences, each one of which recalls a fact apparent to every hearer, he lays foundations for the superstructure upon which he builds, broad and deep.

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon 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 on a great battlefield of that war. We are met to dedicate a portion of it as the 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."

After thus laying the foundation, he states an argument:

"But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot 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 it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work that they have thus far so nobly carried on."

And to make the argument stronger, to clinch it, as we would say, he repeats, "It is rather for us to be dedicated here to the great task remaining before us,—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to the cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion."

And then follows the climax: "That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."

And then the peroration: "That this nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom, and that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

In closing his analysis of the address, Mr. Carr makes this impressive observation:

I want to say in passing that there was one sentence that did deeply affect me—the only one in which the President manifested emotion. With the close of that sentence his lips quivered, and there was a tremor in his voice which I can never forget. I recall it whenever I consider the address. The sentence was, "The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting here to recall the comment of Dr. Christopher B. Coleman, former director of the Indiana Historical Bureau, in a Memorial Day address at Purdue Uni-

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<sup>13</sup> Carr, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 67-77.

versity some years ago, when he said, referring to this same sentence:

At Gettysburg President Lincoln turned from the dedication of the battlefield as a memorial of the men who had fought there, to the dedication, by the battle, of the nation to its unfinished task. . . . Had he known that he was then making the speech which was to be quoted more often than any other delivered in one hundred fifty years of our national history, even so he probably would have belittled what was said in comparison with what was done at Gettysburg.<sup>14</sup>

On the day after the address was delivered, it appeared in full in every leading newspaper of the United States. Even then those who, in a high degree, appreciated it were comparatively few. It was generally assumed that the President would, in what he said, simply dedicate that ground to the sacred purpose for which it had been set apart. But as the people read the printed speech, it gradually dawned upon them that the President had solemnly dedicated those who heard him, and not merely those who heard him, but all his people to the cause for which the martyred heroes about him died and that this was the underlying thought and object of his address.

When Mr. Everett read the address, he began to realize something of its merits; and on the following day he said in a note to the President:

Permit me also to express my great admiration of the thoughts expressed by you with such eloquent simplicity and appropriateness at the consecration of the cemetery. I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came so near the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes.<sup>15</sup>

To which compliment President Lincoln graciously replied on the same day:

Your kind note of today is received. In our respective parts yesterday, you could not have been excused to make a short address, nor I a long one. I am pleased to know that in your judgment, the little I did say was not a failure. Of course, I knew Mr. Everett would not

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher B. Coleman, "The Undying Past," *Bulletin of Purdue University* (Lafayette, 1900- ), XXIX (1929), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Nicolay, "Lincoln's Gettysburg Address," *Century*, XLVII, 604.

fail, and yet, while the whole discourse was eminently satisfactory, and will be of great value, there were passages in it which transcended my expectations.<sup>16</sup>

In this connection it is interesting to note the change in Dr. Everett's opinion of Lincoln. As President-elect, after having read some of Lincoln's informal remarks to the public as he journeyed to Washington for the inauguration, Everett noted in his diary this estimate of Lincoln:

These speeches thus far have been of the most ordinary kind, destitute of everything, not merely a felicity and grace but of common pertinence. He is evidently a person of very inferior cast of character, wholly unequal to the crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Everett's attitude changed, however, as soon as he came to know Lincoln personally, and he spoke about his "intellectual capacities" and how his "kindly . . . spirit mingles its sweetness with the austere cup of public duty." After a formal dinner at the home of Mr. Wills at Gettysburg on the evening before the consecration ceremonies, Dr. Everett said that the President "was the peer of any person present so far as manners, appearance, and conversation were concerned."<sup>18</sup>

While our people gradually began to appreciate in some degree the high character of the address, we did not at all realize at the time how sublime and how comprehensive it was. Not until it had been read and commented upon across the Atlantic did we, generally speaking, place it in our minds among the masterpieces. *The Edinburgh Review*, *The London Spectator*, *The Saturday Review* and several other English periodicals, spoke of it in the highest terms of commendation shortly after its delivery.<sup>19</sup> Goldwin Smith, distinguished English publicist, thus commented upon the excellence of this address: "But, looking to the substance, it may be doubted whether any king in Europe would have expressed himself more royally than the peasant's son."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, XLVII, 604.

<sup>17</sup> Paul R. Frothingham, *Edward Everett, Orator and Statesman* (Boston and New York, 1925), 414.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 453, 461.

<sup>19</sup> Lamon, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, 1847-1865*, pp. 176-77.

<sup>20</sup> Goldwin Smith, "President Lincoln," *Littell's Living Age* (Boston, 1844- ), LXXXIV (1865), 427.

To the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican* goes the honor of contributing the first worthy estimate of the Lincoln address appearing in the American press. Josiah G. Holland, later one of Mr. Lincoln's biographers, said, "Surpassingly fine as Mr. Everett's oration was in the Gettysburg consecration, the rhetorical honors of the occasion were won by President Lincoln."<sup>21</sup>

George William Curtis, then editor of *Harper's Weekly*, took occasion to comment on the Gettysburg address about two weeks after the ceremonies at the battlefield:

The few words of the President were from the heart to the heart. They cannot be read, even, without kindling emotion. "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here." It was as simple and felicitous and earnest a word as was ever spoken.<sup>22</sup>

Later *Harper's Weekly* referred to the Gettysburg Address in an editorial as "the most perfect piece of American eloquence, and as noble and pathetic and appropriate as the oration of Pericles over the Peloponnesian dead."<sup>23</sup> And let it be said to the honor of American patriotism that this high estimate of the quality of this incomparable address has been long universally accepted.

Speaking at the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg in 1913, Newell Dwight Hillis declared that "the greatest thing about the battle of Gettysburg is the fact that it made possible the speech of Abraham Lincoln."<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Louis A. Warren, with whom the study of Lincoln has been a passion since boyhood, expressed his appraisal of the Gettysburg Address in this brief sentence: "In nobility of spirit and majesty of phrase, it is unequaled by any modern utterance."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> William E. Barton, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (Indianapolis, 1930), 117.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 121; *Harper's Weekly* (New York, 1857-1916), VII (1863), 770.

<sup>23</sup> *Harper's Weekly*, VIII (1864), 258.

<sup>24</sup> *Report of the Pennsylvania Commission, Pennsylvania at Gettysburg* (3 vols., Harrisburg, 1914-1939), III, 161.

<sup>25</sup> Louis A. Warren (ed.), "Increasing Respect for the Gettysburg Address," *Lincoln Lore* (Fort Wayne, 1929- ), No. 343 (November 4, 1935).

No one, perhaps, on either side of the Atlantic has commented more succinctly and understandingly about this address than did Lord Curzon, Earl of Kedleston, Chancellor of the University of Oxford, when he delivered an address on "Modern Parliamentary Eloquence" before the University of Cambridge on November 6, 1913. In the course of his address, he referred to what he considered the "three supreme masterpieces of English eloquence—the toast of William Pitt after the victory of Trafalgar, and two of Lincoln's speeches: The Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural." In his comments he said:

The Gettysburg Address is far more than a pleasing piece of occasional oratory. It is a marvelous piece of English composition. It is a pure well of English undefiled. It sets one to inquiring with nothing short of wonder "How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" The more closely the address is analyzed the more one must confess astonishment at its choice of words, the precision of its thought, its simplicity, directness and effectiveness.<sup>26</sup>

The relevant implications of the Lincoln address to present world conditions are properly within this discussion. Almost every word of the address is as pertinent to the life and death struggle in which we are now engaged for the preservation of our democratic form of government as it was to our duties and obligations following the battle of Gettysburg eighty years ago.

In this connection it is an interesting fact that Sun Yat-sen's plans for China's democracy were inspired by this address. Lincoln's phrases, "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," were paraphrased by Dr. Sun as "the people to have, the people to govern, the people to enjoy," and these eventually were presented to the Chinese people as the Three People's Doctrine,<sup>27</sup> the cornerstone of democracy which Free China is now fighting to defend and to perpetuate.

It is worthy of note that wherever one happens upon the text of the Gettysburg address today, particularly in public places, he finds others thoughtfully and contemplatively reading again the immortal words of consecration

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<sup>26</sup> Barton, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 129.

<sup>27</sup> Leonard S. Hsü, *Sun Yat-sen, His Political and Social Ideals* (Los Angeles, 1933), 108.

and dedication. An outstanding instance of this can be observed in the beautiful and impressive Lincoln Memorial in Washington, which contains only the statute of Lincoln and the texts of his Gettysburg address and his second inaugural speech. Bernard DeVoto has thus described his visit:

Impressive as the statue is, one presently ignores it; the texts count more. One sees them working an effect on the uniformed boys. On the approaches and the steps there is a good deal of talk, laughter, and horseplay. It becomes a whisper and presently dies out; the place is quiet. They stand reading those texts, they loiter for a while, and few of them say anything as they go away. There are those ribbons and stars—North Africa, the Solomons, the Aleutians, the sea frontiers, Sicily, the sky over France and Germany. Some of those boys have been there, the rest are on their way—and they might have spent this half-hour with their friends, their wives, or their girls. They don't talk much as they go away, and one becomes aware that they came here to be in touch for a moment with the highest expression ever made of what gives them meaning. A man is speaking to them out of an earlier testing, an earlier proof. They know what he is talking about.<sup>28</sup>

Abraham Lincoln is with us still—more potently than any man in our history.

If one does not look beyond the words of this address and thinks only of its simplicity and its rare rhetorical perfection, he will lose much that thoughtful contemplation will suggest. In this view of the address, I venture finally to say that the unfathomable mystery in Lincoln's Gettysburg address is not *when* or *where* he wrote any part of it, but *how*. In his circumstances from birth through the formative years of his young manhood; with his limited educational opportunities, as we know them; and having neither varied nor extensive experience in his later years beyond the routine practice of law in the pioneer days of a hundred years ago in central Illinois—with such a background, how could he produce in a few days "the supreme masterpiece of the English language" in ten sentences, of two hundred seventy-two words of which two hundred and four are of one syllable?

True, he had read *Aesop's Fables* and biographies of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, and Robert

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<sup>28</sup> Bernard DeVoto, "The Easy Chair," *Harper's* (New York and London, 1850- ), CLXXXVIII (1943), 38.

Burns was his favorite poet. He was also a student of the Bible and he read William Shakespeare, both of which are competent guidance to good English composition; but the Gettysburg address is more than English composition. It is, commonly speaking, so all inclusive, so far-reaching in its implications, so lofty in its conceptions, and withal so profoundly moving in every sentence that its creation by one of Lincoln's limited background is beyond understanding.

I am not unaware that this unparalleled achievement has been attributed to preparation that began with Lincoln's birth and continued to the moment he rose to consecrate the Gettysburg battlefield to the cause of the war and to dedicate all his people to the principles of free government and political equality. It has been said also that every experience of Abraham Lincoln, throughout his life, was reflected in his sublime pronouncement at Gettysburg. Nevertheless, such observations do not account for or explain such power. The ability to write "pure English undefiled" as exemplified in the Gettysburg address cannot be attained by absorption of physical conditions reflected in a background marked by the deprivations of poverty and the hardships of pioneer life. The classic in English letters is not evolved through such methods. Again, Abraham Lincoln defies analysis.<sup>29</sup>

The mystery becomes even more inexplicable as we recall the qualifications of Edward Everett for his part in the consecration exercises and realize that his oration of two hours is long since largely forgotten, while Lincoln's address of two minutes has become immortal.

Everett seemed educated and culturally trained for what he regarded as the supreme achievement of his life—his Gettysburg oration. The son of a Boston clergyman; graduate of Harvard; early widely known in the Unitarian ministry; returned to Harvard as professor of Greek; a

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<sup>29</sup> Dr. M. L. Houser, *Young Abraham Lincoln and Log College* (Peoria, Illinois, 1942), verifies in his painstaking researches the wide range of purposeful reading and intense study by Lincoln during his years in Indiana and his earlier years in Illinois. This study, nevertheless, does not solve appreciably the mystery of Lincoln's inexplicable and unequalled power manifested in his discriminating and impressive use of English, which he seemed suddenly to possess in his inaugural and Gettysburg addresses.



member of Congress for ten years; governor of Massachusetts four terms; minister to England; again back to Harvard, this time as president; secretary of state in President Millard Fillmore's cabinet; and finally United States senator from Massachusetts. After a distinguished career there, he retired to follow his literary predilections in the course of which he was nominated in 1860 for vice-president on the Bell-Everett ticket of the Constitutional Union party.<sup>30</sup> Naturally the high spot in the program for the consecration ceremonies would be the oration of one thus qualified to speak; for, compared with Everett's long and impressive record, Lincoln's four terms in the Illinois legislature and one term as a representative in Congress seem insignificant.

The more one reflects upon this incredible and unprecedented performance of Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg—so perfect in composition that the addition, omission, or substitution of a single word would destroy its literary perfection and impair its sublime spiritual quality—the more incomprehensible and marvelous it becomes, unless we adopt the hypothesis of James Russell Lowell, as expressed in the verses on Lincoln in his "Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration," three months after Lincoln's death. Is it possible that Lowell solved the mystery in these lines?

Nature, they say, doth dote,  
And cannot make a man  
Save on some worn-out plan,  
Repeating us by rote:  
For him her Old-World moulds aside she threw,  
And, choosing sweet clay from the breast  
Of the unexhausted West,  
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,  
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.  
How beautiful to see  
Once more a shepherd of mankind indeed,  
Who loved his charge, but never loved to lead;  
One whose meek flock the people joyed to be,  
Not lured by any cheat of birth,  
But by his clean-grained human worth,

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<sup>30</sup> Henry G. Pearson, "Edward Everett," *Dictionary of American Biography*, VI (1931), 223-26.

And brave old wisdom of sincerity!  
They knew that outward grace is dust;  
They could not choose but trust  
In that sure-footed mind's unfaltering skill,  
And supple-tempered will  
That bent like perfect steel to spring again and thrust.

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The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,  
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,  
New birth of our new soil, the first American.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *The Complete Writings of James Russell Lowell* (16 vols., Boston and New York, 1904), XIII, 23-25.