



Excerpt, [Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address](#)

Historical Background

President Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address, delivered on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of a new national cemetery on the battlefield where Union and Confederate soldiers had fought just months earlier. In a matter of minutes, Lincoln's words reshaped how Americans understood the Civil War and the nation itself. He honored the soldiers who had died. Yet he also invited listeners to see the war as a test of whether a nation founded on liberty and equality could endure.

By grounding the meaning of the Civil War in the founding ideal that "all men are created equal," Lincoln tied the Gettysburg Address to the Declaration of Independence. Recalling that the nation was "conceived in Liberty" and dedicated to equality, he presented the war as a struggle to uphold the promise made in 1776. Lincoln called for a "new birth of freedom" that moved closer to the Declaration's ideal by ending slavery. He also echoed the Declaration's belief in government by consent through his famous description of a government "of the people, by the people, for the people." Finally, just as the Declaration's signers pledged their lives to secure independence, Lincoln honored the soldiers who had given "the last full measure of devotion," urging the living to complete the founders' unfinished work of making the nation's ideals a reality.

In his June 1, 1865 eulogy on Abraham Lincoln, Senator Charles Sumner referred to this famous presidential speech as a "[monumental act](#)." Sumner said Lincoln was mistaken that "the world will little note, nor long remember what we say here." On the contrary, "the world noted at once what he said, and will never cease to remember it." In fact, "the battle itself was less important than the speech," with Lincoln defining American identity and the Civil War's purpose as a desire to preserve the Union and ensure "a new birth of freedom." Today the Gettysburg Address is regarded as one of the most powerful speeches in U.S. history.

Consider these questions as you read the document:

1. How does the speech's three-part structure (past, present, future) build its powerful message? What unfinished work did Lincoln identify, and has it been completed?
2. In the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson writes that equality is a "self-evident truth." In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln refers to it as a "proposition" to which the nation is dedicated. What is the difference between a truth that is self-evident and a proposition? Is the Civil War part of the "proof" stage of the experiment? How does this change the responsibility of the citizens?
3. The words "dedicate," "consecrate," "hallow" and "devotion" all denote (particularly in their 18th century meanings) setting something apart as holy, sacred, or given to God. Lincoln's listeners are

not asked to consecrate the land; the slain have already done this. But what is holy or sacred about the “great task remaining before us”? How do we, in the 21st century, continue this task? To what civic causes do you feel “increased devotion”?

Original Text

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.