

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE NATIVITY THEME IN THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

The monograph prepared by the editor of Lincoln Lore on the subject "The Gettysburg Address—An Evaluation" has aroused sufficient interest to invite some further comment on the theme which embodies Lincoln's famous speech. The Christmas Season offers a helpful atmosphere for these observations because Lincoln introduces at the very outset of the address an expression in the Bethlehem nativity story. The Biblical account: "and Mary brought forth her first born son" is paraphrased by Lincoln to state, "our fathers brought forth . . . a new nation."

If it be admitted that in the development of the theme throughout the address there is continuity of thought expressed in terms of the conception, birth, dedication, and perpetuity of the nation then we might look for a concluding phrase which would serve as a climax for this concept. Such an emphasis is found in the words "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

### *An Axiom Emerges*

Possibly we should raise the question whether or not it is justifiable to accept as the high point of interest in the address the oft quoted phrase "government of the people, by the people, for the people." Does the occasion, the content, and the tenor of the speech point up to such an emphasis?

When it was announced that Lincoln was to appear on the program at Gettysburg those opposed to his candidacy for a second term immediately exclaimed that he was planning to make political capital out of the dedication of a cemetery; that he was going to make the opening speech of his Presidential campaign on the graves of dead soldiers. It is very certain that Lincoln would lean backwards politically in view of these insinuations rather than appear to desecrate the soldier graves by political oratory or give any occasion whatever for such unjust comments as followed his visit to Antietam.

Is it likely that Lincoln would choose to discuss at Gettysburg such a political theme as popular government, the question of sovereignty, or refer to agencies through which the government might act or be acted upon? One would have some difficulty in discovering in the address any logical presentation of a theme which was essentially political in flavor. Furthermore, there does not seem to be extant any contemporary report of the address which calls special attention to the prepositional phrase as having been given a superior emphasis in Mr. Lincoln's rendition of the speech.

However, throughout the years the phrase "government of the people, by the people, for the people" through popular favor has emerged until it has been raised to so conspicuous a position that it has become the most radiant single jewel in the setting, often drawing more attention than the composit beauty of the whole cluster of gems.

### *The Central Idea*

Edward Everett was probably the first one to compliment the President on his address as he was seated next to him on the platform. There is a generally accepted tradition that he arose at the close of the ceremony and shook Mr. Lincoln's hand saying something like this: "Ah, Mr. President how gladly would I exchange all my hundred pages to have been the author of your twenty lines." We do know that the following day Everett wrote to Mr. Lincoln a note containing the same

thought and commenting on the "appropriateness" of the remarks. Mr. Everett then wrote, "I would be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

What did this internationally known statesman, the former president of Harvard University, have in mind when he wrote about the "appropriateness" of Lincoln's remarks which seemed to visualize the "central idea of the occasion." Would it not be the warmth and timeliness of Lincoln's sentiments couched in the simple language of dedicatory rites rather than the development of some profound political thesis?

### *Dedicating the Living*

Nineteen days before the date finally set for the Gettysburg ceremonies President Lincoln was invited "to set apart formally these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks." This was ample time for him to give careful thought to what he might say at a dedicatory service. The problem uppermost in his mind during the war then waging was the preservation of the Union—the survival of the Nation which had had such an auspicious birth but whose very life now was threatened.

He observed how futile it would be to attempt to consecrate a burial ground with words, when it had already been hallowed with blood. This conclusion led him to the alternative that it was the living rather who should be dedicated at Gettysburg, "to the unfinished work" of saving the union, resolving that the nation that was "conceived in liberty" would now experience "a new birth of Freedom."

### *The Nation Rejuvenated*

Nicolay and Hay, secretaries of the President, were both at Gettysburg and it was probably Nicolay who contributed to their monumental history the following brief comment about the Gettysburg Address: "If there arose in the mind of any discriminating listener on the platform a passing doubt whether Mr. Lincoln would or could properly honor the unique occasion, that doubt vanished with his opening sentences; . . ." The opening sentence it will be recalled contained the reference to the conception, birth and dedication of the nation.

Another visitor at Gettysburg who heard the Address was Col. John Forney. Upon returning to Washington he prepared for his paper an account of the Gettysburg ceremonies with special comment on Lincoln's speech. He brought his remarks to a conclusion with the expression which apparently he felt to be the climax of the speech "that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth."

The contemporary issue of the Chicago Times severely critical of both Mr. Lincoln and his address singled out for special attack Lincoln's reference to "The New Birth of Freedom" stating that the men at Gettysburg had given their lives "to maintain the old government." So try as best he could by utilizing the development of a nativity theme yet it was given a political interpretation.

When the cornerstone of the Government Monument at Gettysburg was laid on July 4, 1865, General O. O. Howard was the orator of the day. During his oration he quoted Lincoln's famous Address, made a few comments about it, and then concluded: "The dead did not die in vain, and the nation has experienced already the new birth of freedom of which he spoke."