

Part III: The Gettysburg Address, Lincoln's Legacy, and the *Pursuit of Liberty and Equality*

Gettysburg, Lincoln's legacy, and the pursuit of liberty and equality

In the small battle-torn town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on November 19, 1863, Lincoln uttered 266 words that would be remembered as one of the greatest American speeches of all time. In a time of mourning for the many who died, his Gettysburg Address proclaimed our national purpose and served as a rallying cry to defend it—the carnage of the war should not be in vain.



“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.”

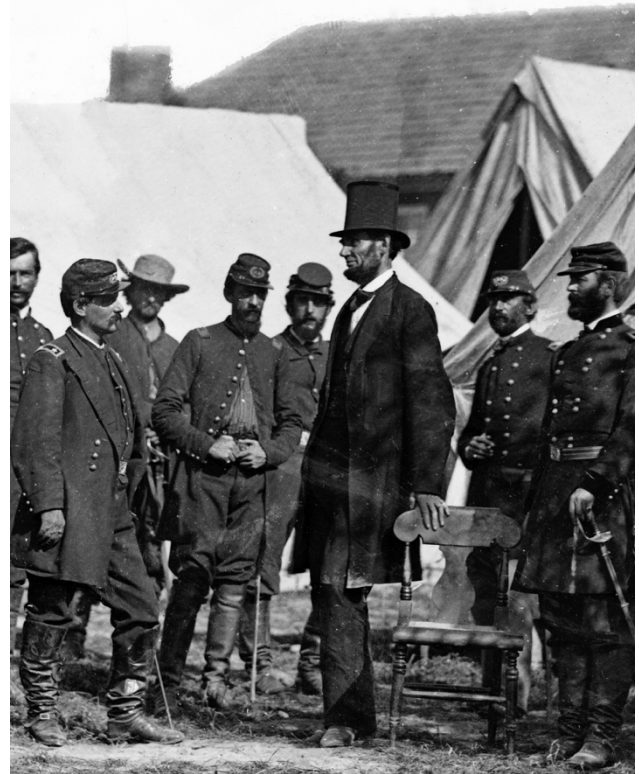
Lincoln urged his audience to fulfill the mission that Union soldiers had fought and died for: the realization of liberty and equality for all—ideals in our Declaration of Independence. The short, impactful address connected the current struggle over slavery with those ideals. He reinvigorated the principles behind the American founding—that our form of government is maintained by the people.

The War and Lincoln's Reelection in Question

As the 1864 presidential election loomed and the war raged on, Lincoln did not expect to win reelection. Anti-Lincoln sentiments had grown, not just in the South, but in the North as well.

He was so pessimistic about his chances, in fact, that he asked his cabinet to sign a letter pledging themselves to save the Union, no matter who became president. He prepared for this possibility too, by writing to Frederick Douglass with plans to help as many slaves escape the South as possible before the November election.

Despite Lincoln's fears and political enemies, the Union gave him a landslide win. In the months leading up to Election Day, Union troops had gained several military victories over the Confederacy. The war (and the confidence of the American people) were looking up.



Hope for a New Tomorrow

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, in which he laid out his vision of how to mend the country, was delivered a mere month before the South's surrender. The Civil War ended on April 9, 1865, when Robert E. Lee surrendered to the Union Army at Appomattox Courthouse.

Less than a week later, Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth in Ford's Theatre, and died the following morning, April 15. The nation's leader through the war would not live to see his vision of healing come to fruition. His closing remarks continue to provide guidance today:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his

orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Without Lincoln at the helm, the Reconstruction era proved especially difficult. The period was marked by hateful division, a shattered economy in the South, and the obstruction of legal rights to former slaves.

A Legacy of Liberty and Equality

We can only speculate about what Reconstruction would have looked like under Lincoln’s presidency, but his vision had a lasting impact on postwar America.

After signing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Lincoln moved to make the abolishment of slavery permanent and wide-ranging. His 1864 election platform included the Thirteenth Amendment, and, before his death, he signed off on it and took an active role in its passage through Congress.

On June 19, 1865, known as Juneteenth, Union soldiers arrived to Galveston, Texas to liberate the last remaining slaves that had been ordered free by the Emancipation Proclamation, 2 1/2 years earlier. And the Thirteenth Amendment was finally ratified December 6, 1865, eight months after Lincoln was assassinated, freeing all slaves in the U.S. and constitutionally banning slavery here forever.



At Gettysburg, Lincoln mused that, “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” On this count, he was only half right.

Today, we revisit the Civil War soldiers' ultimate sacrifice as well as Lincoln's words that stress *why* they gave their lives. We remember that the soldiers' work—the defense and preservation of liberty and equality—remains unfinished, and is up to us. Lincoln's guidance towards and dedication to true liberty and equality still inspire us today.

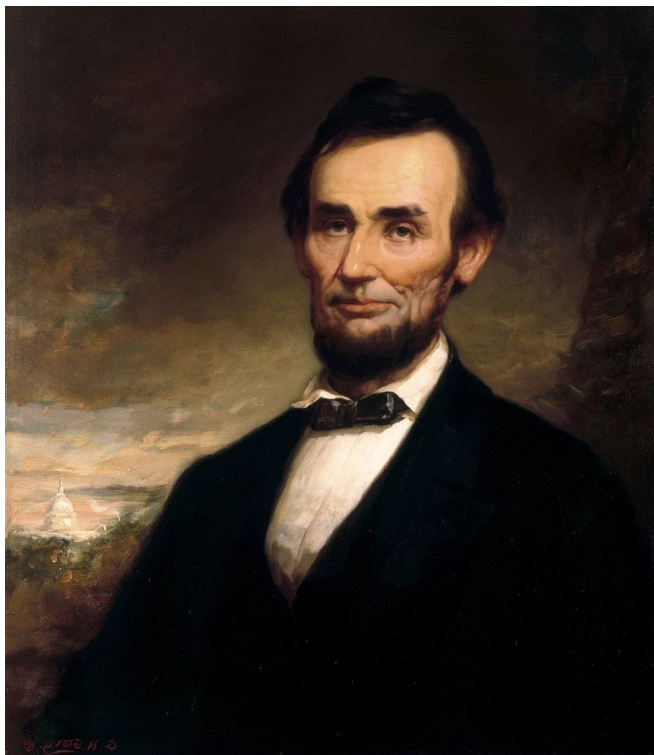


At the Jack Miller Center, we humbly work toward the fulfillment of the Lincoln's efforts by reinvigorating civics education and equipping educators to further pursue Lincoln's call to action. It is all of our responsibility to uphold Lincoln's legacy and ensure that the nation remains "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

A message from Jack Miller, JMC Founder and Chairman Emeritus

Thank you for coming along with us on this Lincoln Series. I've become very interested in Lincoln lately and how his wisdom can guide us today. One hundred fifty-eight years ago, Lincoln delivered his famous Gettysburg address:

"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."



That beginning is as relevant today as it was then. Lincoln said the Civil War tested whether our nation, “or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”

After the Civil War, the nation eventually came together again as one. But, today, we are experiencing a great division.

As divided as we are now, can we as a nation long endure, particularly in a world as challenging as ours is today? Lincoln’s closing remarks should guide us toward our salvation:

“ ... this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Our founders gave us a great vision that all men are created equal and are therefore endowed with equal rights. Our progress toward achieving that vision has been ongoing, but too slow.

The push for progress is necessary and legitimate. The process, however, should not be tied to an agenda that forgets who we are. We are a country whose very founding ideals aim to uphold freedom and opportunity for all people to pursue their dreams.

Lincoln was right. We must make sure that, “it shall not perish from the earth.”

With best wishes,
Jack