

Roots in Ripon

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27 June 2016

Chuck Roots

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The Gettysburg Address

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is a literary *pièce de résistance*. This brief two-minute speech has captivated historians and all lovers America for the past 150-plus years.

It has been erroneously reported that President Lincoln wrote this speech while riding the train from Washington, DC to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. In fact, he began writing the speech in the White House using White House letterhead stationary. His normal approach in crafting a speech was to work on it well in advance of the event. It is surmised by historians in this case that the Address had not been completed until after arriving at Gettysburg. The reason given that debunks his having written the Address on the train points out that his handwriting was the same as all other documents he had written – a challenging feat on a rocking and rolling train in 1863!

The Gettysburg Address was given on November 19, 1863. The crowd in attendance was well aware of the importance of the Address, and they were expecting a real stem-winder. Seeing as the definition for stem-winder is "a rousing speech, especially by a politician," the speaker on this occasion met that criteria. He was an American politician, pastor, educator, diplomat, and orator. He served as a U.S. Representative, a U.S. Senator, the 15th Governor of Massachusetts, Minister to Great Britain, and United States Secretary of State. He was fluent in Greek and Latin, and was a noted historian on Greece. You may be scratching your head at this point, asking, "Lincoln?" No, not Lincoln. The keynote speaker for that day was Edward Everett. Everyone was expecting to be dazzled by the man's brilliance, and they were. The climax to Everett's career as an orator was the opportunity to speak at an event where the recent dead in battle were memorialized. He was invited to give this speech more than two months earlier, while President Lincoln, not to be the main speaker, was given 17 days' notice.

Everett did dazzle the audience, speaking for two hours without notes. His oratory was not lost on President Lincoln who at the end of Everett's speech, "*shook his hand with great fervor, and said, 'I am more than gratified. I am grateful to you.'* Then Lincoln stood up, spoke his 272 words, and sat down." After returning to the White House Lincoln wrote a gracious letter to Mr. Everett pointing out particulars in the speech which he found especially uplifting. Edward Everett, on the other hand, wrote a note to the President which reads, "*I should be glad, if I could flatter myself, that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours, as you did in two minutes.*"

Time and space does not allow me to write the entirety of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. However, I should like to break it down for you in my own reflective way. In the first of three paragraphs which starts out, "*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent . . .*" Lincoln, in one

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elongated sentence, gives us the reason why our nation, the United States of America, was formed. This new nation was *"conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."* Though it has taken a while to see this equality emerge (and we're still working to that end), he was a visionary, seeing what needed, nay, what must take place for a nation to truly be free.

The second paragraph is a cryptic analysis of the state of the nation on November 19, 1863. *"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."* He made a holy dedication over a portion of the former field of battle, *"as a final resting place for those who gave their lives that that nation might live."* Remember: the outcome of the War was gravely in doubt at this juncture.

In humility, Lincoln states eloquently that any efforts on the part of those assembled can never begin to give these men their proper due. Rather, *"the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract."* Perhaps one of the classic ironies of history is Lincoln's next statement. *"The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."* The Civil War is the most popular topic in America! We the People have taken note and remembered what was said, and we will never forget what was done on that sacred ground!

Lincoln concludes this third paragraph with these challenging words to those who would heed them: *"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."* For Lincoln it was always about freedom for all Americans.

Ronald C. White, Jr., wrote a biography entitled, *"A. Lincoln."* He points out that Abe Lincoln came from a very strong, devout Christian family. From childhood on, young Abe *"did not simply read the Bible, he began a lifelong practice of memorizing whole sections. One of his favorite portions to memorize was the Psalms."* White further writes, *"The books young Lincoln read tell us he was drawn to morality tales of the triumph of good over evil. Above all, what tied his books together was the possibility that ordinary people could do extraordinary things."* It is this environment that laid the foundation for his ultimate triumph in life: the abolition of slavery.

Wow! This man from the heartland of America was truly an ordinary man who, indeed, accomplished extraordinary things. This is why I have my young grandchildren memorizing Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. In the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verse 27, we read, *"All things are possible with God."*

I believe Mr. Lincoln would say "Amen!"