**[The Atlantic](http://m.theatlantic.com/)** The Words That Remade

*The significance of the Gettysburg Address*

GARRY WILLS

*In a rare image of President Lincoln at Gettysburg, he is shown hatless at the center of a crowd on the orators’ platform. (Library of Congress)*

In the summer of 1863, General Robert E. Lee pushed northward into Pennsylvania. The Union army met him at Gettysburg, and from July 1 to July 3, the bloodiest battle of the war ensued. By the time it was over, the Confederates were in retreat, and the battlefield was strewn with more than 50,000 dead and wounded.   
  
Four months later, thousands gathered at Gettysburg to witness the dedication of a new cemetery. On the program was the standard assortment of music, remarks, and prayers. But what transpired that day was more extraordinary than anyone could have anticipated. In “The Words That Remade America,” the historian and journalist Garry Wills reconstructed the events leading up to the occasion, debunking the myth that President Lincoln wrote his remarks at the last minute, and carefully unpacking Lincoln’s language to show how—in just 272 words—he subtly cast the nation’s understanding of the Constitution in new, egalitarian terms. Wills’s book *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, from which the essay was adapted, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993.

*—Sage Stossel*

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 hugger-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, fetid 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) … 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, Whittier, Bryant. All three poets, each for his own reason, found their muse unbiddable. 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 … [He] 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.

**WHEN LIGHTNING STRUCK**

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 Wills’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 gestation 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 …

These mythical accounts are badly out of character for Lincoln, who composed his speeches thoughtfully. His law partner, William Herndon, 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 … He could not count on any time for the concentration he required when weighing his words …

**“REMARKS”**

Lincoln’s train arrived toward dusk in Gettysburg. There were still coffins stacked at the station for completing the reburials. Lamon, 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 …

Early in the morning Lincoln took a carriage ride to the battle sites. Later, Ward Lamon 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, Lamon 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 Birgfield’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. Baugher, 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 dedication 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 Lamon 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.

**A GIANT, IF BENIGN, SWINDLE**

At the least, Lincoln had far surpassed David Wills’s hope for words to disinfect the air of Gettysburg. His speech hovers far above the carnage. 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 …

**PLAIN SPEECH**

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 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 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.

**MAKING UNION A REALITY**

[Lincoln] 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 … 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 …

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 … 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.