

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Gettysburg Address

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln (1809–65) delivered his most memorable speech at a ceremony dedicating the cemetery for the Union dead at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, site of the great victory in July of that year which marked a turning point in the Civil War. Lincoln used the occasion to offer his interpretation of the war and the reasons for which it was being fought. To do so, he revisits the Declaration of Independence, summoning the nation to achieve a “new birth of freedom” through renewed dedication to the founding proposition of human equality.

Lincoln says that the great civil war is a “test.” Of what is the war a test? Can the truth of principles be demonstrated by fighting—and winning—a war? What is the difference between “holding” equality as a “self-evident truth” and regarding it as a “proposition” to which we are dedicated? What is the difference between the “new birth of freedom,” which Lincoln hopes will emerge from the bloody war, and the original birth of the nation, “conceived in Liberty”? How does he understand the relation between equality and freedom? What, according to Lincoln, is “the cause for which they gave their last full measure of devotion”? How are the living properly to honor their sacrifice?

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

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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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