Description

President Abraham Lincoln spoke for only a few minutes at the dedication of the Gettysburg Military Cemetery, his words were critical in re-committing Americans to the idea that all men are created equal.

Keywords

Civil War, Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Troops, Casualties, Mass Burial, Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, Speech, Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Politics, Garry Wills, "Lincoln At Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America"

Citation

MLA
"Author Garry Wills Discusses the Gettysburg Address." Katie Couric, correspondent. NBC Today Show.
KATHERINE COURIC, co-host: One hundred and twenty-nine years ago today, American troops were fighting in the hills of southern Pennsylvania, fighting each other. It was the turning point of the Civil War, but the cost of freedom was high at the Battle of Gettysburg.

More than 160,000 troops came together. The fighting lasted three days. Fifty thousand were killed, wounded, or missing. Bodies littered the battleground. The decision to bury the dead on the field where they fell led to a unique moment in history.

President Abraham Lincoln received a last-minute invitation to take part in the dedication of the Gettysburg Military Cemetery. Thousands gathered to hear the speeches, but Lincoln was not the featured orator of that day--Harvard University president Edward Everette had that honor. Following the fashion of the time, he spoke for two hours.

Lincoln, however, spoke for only a few minutes--272 words, to be exact. Many were startled when it ended so soon. But Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, like the battle itself, was a milestone in American history. The speech and its continuing impact on America is the subject of a new book, Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America. Its author is Gary Wills.

Good morning...

Mr. GARY WILLS (Lincoln At Gettysburg)

): Good morning.

COURIC: ...and thanks for joining us.

WILLS: Thank you.

COURIC: We sort of got a feel of what it was like in Gettysburg that day, but can you describe for us or give us a historical context for that day in history?

WILLS: Sure. It was crushing. This is this little village of 2,000 people--2,000 and a few hundred. They
woke up on the Fourth of July and there are 8,000 dead bodies in their fields, farms, whatever; 6,000 dead horses, mules. What to do with them? They obviously had to cover—cover them over quickly in some way, but then, what to do with all these bodies? The various states in the North sent delegations saying, “We want to take them home and give them honorable burial.” Families sent people to look for relatives. The Southerners couldn't claim their bodies. They had to be dumped in communal graves, and so people started rummaging around in these lightly covered graves, and dogs and hogs were. So the governor of Pennsylvania had to step in and say, “No, you can't take away any of these bodies. We have to come up with something new,” a joint cemetery, which hadn't existed before. And the federal government wasn't in charge, because that also was not in a position to do that kind of thing. So the states formed a commission to rebury all these bodies...

COURIC: Uh-huh.

WILLS: ...but they had to wait until the first frost, so they had been rotting in the ground for three months or so. And they started digging them up and moving them to the new cemetery. Very hard to identify them.

COURIC: Oh.

WILLS: A very, very...

COURIC: A gruesome, depressing situation.

WILLS: Yeah, a disanimating situation.

COURIC: The Gettysburg Address is so memorable for many reasons. One is that the Constitution was really not focused on in that address, but the Declaration of Independence. Why was that so significant?

WILLS: That was part of a long campaign that Lincoln had been conducting, to use the Declaration against the Constitution. To say the Constitution admits slavery, but we were pledged--we were dedicated to a proposition that all men are created equal in the Declaration. Also, the Constitution talks about state's right, whereas the Declaration talks about one people separating itself from another people. So he had—he did not say four score minus six years ago, which would have taken us back to the Constitution. He said "four score and seven," all the way back to the Declaration. This is part of this campaign and it--he ends up saying, "government of the people, by the people, for the people." That's the single people of the Declaration, not the states of the Constitution.

COURIC: Did he agree deep--did he believe deeply sort of in these moral principles he was espousing, the end of slavery? Or was he a political opportunist? After all...

WILLS: Yeah.

COURIC: ...I mean public support for the war effort was waning. He was up for re-election. Was this more of a political speech or a moral speech, in your view?

WILLS: Well, it's both. He was a politician, a very good one, and he always worked for what was feasible. But he always had the goal out there, we can only do this and this and this, but we're moving always toward this goal, this proposition to which we are dedicated that all men are created equal. So that even people who had criticized him up to the time of Gettysburg, people like Emerson, said now we see that he's been pacing himself, that he's demanding only what the people can give him. And, of course, by going back to something that the people shared, the Declaration they read every Fourth of July, he was
able to do what is always necessary when you want real change. People are afraid of change, so you go back to something they value very deeply and say, unless you change, you--you're going to lose this thing.

And so he said, unless we change, we can't ever say the words in the Declaration of Independence anymore. We can't say we're dedicated to the idea that all men are created equal.

COURIC: Well, it's a fascinating book. It was a fascinating address, but, of course, all of us remember well, or remember learning about during our school days. Gary Wills, the book is Lincoln at Gettysburg: Words That Remade America

. Thank you so much...

WILLS: Thank you.

COURIC: ...for joining us this morning. Appreciate it.