

## Gettysburg Address (1863)

### President Abraham Lincoln

#### Historical Background

The Civil War had been raging for two bloody and inconclusive years by the summer of 1863. In June 1863 the Union armies won two major victories against the Confederate armies at Vicksburg, Mississippi and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. These victories came at a heavy cost. The Battle of Gettysburg resulted in the death, wounding or capture of 23,000 soldiers on each side. The town of Gettysburg, with a population of around 2,400, was forced to make plans for burying 3,500 soldiers from that conflict. The new 17 acre cemetery was to be consecrated in November of 1863, and although President Lincoln was invited, he was not the keynote speaker. In fact, Edward Everett, former Governor and Senator from Massachusetts, delivered the main two-hour oration. Lincoln's speech, by contrast, was 272 words, and likely only took around two or three minutes to deliver.

#### Historical Significance

Regarding the comparison of the two speeches, Edward Everett said, "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 [Abraham Lincoln] did in two minutes." Lincoln's speech, which recalls Pericles' Funeral Oration, one of the greatest speeches in Western history, traced the history of the nation from the founding to his present. Lincoln located the founding of the nation, not in the ratification of the Constitution, but in the Declaration of Independence. He argued that the Civil War was not only a test of the United States, but would ultimately answer the question as to whether any nation "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" could ultimately endure. Lincoln calls for the nation to rededicate itself "to a new birth of freedom" to ensure that those interred in the new cemetery would not have died in vain, but that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." This powerful argument, placing America at the center of the pursuit of free and democratic government, continues to inspire dedication and sacrifice from all Americans, soldier and citizen alike.

#### Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- describe and define Lincoln's concept of the American Founding;
- analyze and describe rhetorical strategies used in the Gettysburg Address;
- describe the historical background of the Gettysburg Address, including the importance of the Battle of Gettysburg

## Questions to Explore

What makes this a powerful speech?

To what extent do you agree with Lincoln's assertion that the United States came into being with the signing of the Declaration of Independence rather than the Constitution?

The Declaration of Independence does not have a formal role in the United States' system of government. What role, if any, should the Declaration play in the government of the United States?

Lincoln suggests that the Civil War can help resolve the question of whether free and democratic governments are possible or desirable. "American Exceptionalism" is the term often used for describing the view that America possesses special attributes that make its history, values, and actions important not just in national, but in world history. What are some advantages or disadvantages of asserting and stressing the unique or exceptional aspects of America?

In what way, if any, do the dead need the living, as Lincoln presents it? In what way should the living regard the dead? Is Lincoln's spirit in this speech fundamentally conservative, or fundamentally progressive?