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Abstract

Seven score and fourteen years ago, Abraham Lincoln eloquently reminded us of the idealism of our founding our fathers, who “brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. “

Lincoln also called upon all persons of good conscience, not simply to remember the sacrifice of those who died preserving these ideals on the battlefield at Gettysburg, but also to act upon those ideals, and to rise to the challenge “to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us...” (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg address, Charlottesville, racism, Confederate States of America

Disciplines

African American Studies | United States History

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By Christopher Fee, Opinion Contributor - 08/14/17 12:40 PM EDT



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Lincoln also called upon all persons of good conscience, not simply to remember the sacrifice of those who died preserving these ideals on the battlefield at Gettysburg, but also to act upon those ideals, and to rise to the challenge “to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us....”

Prophetic words indeed, as great tasks did and do remain before us.

Here in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, we greet a million or two visitors a year. Folks come for all sorts of reasons and certainly the legacy of Lincoln’s stirring Gettysburg Address draws not a few.

Judging from the preponderance of Confederate flags and caps one sees on the battlefield, however, one might be forgiven for supposing that many of our visitors are answering the siren’s song of the “high water mark of the South” the disastrous results of “Pickett’s Charge,” an ill-

fated maneuver which ended with Robert E. Lee's withdrawal from Gettysburg and the ignominious end of his Northern Campaign.

While the Civil War is dead and gone to many Yankees, not a few Northerners are discomfited when they see statues of Confederate icons in the South, and hence the ongoing conflicts over what to do about such monuments flash into the common consciousness only when such conflicts — always at a simmer — suddenly erupt, sometimes violently, and most recently with tragic results.

Although we certainly live north of the Mason-Dixon line here, however, we in Gettysburg don't have the luxury of overlooking the abiding impact of the Civil War; we are surrounded on one huge, curving flank — as the town was during the battle — by stone testaments to the Confederate cause, not to mention hundreds of retired cannons. I'm not alone among my friends and acquaintances in often using General Lee — massively wrought in bronze astride his steed Traveler — as a turning point on walks, and I can hardly be the first to note how dominant this figure is, and how it casts a far longer shadow — literally as well as figuratively — than any other statue I can recall on the battlefield.

I also am given ample opportunity, therefore, to consider the abiding relevance of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and I would submit that Lincoln's charge to us is as compelling and binding upon one's moral conscience as it was in 1863: We are called not just to lament injustice, hatred, prejudice and oppression, but to answer Lincoln's charge to rise up in the face of adversity, however seemingly intractable and overwhelming, and to ensure "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom...."

Whatever Lee may have been as a man, if the events in Charlottesville prove anything, it's that he is a potent symbol to those looking to assert an ancient heritage of hatred and a misguided sense of superiority based on the color of one's skin.

Gettysburg remains a beacon of a beautiful dream of the common struggle for good in the face of evil, and Lincoln's words of inspiration and responsibility continue to call us to be our better selves, whatever the odds, whatever the risks and whatever the cost.

Lincoln paid a heavy price for his ideals, as indeed did those men he himself lamented in his most famous speech, and as one young woman did this weekend. Lincoln calls on us to mourn the fallen, but to do so through righteous action, and not simply through words, and that is a frightening prospect. Fear must not be allowed to turn us from our cause, however, and now — as in 1863 — we must dedicate ourselves to "to the unfinished work," fully aware of the price we must be willing to pay to stand firm in the face of evil.

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