WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL
The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Abraham Lincoln's Re-founding of the Nation

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This essay interpreting the Gettysburg Address is based on a talk given in June 2007 at the AEI World Forum in Beaver Creek, Colorado, by humanist educator and AEI scholar Leon R. Kass (b. 1939). What was Lincoln's purpose for the Gettysburg Address, according to Kass? How does the structure and imagery of the Address serve this purpose? How, and why, does Lincoln change the Declaration of Independence? How does he reinterpret the American Founding? How is the nation's "new birth of freedom" related to its "first" birth? How are the principles of freedom and equality to be joined under this "new founding"? Who is responsible for the nation's rebirth and re-founding? Why is the Gettysburg Address still meaningful to us today?

From the time I was old enough to have a hero, Abraham Lincoln has been mine. At first, it was largely an accident of birth. Born in Chicago on Lincoln's birthday (1939), to immigrant parents who admired Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, I was educated in a public school whose classrooms displayed portraits of Lincoln (and George Washington) and which closed annually (on the exact date, February 12th) in honor of Lincoln's birthday, still in Illinois a civic holiday. One of my prize possessions (a birthday present, I believe) was a large loose-leaf scrapbook bearing a large portrait of President Lincoln as its leather-bound cover. I loved Lincoln well before I really knew why he deserved my—and our—veneration.

Time and study—not to mention living in the United States under thirteen presidents—have steadily increased my love and admiration of Lincoln. He wins my heart because of his exemplary character, his deep understanding of human affairs, his principled and prudent leadership during the Civil, his courageous deeds, and, not least, his way with words and his inspiring speeches. Justly celebrated as the best among those speeches is the address Lincoln gave at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863.

The Gettysburg Address has been memorized, recited, and admired. Countless scholars have discussed its rhetorical devices, literary merit, and political reception. But few have attended to the *thought* of Lincoln's speech and its deeper purposes, purposes that it continues to serve. Many people recognize that this funeral oration, honoring the Union dead in the battle that marked a turning point in the war against Southern rebellion,

was clearly even more a summons to the living to prosecute to victorious conclusion a war that, despite the victory at Gettysburg, was not going well enough: what Lincoln calls "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 construal of the war as a *test* of that founding, and his own radical call for a second birth of our nation, a nation to be reborn through passing that bloody test. Central to Lincoln's declaration of America reborn is his revisionist reading of our original birth announcement, the Declaration of Independence and, with it, his own as-it-were baptismal teaching on the relation between liberty and equality, crucial to our new birth of freedom.

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 3 days; another 17,000 Union soldiers were wounded; 27,000 Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded). Lincoln acknowledges that, "it is 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," dedicated 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 and resolve, "shall have a new birth of freedom." Before turning to those passages at the beginning and the end, we need to see 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 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*.

Lincoln remained, throughout his life, obsessed with the problem of attaching his fellow citizens to the American republic. And one might well say that his speeches taken as a whole—unsurpassed in the annals of American political utterance—follow his advice in the Lyceum address: they articulate the clear rational principles of the American Republic, they are molded into persuasive and sound moral arguments, and they are always in the service of enhancing reverence for the constitution and its laws. But his *greatest* public utterances were prophetic speeches, speeches that soar and move the soul because they display powers higher than cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason. These supremely inspiring speeches, I submit, were crafted by Lincoln with a view to their becoming canonical texts of the much-needed political religion.

The Gettysburg Address is, in both form and substance, the 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 both its content and its elevated tone and expression, and especially from its famous beginning and 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 pious biblical reference, Lincoln is also 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. He starts by reminding us of things we could not possibly remember.

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 1775, the year of Lexington and Concord, 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 or *fore*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: it was, Lincoln tells us, "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 notions come from geometry (Lincoln had studied Euclid): a self-evident truth is an *axiom* (for example, "The whole is greater than the part" or "Things equal to the same thing are also equal to one another"), which neither admits of proof nor requires proof, for it contains its evidence in itself. If you *understand* the statement, you are compelled also to *affirm* it as *true*. 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 (both male and female[*]) are *equally human*; and, further, one must see that they *equally* possess, by *virtue* of their *equal* humanity, inalienable *rights*, among them, the right to defend their life (when threatened), safeguard their liberty (against enslavement or despotism), and pursue their own happiness as they see fit. A proposition, on the other hand, is like a geometric *theorem*: it is something now put before us—a "pro-posit-ing"—whose truth *must* be proved; yet it may turn out to be either unprovable or even false.

[*] *The term "men" in the Declaration of Independence clearly means "human beings," and refers equally to male and female human beings. The same is true of both of the putative sources for the Declaration's teaching of human equality: the natural rights teaching of John Locke and the "created-in-the-image-of-God" teaching of the Bible ("God created man in his own image; male and female created He them").*

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 shifting "all men are created equal" 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 a proposal 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 and moral goal to which one must devote oneself in action. The effective truth of the proposition of human equality cannot be shown by Euclidean reasoning; it must be demonstrated through deed and devotion.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, we need to clarify what sort of human equality needs proof through deed and devotion. The propositional "created equal" clearly does not mean, "created the same." Neither does it mean equal in every respect. We human beings naturally differ in body and mind, talents and character, desire and determination. Some of us are sturdy, swift, or striving; others are sickly, slow, or slothful. Some find success and happiness, others failure and misery. Some are rich, powerful, and in positions of authority; most people are not. But these natural, social, or economic inequalities in no way contradict the equal *humanity* of otherwise differing human beings. Neither do they refute the derivative—and politically relevant—idea of natural or God-given equal *rights*, including the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is the Declaration's (pre-political) equality of intrinsic rights, not social or political equality, to which, according to Lincoln, our nation was dedicated and which, as a proposition, requires proof through deed and dedication.[‡]

[†] *It should also be noted that, in the Declaration, "all men are created equal" is but the first of several such self-evident truths. It is closely followed by assertions about (a) (equal) inalienable rights, (b) rights secured by governments, justly instituted (only) by consent of the governed, and (in the event that instituted governments become destructive of those ends) (c) the right of revolution and of instituting new government, according to principles and forms deemed likely to effect the people's safety and happiness. Thus, in contrast to Lincoln's formulation in the Gettysburg Address, in the context of the declaring independence, the claim of human equality, although it is stated first, functions less as a national credo, and more as the beginning of a logical argument for legitimating the American revolution.*

[‡] *It is commonly overlooked that, because of the great diversity of talents, ambitions, and efforts of human beings, securing these equal individual rights, especially the right to pursue happiness, virtually guarantees enormous inequalities of outcomes and achievements—economic, social, cultural, political. Neither Lincoln nor the signers of the Declaration of Independence were simple egalitarians.*

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 the principles of 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—not so much in idea as in practice.

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?

Attending closely to the image of generation, we note that, because conception precedes birth, our fathers who brought forth the new nation, according to Lincoln, already enjoyed liberty when they conceived her. But 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 a fit of passion, or, alternatively, "conceived in an act of independence and liberation, from the rule of Britain." But an illuminating interpretation was 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 her colonies and 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 freely chosen 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. Or, in Lincoln's formulation, our fathers exercised their liberty to dedicate a new nation to the principle of human equality.

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 the proposition of human 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.[§] 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 will explicitly suggest that the offense of slavery lies with the nation as a whole.)

The Declaration of Independence was a liberal document, not a republican (or democratic) one. It did not by itself specify any particular form of government: *any* government (including monarchy or aristocracy) is legitimate so long as it secures the rights of all who live under its rule and rules by consent of the governed. Yet despite

[§] *Lincoln insisted that the civil war was a test also for durability of any nation so conceived and so dedicated. Why might our civil war have such universal significance? In part, perhaps, because of the unprecedented character and great good fortune of America's founding: what other nation heretofore in the name of certain abstract moral and political principles? But also, as we shall see, because the war was fought precisely to defend those principles against rebellious forces that denied those principles and sought to destroy the nation that rested on them. Victory against a rebellion based on denial of fundamental principles is surely evidence of durability.*

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. And, in practical terms, only by winning the war and by restoring the Union could slavery be abolished and the equal humanity of all citizens given enduring political legitimacy.

This is made clear in the end of the speech, where Lincoln moves from the deeds of the noble dead to "us the living," and, finally, from the religious language of dedication and devotion to the more political language of resolution.

> 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.

Why must "we *here* highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain"? The goal for which victory is indispensable, stated in Lincoln's conclusion, is two-fold, both aspects 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, 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 made possible only through bloodshed, 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, if we adhere to our resolve, *freedom will be newly 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 and resolving to act hereafter in service to the cause, become, under God, the nation's new patriarchs and founders.

But it is Lincoln's final words, those enunciating the second goal of the war, that show why the new birth of freedom goes beyond the mere abolition of slavery, and why the vindication of the principle of equality goes beyond securing the intrinsic human rights of the Declaration of Independence. "Government of the people, by the people, for the people" is, in fact, Lincoln's final alteration and improvement of the Declaration, going beyond its neutrality regarding the form of government. To the Declaration's legitimating philosophical principle of consent of the governed Lincoln adds the operative practical (and Constitutional) principle of *popular self-government*. Not only are the people to be governed ("*of* the people"), but *they* are to do the governing ("*by* the people"). Also, the clear purpose of government is not the prosperity of the few, but the well-being of all ("*for* the people"). The new synthesis of freedom and equality takes the form of democratic self-rule—not just rule of the majority, but that special sort of democratic self-rule that is informed by the proposition of radical human equality and equal human rights.

The nation conceived in liberty got a new birth, a birth of freedom and popular self-government, 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.