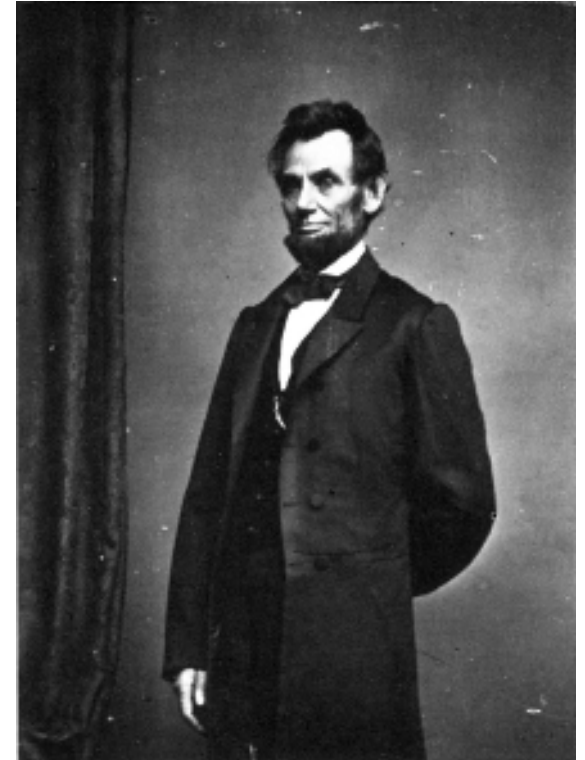




Abraham Lincoln and The Gettysburg Address

By Betsy Cole

Traditionally, Abraham Lincoln is viewed as being the man who freed the slaves. A man of immense morals, he is seen as someone whose primary goal in the Civil War was to provide freedom for the slaves in the South. However, a more in-depth analysis reveals that Lincoln was much more complex than that. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is a speech that relates the Union back to the foundations of the nation and the principles on which the country was founded. Lincoln maintains that the nation was founded even before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, not with the writing of the Constitution. The immortal words of the Gettysburg Address, "Four score and seven years ago..." provide the basis for a redefining of the nation as an entity that was and continues to be dedicated to equality. Abraham Lincoln changed the country on that day, just as did the soldiers who fought in that extremely gruesome battle. Lincoln forced the people of this country to reexamine their own morals and principles and begin to understand just a little bit of what true equality means.





Lincoln made his famous speech at Gettysburg to dedicate a national cemetery for soldiers. This also was a significant part of the way that the Gettysburg changed history. Before, casualties of battles were just buried where they had fallen. With the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg, soldiers could all be buried in one place with actual grave markers.

Lincoln was actually the last person invited to make a speech. Others like David Wills and the keynote speaker, Edward Everett, each knew at least a month in advance of the date set for the dedication. Lincoln, however, was asked on November 2, only seventeen days before the actual event. Lincoln wasn't even asked to give the main speech, or "the Oration." He only was giving a short speech after "the Oration."

A copy of Lincoln's speech

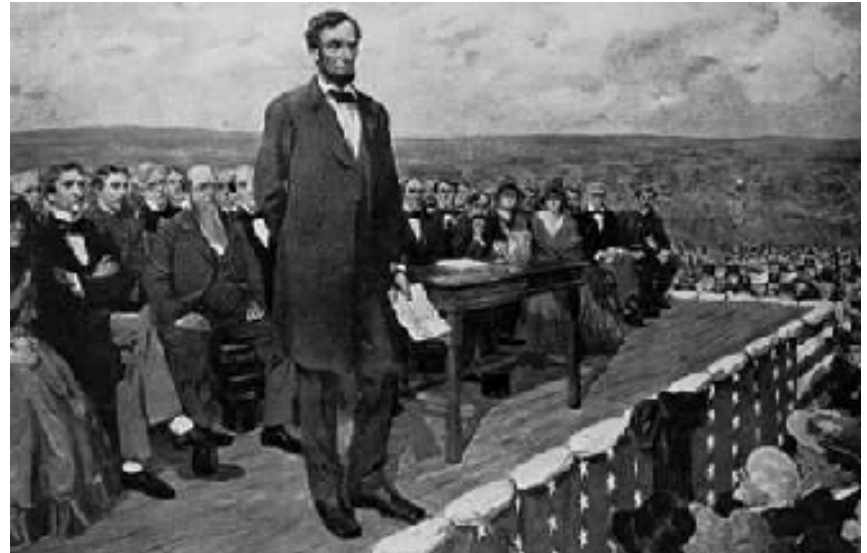
Address delivered at the dedication of the
Cemetery at Gettysburg.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers
brought forth on this continent, a new na-
tion, conceived in liberty, and dedicated
to the proposition that all men are cre-
ated 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 alto-
gether fitting and proper that we should
do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedice


Only ten sentences long, the
Gettysburg Address




Lincoln delivering his Gettysburg Address




With beginning his speech and dating the founding of the Union back to 1776, not 1787, Lincoln showed that a unified common set of principles was present even before a document was written establishing those principles into law. In 1776, the colonists were united by their common hatred of the British and belief in equality for all men. Although the Constitution is traditionally seen as the founding of the nation, Lincoln asserts that it wasn't. The Constitution even says that the goal of writing such a prestigious document was "to form a more perfect union," not create a union, because one was already in existence. Lincoln wanted to remind the citizens of the United States that they were united under a moral banner that was unique to this country and supposed to encompass all of the citizens of the nation. However, the spirit of equality that was present at the founding of the nation in 1776 and even before, had long since faded.




Even before 1776, the colonists were united together because of their common beliefs and their immense hatred of the British. They didn't really need to write down all they believed in and codify it because they all knew they believed it and all abided by it. However, as time went on, and as the founding generation got older and even began to die, that same spirit of unity and equality started to fade. The two supports of the American system dedicated to equality were gone: (1) the ambition to make equality happen because it was a novel idea; and (2) the common hatred of the British. These common beliefs and problems drove the founding fathers to make equality happen; however, getting closer to the Civil War, when equality wasn't a new idea, and when united dislike of the British was no longer holding the citizens of the United States together, these principles were decaying; these truths that were self-evident in the Declaration of Independence time period were no longer evident to the people of the Civil War era. Consequently, Lincoln needed to redefine the Declaration of Independence to fit what was necessary for that time period.




Before, public opinion defined what was moral. If all the colonists thought that equality was necessary and inherently good, then it would become part of an unwritten moral code that was bound to bind the colonists together for however long they all believed that. If the principle of equality was self-evident to everyone, then public opinion would coincide with morality. However, Lincoln asserts, the Civil War era changed that because the truth was no longer self-evident to all. Those in the South believed that slavery wasn't morally evil and they didn't see a fundamental problem with it. In fact, they weren't even apathetic to the cause, believing that it was neither good nor bad. Most Southerners vehemently advocated keeping slavery in existence for a number of reasons. First, they need slaves to work on their plantations and harvest their crops. Since whites didn't want to work themselves, they needed slaves to work for them. As part of their economy, slaves needed to be kept in the South as slaves to keep the economy of the South going. Also, white Southerners believed in the inferiority of blacks and consequently didn't want them to be freed because they thought blacks couldn't take care of themselves. Whites' power came from the fact that they had control of the blacks and could ultimately force them to do anything they wanted. If the slaves were freed, then white Southerners would lose all their power and their economies would disintegrate. These people didn't see the supposedly evident truth of equality and consequently, Lincoln felt the need to bring these seceded people back to the Union to help them realize what equality truly meant.



Lincoln changes the Declaration of Independence in the Gettysburg Address by departing from the traditional definition of the Declaration as a theoretical thing that needs no public support. In the Revolutionary era, there was no need to explain the measures taken by the Declaration, because everyone was for it. In the 1860s, not everyone believed in equality, and Lincoln had to do something to make the nation united once more. So he changed the definition of the Declaration of Independence from a theoretical document to something practical that can be understood and applied to everyday life by everyone.



“[T]he principle of equality has to be embodied in a nation and gain the weight of public opinion in order to be effective” (69). The Declaration of Independence is merely a document that states the common principles of the colonists who wrote it. It has no binding ties and therefore requires public opinion to be behind it to really work. Lincoln wanted to “recreate the spirit and principles of the country’s founding,” and to do that, he needed to unite all the people once again (72). By dating the founding of the country to 1776, “Lincoln declares who an American is. An American is one who shares a common memory back to 1776” (71).



Lincoln even admitted that he wasn't great at speaking extemporaneously. However, in the Gettysburg Address, he added the words "under God" between "this nation" and "shall have a new birth of freedom" (250 White). Although the concrete reasons for the addition of these words in the speech are unknown, there are a couple of guesses for their placement there. Lincoln was a deeply religious man who had a strong sense of piety and great morals. The beginning of his speech, "Four score and seven years ago..." is closely related to the opening lines of Psalm 90. Lincoln was well known to have loved reading the Bible, especially the psalms. By adding the words "under God" to his speech, Lincoln showed his own personal belief in the power of God. Also, the addition of the words is important because it relates the Lincoln's Gettysburg Address back to the Declaration of Independence and its obvious belief in God. Lincoln's addition of the words "under God" while he was speaking provide the nation with a unified belief that they all live "under God" and that Lincoln himself was a man of immense religious beliefs.

Gruesome Gettysburg
Battle

