American Voices—The Power of Words
Sample Essay

The battle of Gettysburg rages on. Gone are the clashing blue and gray armies, the fury of Union soldiers on Little Round Top who repulsed a Confederate attack on the Union's flank in hand-to-hand combat after running out of ammunition. Gone are the courageous Confederate infantrymen of the famous Pickett's Charge who attacked the Union's strongest position under withering fire until there were no units left to advance. Gone are the shredded tatters of Lee's army that retreated in confusion and defeat to the swollen Potomac River where only Union hesitation allowed them to escape. This was Gettysburg, seen by most as the turning point of the war, the bloodiest battle of the Civil War, a battle that claimed 23,000 Union casualties (dead, wounded or missing), bad enough for both sides, but a crisis for the undermanned Confederacy which lost 28,000 or one-third of the entire army in this single battle (Oates 352).

Why does the battle rage on? Today, tourists, private developers, local landowners, Federal Park rangers, and even debating congressmen, are fighting over how best to preserve a landmark in the most meaningful way. The battle of Gettysburg may once have been a battle of armies, but Lincoln was the first to understand that it was a battle of meaning or what a nation stands for.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, far more important than the few dedicatory remarks he was invited to give, is a re-interpretation of the American Constitution, a companion-piece to the Declaration of Independence, and a farsighted vision of what the United States must become. There were other battles that determined the outcome of the war, but no other speech more effectively set the course for American history, a course Lincoln mapped out as one nation, federally supreme, with a mission to achieve

protection and equality for all. The power of his speech derives not from any official status voted on by states or individual citizens (votes which may change), but from its acceptance, memorization, quotation, and guiding principles accepted by nearly all. Americans believe its words, and nothing is more powerful than a collective belief.

To understand the importance of the Gettysburg Address, one should first understand a few key things about Lincoln himself, his motivation, and the historical and political background in which the words were written and delivered to the world. Much is generally known about Lincoln, his rise from poverty and obscurity, his self-taught background and law practice, his debating style of incisive logic clothed in homespun anecdotes. What matters in understanding his Gettysburg Address, though, is that he did not travel to Gettysburg to celebrate an important Union victory; he came with a heart which fully felt the loss that had occurred there. He knew what it meant for parents to lose their sons. Back in Illinois, his son Eddie had died in 1850 (Donald 153), and in the year before the Gettysburg, a second son, Willie, died of fever (Donald 337). Nor was he spared the suffering of the war. He had lost friends and relatives who fought on both sides. According to one Lincoln scholar, his motive for coming to Gettysburg was to "redeem the awful, bloody mess the war had become by making it a struggle for the noble, nationally enshrined ideals of liberty and equality contained in the Declaration of Independence" (Dirck 202). His words reflect such an intent and show that he wanted to convince his audience (and perhaps himself) that the men did not die in vain. He did not deny the loss, but intended to give it meaning.

The context of his speech was obvious to all. Those were dangerous times. On the nineteenth of November, 1863, the date of the speech, the Civil War still raged. Less

than two years earlier, at the insistence of Allan Pinkerton, a detective for the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad who had uncovered a plot against the soon-to-be president's life, Lincoln passed through Baltimore on the way to his 1861 inauguration dressed in a disguise and hidden in the last sleeping car on the train, "where he climbed into a berth reserved for the 'invalid brother' of a Pinkerton detective." (Oates 212). That was the dire situation <u>before</u> southern states had fired on Fort Sumter. Even when Lincoln was in Washington in the summer and staying in cooler quarters than the White House, Walt Whitman noted that the president rode a gray horse to work each morning, always with "a company of twenty-five or thirty cavalry, with sabers drawn…. This guard was against his personal wish, but he let his counselors have their way" (Whitman). Once the war started, no one could assure Lincoln's safety, and his short trip to Gettysburg, the site of a Union victory, was made with four train cars full of cabinet members, bodyguards, some foreign visitors, the Marine Band, and a military escort (Donald 463).

Not only was this a time of personal danger, it was also marked by constitutional crisis. Because of serious challenges to government security in newspapers, in Congressional debate, and in the many rumors of conspiracies and open rebellion, Lincoln unilaterally suspended the right of *habeas corpus,* the legal justification to individuals for their arrest. Although Lincoln's decision was later approved by Congress when it came back into session, Lincoln's action was described by some as an act of tyranny or despotism. Even though such arrests were made mostly of spies, smugglers, blockade runners, and foreign nationals, by best account, 864 persons were detained without a writ of *habeas corpus* (Donald 304). Such a large number of suspect people

certainly shows the divisions in the North. The point is that the Union was under attack by a Southern army, and by a large number of newspapermen, foreign agents, elected officials, privateers, and some sincere but misguided citizens operating in the North. In other words, Lincoln's Union was not only a house divided; it was a house quartered. There can be no doubt that Lincoln knew he was treading on dangerous, unpopular, and perhaps unconstitutional paths. Riots were a regular occurrence in cities such as Boston, Troy, Newark, and New York, fueled by a violent abhorrence of the government's new draft policy which required poor young men to serve in the army if they could not raise the $300 required to purchase an exemption (Oates 357). Lincoln's own son, Robert, even though he was of draft age, was exempt because he attended Harvard, and many threatening letters were written to the Lincolns because of the draft and their own family ties to Confederate soldiers back in Kentucky (Oates 376-7). These were dangerous times indeed.

The actual site and time of the speech could give Lincoln and the many thousands attending little cause for hope. On the day of Lincoln's speech, many coffins for reburial of the dead were stacked nearby. Thousands of soldiers had been hurriedly buried in shallow graves, many of which had been dug up by desperate families looking for their sons and only partially reburied. According to one researcher, even "a nurse shuddered at the all-too-visible 'rise and swell of human bodies' in these furrows war had plowed. A soldier noticed how the earth 'gave' as he walked over the shallow trenches" (Wills 20-21). There could be no more graphic display to anyone on the battlefield that commemorative day than the evidence of deadly war strewn all about them.

Nor could Lincoln expect others to understand the importance of what he was about to say in his short remarks to dedicate the battle site. The actual address was not to be given by Lincoln, but by Edward Everett, a scholar, diplomat, and professional orator, who had made other important speeches at other battlefields. In fact, Everett had managed to delay the dedication of the Gettysburg battlefield for a whole month so that he could finish his research, write, and memorize his thirty-four page, two-hour long oration (Wills 24, 34). He led his listeners through a moment-by-moment description of the actual carnage that had taken place there, and the thousands of listeners only needed to look at their own feet and up at Culp's Hill or Little Round Top to know what Everett was talking about (Wills 33).

It is on this platform, following remarkable performance by Edward Everett, that Lincoln stood and spoke his three-minute, ten-sentence speech that changed the United States and the course of history. Such a concise, important speech deserves close analysis and stands up well when examined for its structure, its diction or word use, its rhetorical devices intended to move its audience, and even some surprising things Lincoln did <u>not</u> say that would have been expected.

The Gettysburg Address has a simple, three-part structure. Its first sentence, "Fourscore and seven years ago…" is about the past. The next six sentences, primarily focusing on the battlefield made sacred by the men who died there, are primarily about the present. The final three sentences are about the future and the task ahead. In addition, the speech is structured by contrasting words and images of life and death (Wills 62), for example "…those who here gave their lives that that nation might live." Also, the speech is structured so that the final sentence, a long one of 85 words in five

clauses with the repetition of “that” to introduce each clause, builds up to a powerful crescendo, a quotation of the Declaration of Independence and the idea that this government “shall not perish.” The result is a complex, multi-layered structure that combines pairs of life and death images, a three-part movement, drum-beat repetition, and a resounding trumpet call to action at the end.

Lincoln’s careful choice of words also shows his intent to sway his audience with phrases that evoke emotion. Examples are “conceived in Liberty,” “those who here gave their lives that a nation might live,” “the world…can never forget what they did here,” and “the nation, under God, have a new birth of freedom.” The use of such “absolute” words such as “death,” “live,” “never forget” and “birth of freedom” denote patriotism, and a love of one’s country, but also a connotation that this love is all-important, unifying, and final.

Even more interesting is what Lincoln does not say that would have been expected in such a speech. The word “Gettysburg” is not used, nor “Union soldiers,” “Confederate soldiers,” “slavery,” “victory,” nor any mention of the generals or brigades who fought and died there. It is true that Lincoln did not need to repeat the specifics Everett trudged through in his oration, but it is more important to note Lincoln’s thesis is not about the battle; it is about preserving freedom and a particular government. H.L. Mencken criticized the speech by writing “It is difficult to imagine anything more untrue. The Union soldiers in the battle actually fought against self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of their people to govern themselves (Mencken 1). Such criticism, however, completely misinterprets the meaning of “self-determination.” It does NOT mean, “If I don’t win the election or have the votes to pass a law I want, I’ll

just start my own government." Freedom and self-determination mean that all must be free, not just a few states who disagree with legally passed and binding laws. It is true that Lincoln's speech says, "all <u>men</u> are created equal," but that limited statement is in the section of the speech that is about the past, and in other writings, Lincoln certainly favored eventual suffrage for women and enfranchisement of freed slaves as far back as his Illinois days (Donald 59). More important is that he ends his speech with "the people," a term that must certainly include freed slaves and women, not "some people," not "white people," nor "male people," but "<u>the</u> people." That was the task Lincoln set before his listeners, a reinterpretation of what the Civil War and all government was about, an idea that changed history.

The effects of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address were immediate. According to the Lincoln scholar, Garry Wills, Lincoln was interrupted by applause five times, followed by stunned silence and then long continued applause (261). It is true that some may have been shocked by the shortness of the speech, but others most certainly were simply trying to absorb what he said. The <u>Chicago Times</u> editor, Willmoore Kendall "says Lincoln undertook a new founding of the nation, to correct things felt to be imperfect in the founders' own achievement" (Wills 39). Another Lincoln scholar, Barry Schwartz (the brother of John Schwartz, Addison Trail art teacher) quoted Representative Wells Goodykoonts on the Gettysburg Address as "truly the perfect model *for* society: 'the most perfect definition ever given of the word democracy'" (Schwartz 241). It contains an idea as important as The Declaration of Independence, phrases as parallel and memorable as Kennedy's inauguration address, and a vision as far-sighted as King's "I

have a dream" speech. Lincoln's ten sentences are among the most important ever written in American history.