



Summer 2013

A New Birth of Freedom

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Guelzo, Allen C. "A New Birth of Freedom," *Claremont Review of Books* 13.3 (Summer 2013), 56-59.

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Abstract

The president of the United States had been more than usually agitated ever since the news of a major collision of the Union and Confederate armies around Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, first flew along the telegraph wires to the War Department on July 1, 1863. For days, he was clouded with “sadness and despondency” until the message arrived, announcing a great victory for the Union. That was followed almost at once by news from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles: another dispatch had come in, “communicating the fall of Vicksburg [Mississippi] on the fourth of July.” At once, Abraham Lincoln’s mood changed, and he was “beaming with joy.” That night, the war-swollen population of Washington City joined in reveling over the twin victories. “The news immediately spread throughout the city, creating intense and joyous excitement,” and “[f]lags were displayed from all the Departments, and crowds assembled with cheers.” A large throng marched up Pennsylvania Avenue with the U.S. Marine Band at their head, milling in front of the White House and calling on the president for a speech. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, Gettysburg Address

Disciplines

History | Military History | Political History | Social History | United States History

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This essay is adapted from Dr. Allen Guelzo's 2013 book, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*.

VOLUME XIII, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2013

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PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$6.95

Essay by Allen C. Guelzo

A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM



THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES had been more than usually agitated ever since the news of a major collision of the Union and Confederate armies around Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, first flew along the telegraph wires to the War Department on July 1, 1863. For days, he was clouded with “sadness and despondency” until the message arrived, announcing a great victory for the Union. That was followed almost at once by news from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles: another dispatch had come in, “communicating the fall of Vicksburg [Mississippi] on the fourth of July.” At once, Abraham Lincoln’s mood changed, and he was “beaming with joy.” That night, the war-swollen population of Washington City joined in reveling over the twin victories. “The news immediately spread throughout the city, creating intense and joyous excitement,” and “[f]lags were displayed from all the Departments, and crowds assembled with cheers.” A large throng marched up Pennsylvania Avenue with the U.S. Marine Band at their head, milling in front of the White House and calling on the president for a speech.

Lincoln did not like speaking unrehearsed, but he appeared at a second-floor window on the north side of the Executive Mansion and allowed his speculations to ramble. “How long ago is it?” he asked out loud, “[e]ighty odd years—since on the Fourth of July for the first time in the history of the world a nation by its representatives, assembled and declared as a self-evident truth that ‘all men are created equal.’” The fact that the news of the twin victories of Gettysburg and Vicksburg had arrived on the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence gave them a halo which other victories—New Orleans, Forts Henry and Donelson—had never seemed to have. A bright line seemed to pulse between July 1776 and July 1863, and he found something wonderful in how the “the cohorts of those who opposed the declaration that all men are created equal” had been put on the run on the Declaration’s anniversary. This was, he continued, “a glorious theme.” But, he added, “I am not prepared” to make a speech. “Bring up the music,” he said instead, and off the crowd went to the War Department to call for Secretary Edwin Stanton.

Successful Experiment

LINCOLN MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN READY to speak on the “glorious theme” at that moment, but in the larger sense, he had been preparing to give a speech on that “theme” all his life. “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence,” he said in 1861. Those sentiments sprang from the Declaration’s most important, animating idea, *that all men are created equal*. Not equal in what they were or what they had made of themselves, perhaps, but equal in the common possession of the same quotient of natural rights with which everyone else was equipped. “The authors of that notable instrument,” he had once cautioned, “did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects.” But they did define “with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in certain inalienable rights.... This they said and this they meant.” In Lincoln’s understanding, *all men are created equal* meant that the most ordinary of people



had been created with the same set of rights to life, to liberty, and to self-advancement as the most extraordinary, that no one was born either with a crown upon his head or a saddle upon his back. "Most governments," he wrote in a brief sketch in 1854, "have been based, practically, on the denial of equal rights of men." The American Founders had taken a different route; they made what Lincoln called "an experiment," to see whether in fact democratic self-government was really a possibility.

More than the founders had any reason to expect, Lincoln believed that this "undecided experiment" had now emerged as a "successful one." Of course, that depended on how one defined *success*. The reply of the cynics, the aristocrats, and the disappointed was that the American success was only temporary. Let some challenge of continental proportions overtake them, and all of these equal men would begin quarrelling obscenely with one another. With no superior class to restrain them, these noisy, self-advancing boors would tear the country apart, while the rest of this shopkeeper nation would scarcely bother to turn their attention away from the pursuit of business. "When you have governed men for several years," Otto von Bismarck warned France's Jules Favre, "you will become a Monarchist. Believe me, one cannot lead or bring to prosperity a great nation without the principle of authority—that is, the Monarchy."

Precisely such an issue was buried deep in the beginnings of the American republic itself. The founders tolerated the existence of chattel slavery in the new "experiment," despite its obvious contradiction of the principle that everyone was, by nature, free and equal. But the founders also expected that this was a problem which could be left to cure itself. Lincoln concluded that "[t]he framers of the Constitution intended and expected the ultimate extinction of that institution." So the Constitution in 1787 permitted the Northwest Ordinance (banning slavery from the Northwest Territories) to stay in effect, sanctioned the banning of the slave trade, and even turned linguistic somersaults to avoid actually using the word *slave*. "The theory of our government is Universal Freedom," Lincoln insisted, which is why "the word *Slavery* is not found," and euphemisms are instead substituted in which "the slave is spoken of as a *person held to service or labor*.... Thus, the thing is hid away, in the constitution" and deliberately "omitted that future generations might not know such a thing ever existed."

Burr Under the Saddle

BUT SLAVERY DID NOT BECOME EXTINCT. Instead, it grew and prospered, and in time it brought into question the integrity of the whole "experiment" in popular government, because if one unfortunate segment of the people were wholly excluded from the right of self-government—then didn't this prove Bismarck's dictum, that government from the top down was the natural, and inevitable, order of things? By the 1850s, the slaveholders, who regarded themselves as America's only real aristocrats, had even begun to embrace Bismarck's Junker skepticism about democracy, arguing that hierarchy and serfdom, not equality, were the only proper order of things, and Lincoln was asking himself and others whether the resurgent economic power of slavery was threatening the very premises of American democracy. "I should like to know if taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle, and making exceptions to it—where will it stop?"

His election as president in 1860 was a sign to the nation that a stop had indeed been called to the metastasization of slavery. But now came the moment when the evil eye of the aristocrats began to gleam, since the people of the slave-holding states promptly announced their democratic unwillingness to be disagreed with, and used that unwillingness to pull down the house of the Union. Lincoln had warned over and over again that Southern secession was not really a free exercise of constitutional rights to do as they pleased, but a refusal to abide by the rules of democracy and an above-board national election. And when the slaveholders called state secession conventions for the purpose of declaring their union with the other states at an end, he warned again that the new Southern Confederacy was not based on a democratic exercise of *rights* or *liberty*, but upon anarchy, and anarchy could lead nowhere but into the hands of the despots, who would promise the restoration of order.

Lincoln had once hoped that the secession problem could be resolved without dealing too harshly with the seceders, that appeals to "the mystic chords of memory" would draw them back. But invocations of the bonds of fraternity were met with denial that any such fraternity any longer existed, and so this man who once confessed that he could barely bring himself to pull the trigger on wild game now found himself directing a civil war. And far from the people of the democracy rallying to the cause in noble ranks and undivided loyalty,

there arose bitter dissension over how the war should be conducted and whether the aims of the war should include the destruction of slavery as the original burr under the saddle. His energy sapped, the president wrestled with the daily dreariness of the war's news. Even though he was not an explicitly religious man, he increasingly was tempted to wonder if "God was against us in our view of the subject of slavery in this country, and our method of dealing with it."

And then came Gettysburg. It was not merely that Gettysburg finally delivered a victory, or that it administered a bloody reverse to Southern fortunes at the point and in the place where they might otherwise have scored their greatest triumph, or that it had come at such a stupendous cost in lives. It was that the monumental scale of that sacrifice was its own refutation of the old lie, that a democracy enervates the virtue of its people to the point where they are unwilling to do more than blinkingly look to their personal concerns. The idea continued to mature. By September, he had become convinced that Gettysburg had not only made "peace...not appear so distant as it did," but that it would demonstrate that "there can be no successful appeal from a fair election, but to the next election," and that an aroused democracy would defend that democracy to the death.

A Few Appropriate Remarks

THEN, IN NOVEMBER, ARRIVED A LETTER from David Wills, an earnest-minded lawyer in Gettysburg who had pulled some very substantial political wires (he had married into the family of the great Pennsylvania political power-broker, Alexander K. McClure, and read law in the office of Thaddeus Stevens) to create a national cemetery on Gettysburg's Cemetery Hill for the 3,900 or so Union dead (out of more than 5,000 killed in the battle) whose bodies had not been claimed by relatives. The letter invited the president to attend the dedication ceremonies there on November 19, and, after the main address of the day was delivered by the celebrity orator Edward Everett, Lincoln would be expected to deliver "a few appropriate remarks" to "set apart these grounds to their Sacred use." Wills's invitation added the final stone in the arch of Lincoln's thinking, because the cemetery would be literally the city of the battle's dead, and the size of that city was its own mute testimony that the citizens of a democracy were not merely a population of bovine shopkeepers and slab-faced farmers, but citizens who had seen something tran-



scendent after all in the rainbow-promise of democracy, something worth dying to protect, something worth communicating to the living.

As was his wont, Lincoln began committing his ideas to paper piece-meal, telling the journalist Noah Brooks on November 15 that the “remarks” he would deliver at the cemetery’s dedication were “written, but not finished,” and his future Attorney General, James Speed, that it was “nearly done.” He left Washington by train just after noon on Wednesday, November 18, accompanied by three of his cabinet secretaries (William Seward, John P. Usher, and Montgomery Blair), plus his two White House staffers, John Nicolay and John Hay, the Marine Band, and assorted generals, admirals, and the French and Italian ministers, Henri Mercier and Joseph Bertinatti, all accommodated in three passenger cars and a baggage car. In Baltimore (where two years before he had been threatened with assassination), he came out onto “the platform of the car” to acknowledge the cheering crowds who surrounded him. He arrived in Gettysburg “about sundown” to be greeted by the local solons, including David Wills and the college president, Henry Baugher. The others would be put up at Gettysburg’s brimming hotels; Wills claimed the right to play host to the president.

It rained during the night, but Thursday, the 19th, dawned as a “beautiful Indian summer day,” with thin clouds dimming the brightness until the afternoon. The president was still dickering with the wording of his “remarks,” re-writing sentences, crossing out words, carreating-in new ones. The parade to the cemetery began forming-up in the town “diamond” at 9:00, with the Marine Band and “officers and soldiers of the Army of the Potomac” in the van, followed by Lincoln, “mounted upon a young and beautiful chestnut bay horse” and dressed in “a black frock coat...his towering figure surmounted by a high silk hat.” Dressed in black, with a black mourning band around his stovepipe hat, Lincoln was “besieged by an eager crowd thronging around him, and anxious for the pleasure of taking him by the hand,” until the parade handlers shooed them back. It took them an hour to get organized, and another hour to traverse the densely-packed length of Baltimore Street, and up the slope of Cemetery Hill to the new cemetery’s entrance, while artillery salutes were fired every minute. “The crowd was so dense that the air was rendered so close even on that day in the late fall that more than one lady and even men fainted.” When the parade at last reached the cemetery grounds, the military units formed a corridor to allow Lincoln and the other dignitaries to reach the speaker’s

platform, dismount, and climb the left-hand steps to the platform. Lincoln’s chair would be in the front row (there were three rows on the platform), with Edward Everett sitting on one side and Secretary of State William Seward on the other.

The program began as Birgfeld’s Band from Philadelphia struck up Adolph Birgfeld’s own *Homage d’un Heros*; the chaplain of the House of Representatives, Thomas Stockton, followed with a prayer, and the Marine Band (under the baton of its enterprising director, Francis Scala) played a dolorous version of the Doxology—*Praise God from whom all blessings flow*. Finally it was the turn of the orator, Edward Everett: “Standing beneath this serene sky, overlooking these broad fields...” Lincoln had once appraised Everett as one of the most over-rated public speakers in America, and he could be forgiven if his mind wandered at points during the 13,000 words which poured forth from the former Harvard president in one Latinate phrase after another.

Those who died at Gettysburg did so because they saw in democracy something more than self-interest.

Lincoln had told Noah Brooks that he would keep his own remarks “short, short, short,” planning to say much the same thing as he had said back in July. He did not propose to trespass on Everett’s territory; he would leave to the eloquent New Englander the review of the war and the battle and the question of how much the battle had cost and its significance in the overall course of things. Instead, he would look for the meaning of this battle and its dead in the larger historical scheme of the American “experiment.” What would be military history in Everett’s hands would become metaphor and symbol in his.

Dedicated to the Proposition

HE WOULD BEGIN (AS HE HAD BACK IN July) by connecting the battle with the republic’s founding, although now he would drop the pre-occupation with one Independence Day leading to a second one. He would also drop the pedestrian opening he employed in July—*How long ago is it?—eighty odd years?*—and replace it with a poetic flourish reminiscent of the Psalm-

ist’s calculation of the lifespan of humanity: *Four-score and seven years ago...* This was not entirely original. Two years before, Pennsylvania Congressman Galusha Grow had survived a bruising selection process to emerge as Speaker of the House of Representatives, and he had begun his thank-you speech by announcing, “Fourscore years ago, fifty-six bold merchants, farmers, lawyers, and mechanics, the representatives of a few feeble colonists, scattered along the Atlantic sea-board, met in convention to found a new empire, based on the inalienable rights of man.” The speech was a minor sensation, and ended-up being quickly reprinted as a model for public-speakers in handbooks like *Beadle’s Dime Patriotic Speaker*. Lincoln had few scruples about adopting and improving other people’s locutions, especially when they drew on common sources like the Psalms’ description of the human lifespan: “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.” (Mary Todd Lincoln remembered in 1866 that her husband “felt religious More than Ever about the time he went to Gettysburg,” and it showed in his “remarks”). From there, biblical images would abound: ...*our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation (as though it was the Mother of God bringing forth her first-born and wrapping him in swaddling clothes) conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that “all men are created equal.”*

It was a matter of ridicule in the eyes of both kings and commoners alike that a nation could be dedicated to anything as rationalistic as a *proposition*, fully as much as it had seemed ridiculous ages before that a heavenly King could be born in a stable. Nations are not *dedicated*; they simply are. And *propositions* are not the building-stuff of national identity; nations are made by time, by collective memory, by racial and religious solidarity, by histories of loyalty and submission to a select race of leaders, warriors, and rulers. Men cannot say to other men, complained the arch-reactionary Joseph de Maistre, “*Make us a government, as a workman is told, make us a fire engine or a loom.*” No government ever emerged from reasoning or deliberation, de Maistre jeered. *Propositions* are made for debates, disputations, and tutorials, but not for nation-building. But this was just what the American Founders had done. It would take twelve centuries to make a Frenchman, but it would take only 20 minutes to make an American.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war. And not merely a war, but a testing, a kind of



pass/fail examination to determine once and for all whether the American Founding had indeed been misbegotten—whether a democracy built solely out of the fragile reeds of constitutional propositions was merely a fuzzy pipe-dream or whether people really could survive without crowns and saddles—*whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.* Gettysburg proved that democracy had not in fact debased the spirit of the American people, but had instead made them stronger and more determined to resist any backsliding from the integrity of the proposition to which they had been dedicated in 1776.

The Larger Question

LINCOLN WAS NOT GOING TO SPEAK about slavery, which doubtless surprised people then and surprises people now. But the destruction of slavery was actually a subset of the larger contest over democracy and tyranny. Much as Lincoln detested slavery, he did not see it as a peculiarly American sin; it was simply one manifestation of the far larger original sin of human politics, the lust after power. “It is the same spirit that says *you* toil and work and earn bread, and *I’ll* eat it,” Lincoln warned in 1858. “No matter in what form it comes—whether from the mouth of a king seeking to bstride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor—or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race—it is the same tyrannical principle.” Curiously, the monarchs did not disagree with this. Paul von Hindenberg remembered decades later that every Prussian officer worth his *pickelhaube* was pulling for the Confederacy. King Leopold of Belgium (the great-uncle of Europe’s royal houses) frankly hoped that the Civil War would “raise a barrier against the United States and provide a support for the monarchical-aristocratic principle in the Southern states.” And, from the other side of the telescope, England’s Richard Cobden pleaded with the House of Commons to see that the American Civil War was “an aristocratic rebellion against a democratic Government.” Restoring the Union was not a separate issue from slavery; restoring the Union was synonymous with the legitimacy of democracy itself, and if that restoring failed, emancipation would fail with it. If democracy did survive and the republic was reunited, then slavery was doomed just by the fact of that successful re-uniting. Emancipation, however great a righting of a historic wrong, would be meaningless unless it was set within the larger question of democracy’s survival.

“The central idea pervading this struggle,” Lincoln told his secretary, John Hay, back at the beginning of the war, “is the necessity... of proving that popular government is not an absurdity,” for “[i]f we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves.”

We are met on a great battle field of that war, which is a reminder that those very ordinary people whom the cultured despisers of democracy hold in such contempt have been willing to mount some very extraordinary efforts to preserve it. Especially, *we have come to dedicate a portion of it, as a final resting place for those who died here, that the nation might live.* Live, and be reminded that those who died here did so because they saw in democracy something more than opportunities for self-interest and self-aggrandizement, something that spoke to the fundamental nature of human beings itself, something which arched like a rainbow in the political sky.

On this hinge, he turned from what had been done to what was being done, and what yet remained to do. *[I]n a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we can not consecrate—we cannot hallow, this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have hallowed it, far above our poor power to add or detract.* For all the planning, foresight, and expenditure which had gone into the creation of the Gettysburg cemetery, the real focus of attention would always be, and deserved to be, on the soldiers who had fought and won the greatest battle, not so much of a war, as of the age-old struggle of commoners and kings. *The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.*

Any dedication to be done that day had been accomplished already by the dead soldiers themselves. But there was still a dedication which needed to be performed—not of graves or a cemetery, but a dedication of the hearts of those standing around—by the 15,000 spectators who crammed into Gettysburg for the ceremonies, by the dignitaries and generals and politicians who would sit stiffly on the 12x20-foot platform—dedicating themselves in a peculiar form of baptism to the true loftiness of the democratic faith. *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.* This was something entirely different from what Edward Everett was summoning them to. Everett’s address reviewed the entire history of the war, and the battle, and was the product of some serious reading and thinking on his part. But it was dutiful rather than inspiring—accurate, you might say, without being moving, like a hired mourner at a wake. Lin-

coln’s words turned the emotional burden of the sacrifices made at Gettysburg onto his listeners by asking them to dedicate, not a cemetery, but themselves to the unfinished work which the dead of Gettysburg had begun. *It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us,* the great task of winning the war (*that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion*), but also the task of re-affirming and re-appropriating the spirit of the founders, of extolling the virtues of democracy and preaching its worth as the one true and natural system of human society.

If he was wrong about democracy, if the war went on in the resultless way it had gone for two years—if these dead had *died in vain*—then he and every other American were surely of all men most miserable. What Gettysburg must become, then, was the occasion of something which bordered on a national revival, *a new birth of freedom* (and though he hadn’t planned to do so, he would reinforce this point by inserting *under God* to re-inforce the tent-meeting urgency of that renewal)—so that *government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

No Brighter Page

EVERETT WAS ALMOST FINISHED: “...IN the glorious annals of our common country there will be no brighter page than that which relates the battles of Gettysburg.” There was then a *Consecration Hymn* to be sung by the twelve members of the National Union Musical Association, five stanzas’ worth of “holy ground” and “widow’s tears.” Ward Hill Lamon, Lincoln’s friend and the master-of-ceremonies, was ready to make the next introduction, and as he did, the president leaned over and thanked Everett.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States,” announced Lamon. In the distance, South Mountain slumbered in a soft haze. Lincoln stood up, took a “thin slip of paper” from the inside pocket of his frock coat, grasped (as was his habit) his left coat lapel, and began to speak.

Allen C. Guelzo is the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College and winner of the Lincoln Prize in 2000 for *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing) and in 2005 for *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (Simon & Schuster). This essay is adapted from his most recent book, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (Alfred A. Knopf).