

Petersburg National Battlefield VirtualCache Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Site 21: Gettysburg Address Poplar Grove

N 37° 124.517
W 077° 21.406



The Gettysburg Address was a speech by U.S. President Abraham Lincoln and one of the most quoted speeches in United States history. It was delivered at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the afternoon of Thursday, November 19, 1863, during the American Civil War, four and a half months after the Union armies defeated those of the Confederacy at the decisive Battle of Gettysburg.

Abraham Lincoln's carefully crafted address, secondary to other presentations that day, came to be regarded as one of the greatest speeches in American history. In just over two minutes, Lincoln invoked the principles of human equality espoused by the Declaration of Independence and redefined the Civil War as a struggle not merely for the Union, but as "a new birth of freedom" that would bring true equality to all of its citizens, and that would also create a unified nation in which states' rights were no longer dominant.

Beginning with the now-iconic phrase "Four score and seven years ago...", Lincoln referred to the events of the Civil War and described the ceremony at Gettysburg as an opportunity not only to consecrate the grounds of a cemetery, but also to dedicate the living to the struggle to ensure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth".

Despite the speech's prominent place in the history and popular culture of the United States, the exact wording of the speech is disputed. The five known manuscripts of the Gettysburg Address differ in a number of details and also differ from contemporary newspaper reprints of the speech.

The Gettysburg Address was not considered a great success at the time. Some eye-witness reports say there was little or no applause. Newspaper responses varied from indifference to predictable partisan praise or condemnation. However, various scholars and journalists subsequently analyzed the short speech. The lawyer-abolitionist Lysander Spooner lampooned the

notion that the war "Saved the Country," and "Preserved our Glorious Union," writing that "the only idea they have ever manifested as to what is a government of consent, is this — that it is one to which everybody must consent, or be shot.-In the 20th century, the American journalist H. L. Mencken wrote:

"The Gettysburg speech was at once the shortest and the most famous oration in American history...the highest emotion reduced to a few poetical phrases. Lincoln himself never even remotely approached it. It is genuinely stupendous. But let us not forget that it is poetry, not logic; beauty, not sense. Think of the argument in it. Put it into the cold words of everyday. The doctrine is simply this: that the Union soldiers who died at Gettysburg sacrificed their lives to the cause of self-determination — that government of the people by the people, for the people, should not perish from the earth. It is difficult to imagine anything more untrue. The Union soldiers in the battle actually fought against self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of their people to govern themselves." — H. L. Mencken on the Gettysburg Address

Shelby Foote, novelist and notable historian of the Civil War, said, "We don't believe that government of and by and for the people would have perished from the earth if the South had won the war, although we are required to memorize those very words in school.

Thomas DiLorenzo, author of *The Real Lincoln* wrote:

Lincoln argued that secession would "destroy" the government, but such an argument was simply foolish.... It was equally absurd for Lincoln to argue that representative government would "perish from the earth" if the Southern states were allowed to secede peacefully. In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln claimed that the war was being fought in defense of government by consent, but in fact exactly the opposite was true: the Federal government under Lincoln sought to deny Southerners the right of government by consent, for they certainly did not consent to remaining in the Union

The importance of the Gettysburg Address in the history of the United States is underscored by its enduring presence in American culture. In addition to its prominent place carved into a stone cellar on the south wall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., the Gettysburg Address is frequently referred to in works of popular culture, with the implicit expectation that contemporary audiences will be familiar with Lincoln's words.

In the many generations that have passed since the Address, it has remained among the most famous speeches in American history.[85] Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is itself referenced in another of those famed orations, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.[86] Standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963, King began with a reference to President Lincoln and his enduring words: "Five score years ago, a great

American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice."

The Constitution of France (under the present Fifth Republic established in 1958) states that the principle of the Republic of France is "gouvernement du peuple, par le peuple et pour le peuple" ("government of the people, by the people, and for the people,") a literal translation of Lincoln's words.

Visit Instructions: Describe the building that the plaque resides on and is there any significance to this shape of the building?