

The Words That Remade America

GARRY WILLS || 1992

On July 1, 1863, the forces of the Union general George G. Meade and of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee squared off across a twenty-five-square-mile swath of rolling hills in southeastern Pennsylvania for what would be the bloodiest and most famous encounter of the Civil War. By the time the Battle of Gettysburg came to an end, after three consecutive days of fierce and unrelenting combat, Lee's rebel army was broken and in retreat, and tens of thousands of dead and wounded soldiers from both sides blanketed the killing fields, the corpses rotting in the summer heat.

"The Words That Remade America," by the prolific journalist, historian, and critic Garry Wills (1934–), is the remarkable account—part historical investigation, part literary exegesis—of how President Abraham Lincoln transformed this scene of apocalyptic horror into one of the defining moments in United States history. Lincoln was able to work this magic, marvels Wills, by virtue of a single speech that was so disarmingly modest in scope and devoid of pretension that it consisted of a mere ten sentences (a total of 272 words) and took only about three minutes to deliver. "The power of words has rarely been given a more compelling demonstration," writes Wills.

Countering claims that Lincoln, while en route to the November 19 ceremony consecrating Gettysburg as a national cemetery, had hurriedly scrawled his remarks on the back of an envelope, Wills contends that, in fact, the president had been thinking about the speech for months; he had discerned an urgent need to make a bold and uplifting statement to the American people on the subject of the war—to explain its larger significance, to justify its enormous costs, and to demonstrate that the future of American democracy was at stake. For Wills, Lincoln's great achievement at Gettysburg that day was nothing less than reinventing the Constitution, repairing its fatal flaw—a tacit acceptance of slavery—by infusing the document with the aggressively egalitarian precepts of the Declaration of Independence. "The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, the new Constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they had brought there with them," Wills writes in his essay, adapted by The Atlantic from his book Lincoln at Gettysburg (1992), which later won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction. "They walked off from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America."

In the aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg, both sides, leaving fifty thousand dead or wounded or missing behind them, had reason to maintain a large pattern of pretense—Lee pretending that he was not taking back to the South a broken cause, Meade that he would not let the broken pieces fall through his fingers. It would have been hard to predict that Gettysburg, out of all this muddle, these missed chances, all the senseless deaths, would become a symbol of national purpose, pride, and ideals. Abraham Lincoln transformed the ugly reality into something rich and strange—and he did it with 272 words. The power of words has rarely been given a more compelling demonstration.

The residents of Gettysburg had little reason to be satisfied with the war machine that had churned up their lives. General George Gordon Meade may have pursued General Robert E. Lee in slow motion, but he wired headquarters that “I cannot delay to pick up the debris of the battlefield.” That debris was mainly a matter of rotting horseflesh and manflesh—thousands of fermenting bodies, with gas-distended bellies, deliquescing in the July heat. For hygienic reasons, the five thousand horses and mules had to be consumed by fire, trading the smell of decaying flesh for that of burning flesh. Human bodies were scattered over, or (barely) under, the ground. Suffocating teams of Union soldiers, Confederate prisoners, and dragooned civilians slid the bodies beneath a minimal covering as fast as possible—crudely posting the names of the Union dead with sketchy information on boards, not stopping to figure out what units the Confederate bodies had belonged to. It was work to be done higger-mugger or not at all, fighting clustered bluebottle flies black on the earth, shoveling and retching by turns.

The whole area of Gettysburg—a town of only twenty-five hundred inhabitants—was one makeshift burial ground, feid and steaming. Andrew Curtin, the Republican governor of Pennsylvania, was facing a difficult reelection campaign. He must placate local feeling, deal with other states diplomatically, and raise the funds to cope with corpses that could go on killing by means of fouled streams or contaminating exhumations.

Curtin made the thirty-two-year-old David Wills, a Gettysburg lawyer, his agent on the scene. Wills (who is no relation to the author) had studied law with Gettysburg’s most prominent former citizen, Thaddeus Stevens, the radical Republican now representing Lancaster in Congress. Wills was a civic leader, and he owned the largest house on the town square. He put an end to land speculation for the burial ground and formed an interstate commission to collect funds for the cleansing of Get-

tytsburg’s bloodied fields. The states were to be assessed according to their representation in Congress. To charge them by the actual number of each state’s dead would have been a time-consuming and complicated process, waiting on identification of each corpse, on the division of costs for those who could not be identified, and on the fixing of per-body rates for exhumation, identification, and reinterment.

Wills put up for bids the contract to rebury the bodies; out of thirty-four bids, the high one was eight dollars per corpse and the winning one was \$1.59. The federal government was asked to ship in the thousands of caskets needed, courtesy of the War Department. All other costs were handled by the interstate commission. Wills took title to seventeen acres for the new cemetery in the name of Pennsylvania.

Wills meant to dedicate the ground that would hold the corpses even before they were moved. He felt the need for artful words to sweeten the poisoned air of Gettysburg. He asked the principal wordsmiths of his time to join this effort—Longfellow, Whitier, Bryant. All three poets, each for his own reason, found their muse unbidable. But Wills was not terribly disappointed. The normal purgative for such occasions was a large-scale, solemn act of oratory, a kind of performance art that had great power over audiences in the middle of the nineteenth century. Some later accounts would emphasize the length of the main speech at the Gettysburg dedication, as if that were an ordeal or an imposition on the audience. But a talk of several hours was customary and expected then—much like the length and pacing of a modern rock concert. The crowds that heard Lincoln debate Stephen Douglas in 1858, through three-hour engagements, were delighted to hear Daniel Webster and other orators of the day recite carefully composed paragraphs for two hours at the least.

The champion at such declamatory occasions, after the death of Daniel Webster, was Webster’s friend Edward Everett. Everett was that rare thing, a scholar and an Ivy League diplomat who could hold mass audiences in thrall. His voice, diction, and gestures were successfully dramatic, and he habitually performed his well-crafted text, no matter how long, from memory. Everett was the inevitable choice for Wills, the indispensable component in the scheme for the cemetery’s consecration. Battlefields were something of a specialty with Everett—he had augmented the fame of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill by his oratory at those Revolutionary sites. Simply to have him speak at Gettysburg would add this field to the sacred roll of names from the Founders’ battles.

Everett was invited, on September 23, to appear October 23. That would leave all of November for filling the graves. But a month was not

sufficient time for Everett to make his customary preparation for a major speech. He did careful research on the battles he was commemorating—a task made difficult in this case by the fact that official accounts of the engagement were just appearing. Everett would have to make his own inquiries. He could not be ready before November 19. Wills seized on that earliest moment, though it broke with the reburial schedule that had been laid out to follow on the October dedication. He decided to move up the reburial, beginning it in October and hoping to finish by November 19.

The careful negotiations with Everett form a contrast, more surprising to us than to contemporaries, with the casual invitation to President Lincoln, issued some time later as part of a general call for the federal Cabinet and other celebrities to join in what was essentially a ceremony of the participating states.

No insult was intended. Federal responsibility for or participation in state activities was not assumed then. And Lincoln took no offense. Though specifically invited to deliver only “a few appropriate remarks” to open the cemetery, he meant to use this opportunity. The partly mythical victory of Gettysburg was an element of his Administration’s war propaganda. (There were, even then, few enough victories to boast of.) Beyond that, he was working to unite the rival Republican factions of Governor Curtin and Simon Cameron, Edwin Stanton’s predecessor as Secretary of War. He knew that most of the state governors would be attending or sending important aides—his own bodyguard, Ward Lamon, who was acting as chief marshal organizing the affair, would have alerted him to the scale the event had assumed, with a tremendous crowd expected. This was a classic situation for political fence-mending and intelligence-gathering. Lincoln would take with him aides who would circulate and bring back their findings; Lamon himself had a cluster of friends in Pennsylvania politics, including some close to Curtin, who had been infuriated when Lincoln overrode his opposition to Cameron’s Cabinet appointment.

Lincoln also knew the power of his rhetoric to define war aims. He was seeking occasions to use his words outside the normal round of proclamations and reports to Congress. His determination not only to be present but to speak is seen in the way he overrode staff scheduling for the trip to Gettysburg. Stanton had arranged for a 6:00 A.M. train to take him the hundred and twenty rail miles to the noontime affair. But Lincoln was familiar enough by now with military movement to appreciate what Clausewitz called “friction” in the disposal of forces—the margin for error that must always be built into planning. Lamon would have informed Lincoln about the potential for muddle on the nineteenth. State delegations, civic

organizations, military bands and units, were planning to come by train and road, bringing at least ten thousand people to a town with poor resources for feeding and sheltering crowds (especially if the weather turned bad). So Lincoln countermanded Stanton’s plan:

I do not like this arrangement. I do not wish to so go that by the slightest accident we fail entirely, and, at the best, the whole to be a mere breathless running of the gauntlet. . . .

If Lincoln had not changed the schedule, he would very likely not have given his talk. Even on the day before, his trip to Gettysburg took six hours, with transfers in Baltimore and at Hanover Junction. Governor Curtin, starting from Harrisburg (thirty miles away) with six other governors as his guests, was embarrassed by breakdowns and delays that made them miss dinner at David Will’s house. They had gathered at 2:00 P.M., started at five, and arrived at eleven. Senator Alexander Ramsey, of Minnesota, was stranded, at 4:00 A.M. on the day of delivery, in Hanover Junction, with “no means of getting up to Gettysburg.” Lincoln kept his resolution to leave a day early even when he realized that his wife was hysterical over one son’s illness soon after the death of another son. The President had important business in Gettysburg.

FOR A MAN SO DETERMINED TO GET THERE, Lincoln seems—in familiar accounts—to have been rather cavalier about preparing what he would say in Gettysburg. The silly but persistent myth is that he jotted his brief remarks on the back of an envelope. (Many details of the day are in fact still disputed, and no definitive account exists.) Better-attested reports have him considering them on the way to a photographer’s shop in Washington, writing them on a piece of cardboard as the train took him on the hundred-and-twenty-mile trip, penciling them in David Will’s house on the night before the dedication, writing them in that house on the morning of the day he had to deliver them, and even composing them in his head as Everett spoke, before Lincoln rose to follow him.

These recollections, recorded at various times after the speech had been given and won fame, reflect two concerns on the part of those speaking them. They reveal an understandable pride in participation at the historic occasion. It was not enough for those who treasured their day at Gettysburg to have heard Lincoln speak—a privilege they shared with ten to twenty thousand other people, and an experience that lasted no more than three minutes. They wanted to be intimate with the restoration of that

extraordinary speech, watching the pen or pencil move under the inspiration of the moment.

That is the other emphasis in these accounts—that it was a product of the moment, struck off as Lincoln moved under destiny's guidance. Inspiration was shed on him in the presence of others. The contrast with Everett's long labors of preparation is always implied. Research, learning, the student's lamp—none of these were needed by Lincoln, whose unsummoned muse was prompting him, a democratic muse unacquainted with the library. Lightning struck, and each of our informants (or their sources) was there when it struck.

The trouble with these accounts is that the lightning strikes too often, as if it could not get the work done on its first attempt. It hits Lincoln on the train, in his room, at night, in the morning. If inspiration was treating him this way, he should have been short-circuited, not inspired, by the time he spoke.

These mythical accounts are badly out of character for Lincoln, who composed his speeches thoughtfully. His law partner, William Herrdon, having observed Lincoln's careful preparation of cases, recorded that he was a slow writer, who liked to sort out his points and tighten his logic and his phrasing. That is the process vouched for in every other case of Lincoln's memorable public statements. It is impossible to imagine him leaving his Gettysburg speech to the last moment. He knew he would be busy on the train and at the site—important political guests were with him from his departure, and more joined him at Baltimore, full of talk about the war, elections, and policy. In Gettysburg he would be entertained at David Wills's house, with Everett and other important guests. State delegations would want a word with him. He hoped for a quick tour of the battle site (a hope fulfilled early on the nineteenth). He could not count on any time for the concentration he required when weighing his words.

In fact, at least two people testified that the speech was mainly composed in Washington, before Lincoln left for Gettysburg—though these reports, like all later ones describing this speech's composition, are themselves suspect. Lamont claimed that a day or two before the dedication Lincoln read him substantially the text that was delivered. But Lamont's remarks are notoriously imaginative, and he was busy in Gettysburg from November 13 to 16. He made a swift trip back to Washington on the sixteenth to collect his marshals and instruct them before departing again the next morning. His testimony here, as elsewhere, does not have much weight.

Noah Brooks, Lincoln's journalist friend, claimed that he talked with

Lincoln on November 15, when Lincoln told him he had written his speech "over, two or three times"—but Brooks also said that Lincoln had with him galleys of Everett's speech, which had been set in type for later printing by the *Boston Journal*. In fact the Everett speech was not set until November 14, and then by the *Boston Daily Advertiser*. It is unlikely that a copy could have reached Lincoln so early.

LINCOLN'S TRAIN ARRIVED toward dusk in Gettysburg. There were still coffins stacked at the station for completing the burials. Lamont, Wills, and Everett met Lincoln and escorted him the two blocks to the Wills home, where dinner was waiting, along with almost two dozen other distinguished guests. Lincoln's black servant, William Slade, took his luggage to the second-story room where he would stay that night, which looked out on the square.

Everett was already in residence at the Wills house, and Governor Curtin's late arrival led Wills to suggest that the two men share a bed. The governor thought he could find another house to receive him, though lodgings were so overcrowded that Everett said in his diary that "the fear of having the Executive of Pennsylvania tumbled in upon me kept me awake until one." Everett's daughter was sleeping with two other women, and the bed broke under their weight. William Saunders, the cemetery's designer, who would have an honored place on the platform the next day, could find no bed and had to sleep sitting up in a crowded parlor.

It is likely that Everett, who had the galleys of his speech with him, showed them to Lincoln that night. Noah Brooks, who mistook the time when Everett showed Lincoln his speech, probably gave the right reason—so that Lincoln would not be embarrassed by any inadvertent correspondences or unintended differences.

Lincoln greeted Curtin after his late arrival, and was otherwise interrupted during the night. Bands and serenades were going through the crowded square under his window. One group asked him to speak, and the newspaper reported his words:

I appear before you, fellow-citizens, merely to thank you for this compliment. The inference is a very fair one that you would hear me for a little while at least, were I to commence to make a speech. I do not appear before you for the purpose of doing so, and for several substantial reasons. The most substantial of these is that I have no speech to make. [Laughter.] In my position it is somewhat important that I should not say any foolish things. [A voice: If you can help it.]

It very often happens that the only way to help it is to say nothing at all. [Laughter.] Believing that is my present condition this evening, I must beg of you to excuse me from addressing you further.

This displays Lincoln's normal reluctance to improvise words as President. Lincoln's secretary John Hay, watching the scene from the crowd, noted in his diary: "The President appeared at the door and said half a dozen words meaning nothing & went in."

Early in the morning Lincoln took a carriage ride to the battle sites. Later, Ward Lamont and his specially uniformed marshals assigned horses to the various dignitaries (carriages would have clogged the site too much). Although the march was less than a mile, Lamont had brought thirty horses into town, and Wills had supplied a hundred, to honor the officials present.

Lincoln sat his horse gracefully (to the surprise of some), and looked meditative during the long wait while marshals tried to coax into line important people more concerned about their dignity than the President was about his. Lincoln was wearing a mourning band on his hat for his dead son. He also wore white gauntlets, which made his large hands on the reins dramatic by contrast with his otherwise black attire.

Everett had gone out earlier, by carriage, to prepare himself in the special tent he had asked for near the platform. At sixty-nine, he had kidney trouble and needed to relieve himself just before and after the three-hour ceremony. (He had put his problem so delicately that his hosts did not realize that he meant to be left alone in the tent; but he finally coaxed them out.) Everett mounted the platform at the last moment, after most of the others had arrived.

Those on the raised platform were hemmed in close by standing crowds. When it had become clear that the numbers might approach twenty thousand, the platform had been set at some distance from the burial operations. Only a third of the expected bodies had been buried, and those under fresh mounds. Other graves had been readied for the bodies, which arrived in irregular order (some from this state, some from that), making it impossible to complete one section at a time. The whole burial site was incomplete. Marshals tried to keep the milling thousands out of the work in progress.

Everett, as usual, had neatly placed his thick text on a little table before him—and then ostentatiously refused to look at it. He was able to indicate with gestures the sites of the battle's progress, visible from where he stood. He excoriated the rebels for their atrocities, implicitly justifying the fact

that some Confederate skeletons were still unburied, lying in the clefts of Devil's Den under rocks and autumn leaves. Two days earlier Everett had been shown around the field, and places were pointed out where the bodies lay. His speech, for good or ill, would pick its way through the carnage.

As a former Secretary of State, Everett had many sources, in and outside government, for the information he had gathered so diligently. Lincoln no doubt watched closely how the audience responded to passages that absolved Meade of blame for letting Lee escape. The setting of the battle in a larger logic of campaigns had an immediacy for those on the scene which we cannot recover. Everett's familiarity with the details was flattering to the local audience, which nonetheless had things to learn from this shapely presentation of the whole three days' action. This was like a modern "docudrama" on television, telling the story of recent events on the basis of investigative reporting. We badly misread the evidence if we think Everett failed to work his customary magic. The best witnesses on the scene—Lincoln's personal secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay, with their professional interest in good prose and good theater—praised Everett at the time and ever after. He received more attention in their biography's chapter on Gettysburg than did their own boss.

When Lincoln rose, it was with a sheet or two, from which he read. Lincoln's three minutes would ever after be obsessively contrasted with Everett's two hours in accounts of this day. It is even claimed that Lincoln disconcerted the crowd with his abrupt performance, so that people did not know how to respond ("Was that *all*?"). Myth tells of a poor photographer making leisurely arrangements to take Lincoln's picture, expecting him to be standing for some time. But it is useful to look at the relevant part of the program:

Music. *by Birgfeld's Band.*

Prayer. *by Rev. T. H. Stockton, D.D.*

Music. *by the Marine Band.*

Oration. *by Hon. Edward Everett.*

Music. *Hymn composed by B. B. French.*

DEDICATORY REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

Dirge. *sung by Choir selected for the occasion.*

Benediction. *by Rev. H. L. Baughner, D.D.*

There was only one "oration" announced or desired here. Though we call Lincoln's text *the Gettysburg Address*, that title clearly belongs to Everett. Lincoln's contribution, labeled "remarks," was intended to make the ded-

ication formal (somewhat like ribbon-cutting at modern openings). Lincoln was not expected to speak at length, any more than Rev. T. H. Stockton was (though Stockton's prayer is four times the length of the President's remarks). A contrast of length with Everett's talk raises a false issue. Lincoln's text is startlingly brief for what it accomplished, but that would be equally true if Everett had spoken for a shorter time or had not spoken at all.

Nonetheless, the contrast was strong. Everett's voice was sweet and expertly modulated; Lincoln's was high to the point of shrillness, and his Kentucky accent offended some eastern sensibilities. But Lincoln derived an advantage from his high tenor voice—carrying power. If there is agreement on any one aspect of Lincoln's delivery, at Gettysburg or elsewhere, it is on his audibility. Modern impersonators of Lincoln, such as Walter Huston, Raymond Massey, Henry Fonda, and the various actors who give voice to Disneyland animations of the President, bring him before us as a baritone, which is considered a more manly or heroic voice—though both the Roosevelt Presidents of our century were tenors. What should not be forgotten is that Lincoln was himself an actor, an expert raconteur and mimic, and one who spent hours reading speeches out of Shakespeare to any willing (or sometimes unwilling) audience. He knew a good deal about rhythmic delivery and meaningful inflection. John Hay, who had submitted to many of those Shakespeare readings, gave high marks to his boss's performance at Gettysburg. He put in his diary at the time that “the President, in a fine, free way, with more grace than is his wont, said his half dozen words of consecration.” Lincoln's text was polished, his delivery emphatic; he was interrupted by applause five times. Read in a slow, clear way to the farthest listeners, the speech would take about three minutes. It is quite true the audience did not take in all that happened in that short time—we are still trying to weigh the consequences of Lincoln's amazing performance. But the myth that Lincoln was disappointed in the result—that he told the unreliable Lamont that his speech, like a bad plow, “won't scour”—has no basis. He had done what he wanted to do, and Hay shared the pride his superior took in an important occasion put to good use.

AT THE LEAST, Lincoln had far surpassed David Willis's hope for words to disinfect the air of Gettysburg. His speech hovers far above the carriage. He lifts the battle to a level of abstraction that purges it of grosser matter—even “earth” is mentioned only as the thing from which the tested form of government shall not perish. The nightmare realities have been etherealized in the crucible of his language.

Lincoln was here to clear the infected atmosphere of American history itself, tainted with official sins and inherited guilt. He would cleanse the Constitution—not as William Lloyd Garrison had, by burning an instrument that countenanced slavery. He altered the document from within, by appeal from its letter to the spirit, subtly changing the recalcitrant stuff of that legal compromise, bringing it to its own indictment. By implicitly doing this, he performed one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight of hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting. Everyone in that vast throng of thousands was having his or her intellectual pocket picked. The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, the new Constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they had brought there with them. They walked off from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely.

Some people, looking on from a distance, saw that a giant (if benign) swindle had been performed. The *Chicago Times* quoted the letter of the Constitution to Lincoln—noting its lack of reference to equality, its tolerance of slavery—and said that Lincoln was betraying the instrument he was on oath to defend, traducing the men who died for the letter of that fundamental law:

It was to uphold this constitution, and the Union created by it, that our officers and soldiers gave their lives at Gettysburg. How dared he, then, standing on their graves, misstate the cause for which they died, and libel the statesmen who founded the government? They were men possessing too much self-respect to declare that negroes were their equals, or were entitled to equal privileges.

Heirs to this outrage still attack Lincoln for subverting the Constitution at Gettysburg—suicidally frank conservatives like M. E. Bradford and the late Willmoore Kendall. But most conservatives are understandably unwilling to challenge a statement now so hallowed, so literally sacrosanct, as Lincoln's clever assault on the constitutional past. They would rather hope or pretend, with some literary critics, that Lincoln's emotionally moving address had no discernible intellectual content, that, in the words of the literary critic James Hurt, “the sequence of ideas is commonplace to the point of banality, the ordinary coin of funeral oratory.”

People like Kendall and the *Chicago Times* editors might have wished this were true, but they knew better. They recognized the audacity of

Lincoln's undertaking. Kendall rightly says that Lincoln undertook a new founding of the nation, to correct things felt to be imperfect in the Founders' own achievement:

Abraham Lincoln and, in considerable degree, the authors of the post-civil-war amendments, attempted a new act of founding, involving concretely a startling new interpretation of that principle of the founders which declares that "All men are created equal."

Edwin Meese and other "original intent" conservatives also want to go back before the Civil War amendments (particularly the Fourteenth) to the original Founders. Their job would be comparatively easy if they did not have to work against the values created by the Gettysburg Address. Its deceptively simple-sounding phrases appeal to Americans in ways that Lincoln had perfected in his debates over the Constitution during the 1850s. During that time Lincoln found the language, the imagery, the myths, that are given their best and briefest embodiment at Gettysburg. In order to penetrate the mystery of his "refounding," we must study all the elements of that stunning verbal coup. Without Lincoln's knowing it himself, all his prior literary, intellectual, and political labors had prepared him for the intellectual revolution contained in those 272 words.

LINCOLN'S SPEECH IS BRIEF, one might argue, because it is silent on so much that one would expect to hear about. The Gettysburg Address does not mention Gettysburg. Or slavery. Or—more surprising—the Union. (Certainly not the South.) The other major message of 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation, is not mentioned, much less defended or vindicated. The "great task" mentioned in the address is not emancipation but the preservation of self-government. We assume today that self-government includes self-rule by blacks as well as whites; but at the time of his appearance at Gettysburg, Lincoln was not advocating even eventual suffrage for African-Americans. The Gettysburg Address, for all its artistry and eloquence, does not directly address the prickliest issues of its historical moment.

Lincoln was accused during his lifetime of clever evasions and key silences. He was especially indirect and hard to interpret on the subject of slavery. That puzzled his contemporaries, and has infuriated some later students of his attitude. Theodore Parker, the Boston preacher who was the idol of Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, found Lincoln more clever than principled in his 1858 Senate race, when he debated Stephen Douglas. Parker initially supported William Seward for President in 1860, because he

found Seward more forthright than Lincoln in his opposition to slavery. But Seward probably lost the Republican nomination *because* of that forthrightness. Lincoln was more cautious and circuitous. The reasons for his reserve before his nomination are clear enough—though that still leaves the omissions of the Gettysburg Address to be explained.

Lincoln's political base, the state of Illinois, runs down to a point (Cairo) farther south than all of what became West Virginia, and farther south than most of Kentucky and Virginia. The "Negrophobia" of Illinois led it to vote overwhelmingly in 1848, just ten years before the Lincoln-Douglas debates, to amend the state constitution so as to deny freed blacks all right of entry to the state. The average vote of the state was 79 percent for exclusion, though southern and some central counties were probably more than 90 percent for it. Lincoln knew the racial geography of his own state well, and calibrated what he had to say about slavery according to his audience.

Lincoln knew it was useless to promote the abolitionist position in Illinois. He wanted to establish some common ground to hold together the elements of his fledgling Republican Party. Even as a lawyer, Herndon said, he concentrated so fiercely on the main point to be established ("the nub") that he would concede almost any ancillary matter. Lincoln's accommodation to the prejudice of his time did not imply any agreement with the points he found it useless to dispute. One sees his attitude in the disarming concession he made to Horace Greeley, in order to get to the nub of their disagreement:

I have just read yours of the 19th addressed to myself through the New-York Tribune. If there be in it any statements, or assumptions of fact, which I may know to be erroneous, I do not, now and here, controvert them. If there be in it any inferences which I may believe to be falsely drawn, I do not, now and here, argue against them. If there be perceptible in it an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it in deference to an old friend, whose heart I have always supposed to be right.

Obviously, Lincoln did not agree with the aspersions that Greeley had cast, but this was not a matter he could usefully pursue "now and here." In the same way, Lincoln preferred agnosticism about blacks' intellectual inferiority to whites, and went along with the desire to keep them socially inferior. As George Fredrickson points out, agnosticism rather than *certainly* about blacks' intellectual disability was the liberal position of that time

and there was nothing Lincoln or anyone else could do about social mixing. Lincoln refused to let the matter of political equality get tangled up with such emotional and (for the time) unresolvable issues. What, for him, was the nub, the realizable minimum—which would be hard enough to establish in the first place?

At the very least, it was wrong to treat human beings as property. Lincoln reduced the slaveholders' position to absurdity by spelling out its consequences:

If it is a sacred right for the people of Nebraska to take and hold slaves there, it is equally their sacred right to buy them where they can buy them cheapest; and that undoubtedly will be on the coast of Africa . . . [where a slavetrader] buys them at the rate of about a red cotton handkerchief a head. This is very cheap.

Why do people not take advantage of this bargain? Because they will be hanged like pirates if they try. Yet if slaves are just one form of property like any other,

it is a great abridgement of the sacred right of self-government to hang men for engaging in this profitable trade!

Not only had the federal government, following international sentiment, outlawed the slave trade, but the domestic slave barterer was held in low esteem, even in the South:

You do not recognize him as a friend, or even as an honest man. Your children must not play with his. . . . Now why is this? You do not so treat the man who deals in corn, cattle or tobacco.

And what kind of *property* is “set free”? People do not “free” houses or their manufactures to fend for themselves. But there were almost half a million freed blacks in Lincoln’s America:

How comes this vast amount of property to be running about without owners? We do not see free horses or free cattle running at large.

Lincoln said that in 1854, three years before Chief Justice Roger Taney declared, in the *Dred Scott* case, that slaves were movable property like any

other chattel goods. The absurd had become law. No wonder Lincoln felt he had to fight for even minimal recognition of human rights.

If the black man owns himself and is not another person’s property, then he has rights in the product of his labor:

I agree with Judge Douglas [the Negro] is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.*

Lincoln, as often, was using a Bible text, and one with a sting in it. The *curse* of mankind in general, that “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (Genesis 3:19), is, at the least, a *right* for blacks.

Lincoln tried to use one prejudice against another. There was in Americans a prejudice in favor of anything biblical. There was also anti-monarchical bias. Lincoln put the text about eating the bread of one’s own sweat in an American context of antimonarchism.

That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, “You work and toil and earn bread, and I’ll eat it!” [Loud applause.] No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.

In at least these two ways, then, slavery is wrong. One cannot own human beings, and one should not be in the position of a king over human beings.

Lincoln knew how to sneak around the frontal defenses of prejudice and find a back way into agreement with bigots. This explains, at the level of tactics, the usefulness to Lincoln of the Declaration of Independence. That revered document was antimonarchical in the common perception,

and on that score unchallengeable. But because it indicted King George III in terms of the equality of men, the Declaration committed Americans to claims even more at odds with slavery than with kingship—since kings do not necessarily claim to own their subjects. Put the claims of the Declaration as mildly as possible, and they still cannot be reconciled with slavery:

I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong having the [politically and socially] superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary; but I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. [Loud cheers.] I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man.

LINCOLN'S SPEECH AT GETTYSBURG WORKED several revolutions, beginning with one in literary style. Everett's talk was given at the last point in history when such a performance could be appreciated without reservation. It was made obsolete within a half hour of the time when it was spoken. Lincoln's remarks anticipated the shift to vernacular rhythms which Mark Twain would complete twenty years later. Hemingway claimed that all modern American novels are the offspring of *Huckleberry Finn*. It is no greater exaggeration to say that all modern political prose descends from the Gettysburg Address.

The address looks less mysterious than it should to those who believe there is such a thing as "natural speech." All speech is unnatural. It is artificial. Believers in "artless" or "plain" speech think that rhetoric is added to some prior natural thing, like cosmetics added to the unadorned face. But human faces are born, like kitten faces. Words are not born in that way. Human babies, unlike kittens, later produce an artifact called language, and they largely speak in jingles, symbols, tales, and myths during the early stages of their talk. Plain speech is a later development, in whole cultures as in individuals. Simple prose depends on a complex epistemology—it depends on concepts like "objective fact." Language reverses the logic of horticulture: here the blossoms come first, and *they* produce the branches.

Lincoln, like most writers of great prose, began by writing bad poetry. Early experiments with words are almost always stilted, formal, tentative. Economy of words, grip, precision come later (if at all). A Gettysburg Address does not precede rhetoric but burms its way through the lesser

toward the greater eloquence, by long discipline. Lincoln not only exemplifies this process but studied it, in himself and others. He was a student of the word.

Lincoln's early experiences with language have an exuberance that is almost comic in its playing with contrivances. His showy 1838 speech to the Young Men's Lyceum is now usually studied to support or refute Edmund Wilson's claim that it contains oedipal feelings. But its most obvious feature is the attempt to describe a complex situation in nearly balanced structures (emphasized here by division into rhetorical units).

*Their's was the task
(and nobly they performed it)
to possess themselves,
and through themselves, us,
of this goodly land;
and to uprear upon its hills
and its valleys,
a political edifice of liberty
and equal rights;
'tis ours only,
to transmit these,
the former, unprofaned by the foot of an
invader;
the latter, undecayed by the lapse of time,
and untorn by usurpation—
to the latest generation that fate shall permit
the world to know.*

This is too labored to be clear. One has to look a second time to be sure that "the former" refers to "this goodly land" and "the latter" to "a political edifice." But the exercise is limbering Lincoln up for subtler uses of such balance and antithesis. The parenthetical enriching of a first phrase is something he would use in his later prose to give it depth (I have added all but the first set of parentheses):

*Their's was the task
(and nobly they performed it)
to possess themselves*

*(and through themselves, us)
of this goodly land*

It is the pattern of

*The world will little note
(nor long remember)
what we say here*

And, from the Second Inaugural Address, of

*Fondly do we hope
(fervently do we pray)
that this mighty scourge of war
may speedily pass away*

And, also from the Second Inaugural,

*... 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 end after complex melodic pairings with a strong row of monosyllables was an effect he especially liked. Not only “the world to know” and “what we say here” and “the work we are in” in the examples above but also, from the 1861 Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois, in

*Trusting in Him,
who can go with me,
and remain with you
and be every where for good,
let us confidently hope
that all will yet be well.*

And in this, from the Second Inaugural,

*Both parties deprecated war;
but one of them would make war
rather than let the nation survive;*

*and the other would accept war
rather than let it perish.
And the war came.*

And, in the 1862 message to Congress,

*In giving freedom to the slave,
we assure freedom to the free—
honorable alike in what we give,
and what we preserve.
We shall nobly save,
or meanly lose,
the last best hope of earth.*

The closing of the sentence above from Lincoln’s early Lyceum speech (“to the latest generation”) gives a premonition of famous statements to come.

*The fiery trial through which we pass,
will light us down,
(in honor or dishonor)
to the latest generation.*

Those words to Congress in 1862 were themselves forecast in Lincoln’s Peoria address of 1854.

*If we do this,
we shall not only have saved the Union;
but we shall have so saved it,
as to make, and to keep it,
forever worthy of the saving.
We shall have so saved it,
that the succeeding millions
of free happy people,
the world over,
shall rise up,
and call us blessed, to the latest generations.*

It would be wrong to think that Lincoln moved toward the plain style of the Gettysburg Address just by writing shorter, simpler sentences. Actually,

that address ends with a very long sentence—eighty-two words, almost a third of the whole talk's length. So does the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln's second most famous piece of eloquence: its final sentence runs to seventy-five words. Because of his early experiments, Lincoln's prose acquired a flexibility of structure, a rhythmic pacing, a variation in length of words and phrases and clauses and sentences, that make his sentences move "naturally," for all their density and scope. We get inside his verbal workshop when we see how he recast the suggested conclusion to his First Inaugural given him by William Seward. Every sentence is improved, in rhythm, emphasis, or clarity:

Seward

I close.

We are not, we must not be aliens or enemies, but fellow-countrymen and brethren.

Although passion has strained our bonds of affection too hardly, they must not, I am sure they will not, be broken.

The mystic chords which, proceeding from so many battle-fields and so many patriot graves, pass through all the hearts and all the hearths in this broad continent of ours, will yet harmonize in their ancient music when breathed upon by the guardian angel of the nation.

Lincoln

I am loth to close.

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies.

Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.

The mystic chords of memory stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Lincoln's lingering monosyllables in the first sentence seem to cling to the occasion, not wanting to break off the communication on which the

last hopes of union depend. He simplified the next sentence using two terms ("enemies," "friends") where Seward had used two *pairs* ("aliens" and "enemies," "fellow-countrymen" and "brethren"), but Lincoln repeated "enemies" in the urgent words "We must not be enemies." The next sentence was also simplified, to play off against the long, complex image of the concluding sentence. The "chords of memory" are not musical sounds. Lincoln spelled "chord" and "cord" indiscriminately; they are the same etymologically. He used the geometric term "chord" for a line across a circle's arc. On the other hand, he spelled the word "cord" (in an 1858 speech) when calling the Declaration of Independence an electrical wire sending messages to American hearts: "the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty loving men together."

Seward knew that the chord to be breathed on was a string (of a harp or lute, though his "chords proceeding from graves" is grotesque). Lincoln stretched the cords between graves and living hearts, as in his earlier image of the Declaration. Seward also got ethereal when he talked of harmonies that come from breathing on the chords. Lincoln was more believable (and understandable) when he had the better angels of our nature touch the cords to swell the chorus of union. Finally, Seward made an odd picture to get his jingle of chords passing through "hearts and hearths." Lincoln stretched the chords from graves to hearts and hearthstones. He got rid of the crude rhyme by making a chiasmic (a-b-b-a) cluster of "iving heart and hearthstone"; the vital heart is contrasted with the inert hearth-stuff. Seward's clumsy image of stringing together these two different items has disappeared. Lincoln gave to Seward's fustian a pointedness of imagery, a euphony and interplay of short and long sentences and phrases, that lift the conclusion almost to the level of his own best prose.

The spare quality of Lincoln's prose did not come naturally but was worked at. Lincoln not only read aloud, to think his way into sounds, but also wrote as a way of ordering his thought. He had a keenness for analytical exercises. He was proud of the mastery he achieved over Euclid's Elements, which awed Herndon and others. He loved the study of grammar, which some think the most arid of subjects. Some claimed to remember his gift for spelling, a view that our manuscripts disprove. Spelling as he had to learn it (separate from etymology) is more arbitrary than logical. It was the logical side of language—the principles of order as these reflect patterns of thought or the external world—that appealed to him.

He was also, Herndon tells us, laboriously precise in his choice of words. He would have agreed with Mark Twain that the difference between the right word and the nearly right one is that between lightning and a

lightning bug. He said, debating Douglas, that his foe confused a similarity of words with a similarity of things—as one might equate a horse chestnut with a chestnut horse.

As a speaker, Lincoln grasped Twain's later insight: "Few sinners are saved after the first twenty minutes of a sermon." The trick, of course, was not simply to be brief but to say a great deal in the fewest words. Lincoln justly boasted of his Second Inaugural's seven hundred words, "Lots of wisdom in that document, I suspect." The same is even truer of the Gettysburg Address, which uses fewer than half that number of words.

The unwillingness to waste words shows up in the address's telegraphic quality—the omission of coupling words, a technique rhetoricians call asyndeton. Triple phrases sound as to a drumbeat, with no "and" or "but" to slow their insistency:

We are engaged . . .

We are met . . .

We have come . . .

we can not dedicate . . .

we can not consecrate . . .

we can not hallow . . .

that from these honored dead . . .

that we here highly resolve . . .

that this nation, under God . . .

government of the people,

by the people,

for the people . . .

Despite the suggestive images of birth, testing, and rebirth, the speech is surprisingly bare of ornament. The language itself is made strenuous, its musculature easily traced, so that even the grammar becomes a form of rhetoric. By repeating the antecedent as often as possible, instead of referring to it indirectly by pronouns like "it" and "they," or by backward referential words like "former" and "latter," Lincoln interlocks his sentences, making of them a constantly self-referential system. This linking up by explicit repetition amounts to a kind of hook-and-eye method for joining the parts of his address. The rhetorical devices are almost invisible, since they use no figurative language. (I highlight them typographically here.)

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.*

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 altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not *dedicate*—we can not *consecrate*—we can not hallow—this ground.

The brave men, living and dead, *who struggled here*, have *consecrated* it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us the living, rather, to be *dedicated* here to the unfinished work which they *who fought here* have thus far so nobly advanced. 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.

Each of the paragraphs printed separately here is bound to the preceding and the following by some resumptive element. Only the first and last paragraphs do not (because they cannot) have this two-way connection to their setting. Not all of the "pointer" phrases replace grammatical antecedents in the technical sense. But Lincoln makes them perform analogous work. The nation is declared to be "dedicated" before the term is given further uses for individuals present at the ceremony, who repeat (as it were) the national consecration. The compactness of the themes is emphasized by this reliance on a few words in different contexts.

A similar linking process is performed, almost subliminally, by the repeated pinning of statements to *this field, these dead, who died here*, for *that* kind of nation. The reverential touching, over and over, of the charged moment and place leads Lincoln to use "here" eight times in the short text, the adjectival "that" five times, and "this" four times. The spare vocabulary

is not impoverishing, because of the subtly interfused constructions, in which the classicist Charles Smiley identified “two antitheses, five cases of anaphora, eight instances of balanced phrases and clauses, thirteen alliterations.” “Plain speech” was never less artless. Lincoln forged a new lean language to humanize and redeem the first modern war.

This was the perfect medium for changing the way most Americans thought about the nation’s founding. Lincoln did not argue law or history, as Daniel Webster had. He *made* history. He came not to present a theory but to impose a symbol, one tested in experience and appealing to national values, expressing emotional urgency in calm abstractions. He came to change the world, to effect an intellectual revolution. No other words could have done it. The miracle is that these words did. In his brief time before the crowd at Gettysburg he wove a spell that has not yet been broken—he called up a new nation out of the blood and trauma.

JAMES MCPHERSON HAS DESCRIBED LINCOLN as a revolutionary in terms of the economic and other physical changes he effected, whether intentionally or not—a valid point that McPherson discusses sensibly. But Lincoln was a revolutionary in another sense as well—the one Willmoore Kendall denounced him for: he not only presented the Declaration of Independence in a new light, as a matter of founding law, but put its central proposition, equality, in a newly favored position as a principle of the Constitution (whereas, as the *Chicago Times* noticed, the Constitution never uses the word). What had been mere theory in the writings of James Wilson, Joseph Story, and Daniel Webster—that the nation preceded the states, in time and importance—now became a lived reality of the American tradition. The results of this were seen almost at once. Up to the Civil War “the United States” was invariably a plural noun: “The United States are a free country.” After Gettysburg it became a singular: “The United States is a free country.” This was a result of the whole mode of thinking that Lincoln expressed in his acts as well as his words, making union not a mystical hope but a constitutional reality. When, at the end of the address, he referred to government “of the people, by the people, for the people,” he was not, like Theodore Parker, just praising popular government as a Transcendentalist’s ideal. Rather, like Webster, he was saying that America was a people accepting as its great assignment what was addressed in the Declaration. This people was “conceived” in 1776, was “brought forth” as an entity whose birth was datable (“four score and seven years” before) and placeable (“on this continent”), and was capable of receiving a “new birth of freedom.”

Thus Abraham Lincoln changed the way people thought about the

Constitution. For a states’-rights advocate like Willmoore Kendall, for an “original intent” advocate like Edwin Meese, the politics of the United States has all been misdirected since that time. The Fourteenth Amendment was, in their view, ultimately bootlegged into the Bill of Rights. But as soon as it was ratified, the Amendment began doing harm, in the eyes of strict constructionists.

As Robert Bork put it:

Unlike the [Fourteenth Amendment’s] other two clauses, [the due-process clause] quickly displayed the same capacity to accommodate judicial constitution-making which Taney had found in the fifth amendment’s version.

Bork, too, thinks that equality as a national commitment has been sneaked into the Constitution. There can be little doubt about the principal culprit. As Kendall put it, Lincoln’s use of the phrase from the Declaration about all men being equal is an attempt “to wrench from it a single proposition and make that our supreme commitment.”

We should not allow [Lincoln]—not at least without some probing inquiry—to “steal” the game, that is, to accept his interpretation of the Declaration, its place in our history, and its meaning as “true,” “correct,” and “binding.”

But, as Kendall himself admitted, the professors, the textbooks, the politicians, the press, *have* overwhelmingly accepted Lincoln’s vision. The Gettysburg Address has become an authoritative expression of the American spirit—as authoritative as the Declaration itself, and perhaps even more influential, since it determines how we read the Declaration. For most people now, the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as he did to correct the Constitution without overthrowing it. It is this correction of the spirit, this intellectual revolution, that makes attempts to go back beyond Lincoln to some earlier version so feckless. The proponents of states’ rights may have arguments to advance, but they have lost their force, in the courts as well as in the popular mind. By accepting the Gettysburg Address, and its concept of a single people dedicated to a proposition, we have been changed. Because of it, we live in a different America.