



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 19, 2013

Lincoln's Rewrite of the Declaration of Independence

Six score and 30 years ago, the 16th president of the United States delivered an address at the site of the major Civil War battle in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Thousands gathered at the site Tuesday to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered on November 19, 1863. The speech would become part of the canon of American political compositions, ranking just below the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights in the hierarchy of America's "political scriptures."



Civil War historian James McPherson, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell, and Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett were among the dignitaries who spoke at the anniversary observance. "Lincoln's timeless words embodied and galvanized us as a nation," Congressman Scott Perry (R-Pa), said at the event. "Everything we've achieved since that time ... was born out of the sacrifice of the soldiers that fought here and the patriots that followed through their footsteps throughout history."

The reverence accorded Lincoln's words in later years would no doubt have surprised many of those present at the event, as well as those who commented upon it in the highly partisan newspapers of the day. The prime speaking slot had been reserved for Harvard professor and celebrated orator Edward Everett, who made the most of it, speaking for two hours on that late November day. Lincoln's remarks, constituting a mere 268 words, were dismissed by some and ridiculed by others. The Democratic-leaning *Chicago Times* was notably scornful of the president's brief oration.

"The cheek of every American must tingle with shame," the *Times* scoffed, "as he reads the silly, flat and dishwatery utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to intelligent foreigners as the President of the United States." The Republican-leaning *New York Times*, on the other hand, reviewed the speech favorably, as did the *Springfield Republican* in Lincoln's home state of Illinois, praising the address as "deep in feeling, compact in thought and expression, and tasteful and elegant in every word and comma." What became the verdict of history was best expressed by the now mostly forgotten star orator of the day. In a letter to Lincoln, Everett said, "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes."

Lincoln is perhaps the most quoted of all American presidents, owing to the pivotal role he played in our nation's history and to his virtually unmatched talent for putting words together in succinct and memorable phrases. At Gettysburg he combined borrowed phrasing from the King James Bible ("Four score" seems somehow a more elevated way of counting years than a mere "eighty") with his own talent for juxtaposing words and syllable in a cadence and rhythm that appeals to the ear as much as, or more than, the mind. As Gary Wills noted in *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, Lincoln, in composing a phrase like "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here" has virtually guaranteed that the world would long remember and frequently quote what he said there.



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But the historical accuracy of Lincoln's address remains open to debate. Was it, after all "Four score and seven years earlier" that "a new nation" was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"? Eighty-seven years from 1863 brings us, of course, back to 1776 and the Declaration of Independence. But were the signers of that document really dedicating themselves to the "proposition" of legal equality among men? Many of them, including the Declaration's primary author, Thomas Jefferson, were and would remain slave owners. And the Declaration, not being a legal document, did not bind them to the principles enshrined therein. Its purpose was to proclaim the rectitude of the colonists to a (supposedly) "candid world" in the hope of drawing support from other nations, mainly Great Britain's long-time adversary, France.

In 1776, the colonists were still a long way from achieving the independence they had declared, and further still from having "brought forth" a "new nation." The year, 1781, when the Articles of Confederation were adopted, announcing the formation of a "permanent union" might have a better claim to the starting point of a new nation. Better still would be adoption of the Constitution in 1787.

If the signers of the Declaration had "brought forth a new nation," they appear to have been unaware of it. They announced to the world "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be Free and Independent States," with all the rights and powers belonging to the same. The use of the plural was quite deliberate. What they "brought forth" was not a new nation, but "Independent States." Indeed in the treaty ending the war, Great Britain agreed to the terms of peace not with one nation, but with each of her former colonies.

Lincoln's conduct during the Civil War included the suspension of habeus corpus and the imprisonment without trial of editors, publishers, and legislators. Lincoln was much influenced in thought and rhetorical style by his favorite literary sources: the King James Bible, Aesop's Fables, Shakespeare's plays, especially *Macbeth*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. The Constitution and its Bill of rights, not so much.

The Declaration, on the other hand, was something Lincoln held up as the American creed, claiming to have never had a political thought or sentiment that didn't spring forth from that noble document. Yet the Declaration of Independence was essentially a secessionist document, declaring the right of a people to free themselves of the political bands that bind them to another and to establish for themselves an independent government that "to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." When the new Constitution was proposed in 1787, some states attached conditions to their ratification of it, including, in the case of New York and Virginia, the right to leave the Union if they saw fit.

That was the right Jefferson Davis was looking to test when he resigned from the U.S. Senate, after his state, Mississippi, declared its secession. After making his farewell speech in the Senate, Davis remained in Washington, waiting to be arrested and tried for treason. He hoped to have the question of whether states had the right to secede be decided in a court of law rather than on fields of battle. Davis, who became President of the Confederate States of America, was captured and imprisoned for a time after the war, but authorities of the United States never did charge and try him for treason. Perhaps they were afraid he would be found not guilty. It would have been, to say the least, embarrassing, if after a war costing the lives of some 600,000 on both sides, had been fought against secession, should be followed by a verdict declaring secession to be no crime.

A new nation was in fact created by the Civil War, but it was a nation at variance with the principles of independence espoused in the Declaration. It was a union, not "conceived in liberty" but imposed by blood and conquest, rather than a by voluntary association based on shared principles and aspirations.



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