

*“That these dead shall not have
died in vain”*

LINCOLN’S GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

1863

Only 272 words—but what words! Only 10 sentences—but what sentences! The historian Garry Wills (born 1934) has written about President Abraham Lincoln’s brief speech at the formal dedication of the 17-acre National Soldiers’ Cemetery, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania:

“The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. They walked off, from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely.”

In early July, 1863, General Robert E. Lee’s army, driving to split the United States in two, had been turned back by the Union soldiers at Gettysburg. Seven thousand Union and Confederate soldiers gave their “last full measure of devotion” in the decisive three-day battle. The Union had “a new birth of freedom,” the Southern cause was broken. The Confederate army, thrown into a defensive war, realized it would never win. The nation, “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” had endured. Lincoln (1809–1865) worked on the speech the night before delivery and on the platform while waiting hours to be introduced. He spoke it slowly, clearly, and, with his Kentucky accent, in a high voice. It was over so fast that photographers missed it.

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 on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field 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 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 which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.

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.

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