The Gettysburg Address: Abraham Lincoln's Re-founding of the Nation

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"In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever." This, I trust everyone knows, is the inscription on the back wall of the Lincoln Memorial, visible above the awe-inspiring statue of our greatest president, greeting us and inducing reverence as we enter what is, in my opinion, the finest public building anywhere. On facing walls, to left and right, are carved in stone Lincoln's two greatest speeches, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, Lincoln's personal contributions to his enduring memory. The world may little note nor long remember what exactly happened at Gettysburg, but it will never forget what Lincoln said there and on the second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential office.

The Gettysburg Address has been memorized, recited, and admired.[1] Countless scholars have discussed its rhetorical devices, literary merit, and political reception. But few have attended to the *thought* of Lincoln's speech and the deeper purposes that it serves. People do recognize that this funeral oration, honoring Union dead in the battle that marked a turning point in the war against Southern rebellion, was even more clearly a summons to the living to prosecute to victorious conclusion a war that, despite the victory at Gettysburg, was not going well enough: "the great task remaining before us" is, first and foremost, the winning of the war. But few people see that the speech offers Lincoln's reinterpretation of the American Founding, his understanding of the war as a *test* of that founding, and his own characterization of this nation now being reborn through passing that bloody test. Central to Lincoln's declaration of America reborn is his own new, as-it-were baptismal, teaching on the relation between liberty and equality, crucial to our new birth of freedom. In this talk, I would like to offer some evidence for these large claims.

The express rhetorical purpose of the speech is clearly evident on the surface. The occasion is the dedication of a Union cemetery at Gettysburg for the burial of the nearly 5,300 Union fallen (killed in 2 days; another 17,000 Union soldiers were wounded; 27,000 Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded). Lincoln acknowledges that, "it is

[1] The text of the Gettysburg Address is appended to this essay.

altogether fitting and proper that we should do this." But he is much less interested in dedicating a patch of earth to honor the dead than he is in inspiring his listeners, "us the living," who are—despite dispiriting loss and grief— "to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced," to "the great task remaining before us," namely, victory in the war and the restoration of the Union, now on a more solid foundation. But it is the outer frame of the speech, and especially its beginning and its end, that bespeaks Lincoln's larger purpose: to create for future generations an interpretation of the war, and especially the war's relation to both the once "*new* nation," brought forth by "our fathers" and "conceived in liberty," and "*this* nation," which, through the sacrifice of war and our dedication, "shall have a new birth of freedom." Before turning to those passages at the beginning and the end, I need to say something about the relation of this speech to a concern that had preoccupied Lincoln for at least 25 years.

In January 1838, in a remarkable speech to the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln (age 28) worried about the perpetuation of our institutions, now that the Founding generation had gone to rest and those who had known them were also dying out. It is an astonishing speech, informed by profound reflections on themes such as law and lawlessness, soaring political ambition (including his own), and the vulnerability of free institutions in democratic times to both mob rule and tyranny. It is in this speech that Lincoln asserts that perpetuating our political institutions requires the development of a "political religion," comprising reverence for the laws and, more generally, sober sentiments "hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason"—among them, the founding principles. As Lincoln put it:

> . . . Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense. —Let those materials be moulded into *general intelligence; sound morality;* and, in particular, *a reverence for the constitution and laws.*

It is my contention that Lincoln was, throughout his life, obsessed with the problem of attaching his fellow citizens to the American regime, and that he self-consciously crafted his best public utterances with a view to their becoming canonical texts of the much needed political religion.

The Gettysburg Address is, in both form and substance, a perfect text for the bible of American political religion. It is short enough to be memorized: 3 paragraphs of progressively increasing length, 10 sentences, 272 words (only 130 different words), 74% of which are monosyllables. The polysyllabic words stand out against the little words, and only a few pregnant longer words appear more than once: among the disyllabic words, only *conceived*, *living*, *rather*, *people* (three times in the last clause), and especially *nation* (5 times: "*new* nation" in paragraph 1; "that nation," "any nation," and "that nation" in paragraph 2; but "*this* nation" in the last sentence of paragraph 3, this nation that shall be reborn into freedom). Among still longer words, Lincoln uses more than once only *devotion* (twice), *consecrate* or *consecrated* (twice), and—the most important word in the speech—*dedicate* or *dedicated* (6 times). Noteworthy also is the echoing use of the word "here"—heard 8 times—the importance of which will be clear by the end.

The three paragraphs of progressively increasing length refer to time periods and actors of progressively increasing rhetorical importance: (paragraph 1) the *past* ("Four-score and seven years ago"; "our fathers"; 30 words); (paragraph 2) the *very immediate present* ("Now"; *we* who are engaged in a great civil war, but mainly a much smaller *we* who are, right *here* and right *now*, met on a great battlefield of that war and who, fittingly and properly, have come to dedicate a portion of that field; 73 words); and (paragraph 3) our *future* in relation to our present and our past (contrasting "the brave men" who fought and died, with "us the living"; and moving from (a) our inability through speech to dedicate ground better consecrated by the deeds of the brave men, to (b) "us the living" dedicating *ourselves* to the great task remaining before us, (c) to "*we* here highly resolv[ing]" to win the war, so that (d) certain great things will follow, both for this nation ("a new birth") and also for people everywhere (169 words, nearly half of them in the last sentence about our dedication). The speech, in its spatial references, has an hour-glass structure, widest below: it opens "on this continent," narrows in its center to "a great battle-field" and, even narrower, to "a portion of that field," but finishes by suggesting that our dedication "here" can ensure that popular government will never perish from the whole *earth*.

But these are but smaller formal details, important to be sure for the rhetorical effect, but hardly by themselves enough to give the speech canonical standing. That comes from its content, and especially from its beginning and its end. Let us examine them.

> 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.

Four score and seven years ago. Why does Lincoln begin with this expression? Scholars note that the language is Biblical, and that it echoes the 90th Psalm:

> The days of our years are three score and ten,
> Or even by reason of strength four score years.

But few notice that, by this biblical reference, Lincoln is making a crucial substantive point: the deed he is about to recount, he intimates, happened not in living memory; four score *and seven* years ago none alive today (in 1863) had yet been born. Lincoln's beginning reflects and highlights his long-standing concern about perpetuation in a fully post-revolutionary age.

The theme and imagery of the first paragraph, and indeed of the frame of the speech as a whole, is *birth*: the birth (and, at the end, the *re*-birth) of the nation. Four score and seven, or 87, years identifies the birth year as 1776, the year of the Declaration of Independence, not 1787, the year of the Constitution. Lincoln gives no hint of the bloody war of American separation and secession that secured in deed the Declaration's verbal assertion of our independence from Great Britain. Instead, Lincoln gives us an image of quiet generative congress. According to Lincoln, *our fathers*—after pointing out that we could not have known them, Lincoln calls the founders *our fathers*, rather than our *grand*fathers, bringing us close to them in spirit and inviting pious gratitude for our patrimony—brought forth or sired upon this continent (as mother) a *new* nation. It is new not only in historical fact; it is new also in principle. Lincoln tells us precisely how it was distinctively novel: it was "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Several points deserve emphasis, especially when we compare Lincoln's description of the founding birth with the birth certificate language of the Declaration of Independence itself.

In the Declaration the signers declare: "We *hold* these *truths* to be *self-evident*: that all men are created equal." In Lincoln's version, three important changes are made. First, Lincoln changes a "self-evident truth" to a "proposition." Both terms come from geometry (Lincoln had studied Euclid): a self-evident truth is an *axiom*, which neither admits of proof nor requires proof, for it contains its evidence in itself. According to the

Declaration, human equality is held to be an axiom, evident in itself: if one understands the meaning of "men," one must immediately see that *all* men are *equally human*. A proposition, on the other hand, is like a geometric *theorem*: its truth *must* be proved; yet it may turn out to be either unprovable or even false. According to Lincoln, human equality was less a self-evident *premise* of the American founding, more a proposition in need of *future* demonstration.

The significance of the shift from axiom to proposition is revealed by Lincoln's second big change: according to Lincoln "our fathers" treated "all men are created equal" not, as the Declaration states, as a *truth* that "we *hold*," but as something to which they were *dedicated*. Lincoln shifts the picture from theory to practice: the proposition is more than an intellectual matter that one holds as a belief and proves in speech; it is a practical goal to which one must devote oneself in action. The truth of the proposition of human equality cannot be shown by Euclidean reasoning; it must be demonstrated through deed and devotion.

Third, and most subtly, Lincoln does not ask us to think of the proposition only as a universal truth that we too can try to prove in practice; he wraps that truth in the pious drapery of the dedication of *our fathers*. We should take an interest in this proposition, he implies, not only because it might be true, but as a matter of honoring the memory of our remarkable fathers. In short, Lincoln has transformed a merely intellectual truth, held as self-evident and accessible to universal human reason (the Declaration's formulation), into a truth requiring *practical* demonstration by *particular* people—our fathers—who dedicated themselves to doing so. In this way, Lincoln summons our ancestral piety and attaches it to an emerging political religion, whose creed he is here redefining. Yet, as we shall see, ancestral piety alone cannot sustain us, and a new birth is necessary, in large part because our fathers did not get it exactly right.

Why does Lincoln change the Declaration? In order to address and correct a deep difficulty in our founding regarding the relation between equality and liberty. A clue is provided in the other big idea in the first sentence, "conceived in liberty." We know the fathers, we know the mother continent, and we know the child nation and to what it is dedicated. But what is meant by "conceived *in* liberty," and how does this figure in Lincoln's revision of the story of America's birth?

The oddity of the "in" in the phrase, "conceived in Liberty," has confused me for some time. One astute reader suggested that, just as a natural child is "conceived in love,"

so the American national child was "conceived in love of Liberty." I myself have instead toyed with "conceived *freely*, conceived by *choice*," not by necessity or nature or in passion, or, alternatively, "conceived in an act of independence and liberation, from the rule of Britain." But an illuminating interpretation was recently given me by my friend, Harvey Flaumenhaft, of St. John's College, Annapolis. "In Liberty," he suggests, refers to the political matrix that characterizes both "the before" and "the after" of the "bringing forth" of the new nation, and that matrix is British liberty, the context also of the American colonies. Britain, like the new republic, was a liberal polity, but British liberty was mixed with a hereditary principle—not only the monarchy, but especially a hereditary nobility of dukes and barons who lorded it over the commons. The true American innovation is the replacement of the hereditary principle with the principle of equality and equal rights: governments, the Founders declared, exist to secure the rights not only of the highborn of hereditary privilege but of *all* men, who are equally endowed with unalienable rights.

We today take for granted the compatibility of political liberty and political equality. But this novel addition of the principle of equality to the principle of liberty was then an unprecedented experiment. Not unreasonably, it gave rise to two big questions: Can a nation "so conceived and so dedicated long endure"? Can political equality be obtained without the *surrender* of liberty? Taking the second question first, Lincoln had been personally attacked as a tyrant who was destroying liberty in his pursuit of equality: "Maryland, My Maryland," the state song written in 1861, begins "The despot's heel is on thy shore, Maryland! His torch is at thy temple door, Maryland!" and the alleged despot is none other than Lincoln! His later suspension of the writ of habeas corpus would eventually be ruled unconstitutional. Yet Lincoln teaches in this speech that commitment to equality is not only compatible with liberty, but is in fact freedom's only true foundation.

Regarding the first point, the war, Lincoln says, is a test: a test of the durability of a nation committed to equality as well as to liberty.[2] And although he does not say so here, as he does in the Second Inaugural, the war is a test that is now upon the nation because of an offensive defect in the founding. The defect is not mentioned by name in the Gettysburg Address, but its name is slavery. (Lincoln, by the way, also does not mention either the North or the South—or the Union—nor does he here assign blame for the war; in the Second Inaugural he explicitly suggests that the offense of slavery lies with the

[2] Moreover, because of the unprecedented character and great good fortune of America's founding, Lincoln insisted that the civil war was a test also for durability of *any* nation so conceived and so dedicated.

nation as a whole.)

The Declaration of Independence was a liberal document, not a republican one. It did not by itself specify any particular form of government; any government is legitimate so long as it secures the rights of all who live under its rule. Yet despite adding the egalitarian principle to the British liberal principle, and despite the fact that, in Lincoln's reformulation of the nation's birth, equality as the *goal* was to come out of liberty by way of dedication, the new nation was flawed and stained from the start by the institution of slavery.

Contrary to current opinion, many of the Founders understood that America's practice fell short of its founding principles, and they devised instrumentalities that they hoped would place slavery in the course of its ultimate extinction. But by Lincoln's time the situation had deteriorated. Not only was the regime in contradiction with itself, falling short of its stated ideals; worse, the South in rebelling had given effect to the view that the principle of equality was not merely too lofty but, in fact, as a proposition simply false. Lincoln knew that this denial of human equality was the true cause of the war; and Lincoln understood that the bloody struggle over slavery was the true test of the nation. Now that the self-evident truth of equality had been turned into a proposition needing proof, and now that the rebels had repudiated the proposition calling it a self-evident lie, passing the test meant winning the war, in part because winning the war meant a repudiation of the repudiation, a vindication of the proposition of equality.

So what then is at issue in this war, and why must "we *here* highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain"? The goal for which victory is indispensable is two-fold, both transcending the mere restoration of the now dissolved Union: first, "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom"; and second, "that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

The new birth of freedom—for which Lincoln is here offering the baptismal blessing and explanation—is a birth through blood, not through generative congress of ancestral patriarchs and mother continent. More important, this new freedom will differ from the British liberty in which the nation was first conceived. Here equality will not come out of liberty. Rather, *freedom will be born out of equality*, because the inegalitarian principle and the practice of slavery will be repudiated and defeated as the necessary condition of rebirth. Masters as well as slaves will share in this new birth of freedom, having shed the mutual degradation that enslavement brings to them both. Liberty, says Lincoln, has not

only not been destroyed, as the rebels claimed; it will for the first time be put on a truly secure foundation: the radical equality of all human beings, now thrice called "the people," who will govern and be governed for their own well-being. We the people, we the living rededicating ourselves here on the graves of the fallen, become, under God, the nation's new patriarchs and founders.

The nation conceived in liberty got a new birth of freedom, thanks to the self-sacrificing deeds of "the brave men . . . who struggled here" and thanks to the dedication of the living, under Lincoln's leadership, to "the cause for which they gave their last full measure of devotion." But taking the long view, the nation became better able to attach the hearts and minds of its citizens thanks to the words fitly spoken at Gettysburg by Father Abraham, who presided over its refounding in speech no less than in deed and whose words have inspired all who came afterwards to dedicate themselves to preserve, protect, and perfect our political freedom and equality. Today and tomorrow, our attachment to the republic is greatly enhanced whenever we reanimate Lincoln's words and, under their still living instruction, remain dedicated to his vision of our national purpose.

Appendix:
The Gettysburg Address

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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 battle-field 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 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 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.

November 19, 1863