

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Centennial of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

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To commemorate the centennial of the Gettysburg Address, President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) was asked to speak during a special event at the Gettysburg National Cemetery. Already scheduled on a trip to Texas, Kennedy declined the invitation, and former President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969) stepped in to honor Lincoln's memory. Eisenhower's speech exalting America's great fallen hero would be soon overshadowed by another event that occurred just days later: the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.

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What was Lincoln's "faith"? Why can we not finish the work called for in the Gettysburg Address? If that work is still—and will remain—unfinished, how could Lincoln's faith be "justified"? How, according to Eisenhower, can we properly pay tribute to Lincoln? Does this suggestion make sense to you? Is it sufficient?

We mark today the centennial of an immortal address. We stand where Abraham Lincoln stood as, a century ago, he gave to the world words as moving in their solemn cadence as they are timeless in their meaning. Little wonder it is that, as here we sense his deep dedication to freedom, our own dedication takes added strength.

Lincoln had faith that the ancient drums of Gettysburg, throbbing mutual defiance from the battle lines of the blue and the gray, would one day beat in unison, to summon a people, happily united in peace, to fulfill, generation by generation, a noble destiny. His faith has been justified—but the unfinished work of which he spoke in 1863 is still unfinished; because of human frailty, it always will be. Where we see the serenity with which time has invested this hallowed ground, Lincoln saw the scarred earth and felt the press of personal grief. Yet he lifted his eyes to the future, the future that is our present. He foresaw a new birth of freedom, a freedom and equality for all which, under God, would restore the purpose and meaning of America, defining a goal that challenges each of us to attain his full stature of citizenship.

We read Lincoln's sentiments, we ponder his words—the beauty of the sentiments he expressed enravels us; the majesty of his words holds us spellbound—but we have not paid to his message its just tribute until we—ourselves—live it. For well he knew that to live for country is a duty, as demanding as is the readiness to die for it. So long as this

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truth remains our guiding light, self-government in this nation will never die. True to democracy's basic principle that all are created equal and endowed by the Creator with priceless human rights, the good citizen now, as always before, is called upon to defend the rights of others as he does his own; to subordinate self to the country's good; to refuse to take the easy way today that may invite national disaster tomorrow; to accept the truth that the work still to be done awaits his doing.

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On this day of commemoration, Lincoln still asks of each of us, as clearly as he did of those who heard his words a century ago, to give that increased devotion to the cause for which soldiers in all our wars have given the last full measure of devotion. Our answer, the only worthy one we can render to the memory of the great emancipator, is ever to defend, protect and pass on unblemished, to coming generations the heritage—the trust—that Abraham Lincoln, and all the ghostly legions of patriots of the past, with unflinching faith in their God, have bequeathed to us—a nation free, with liberty, dignity, and justice for all.