



## **Lincoln's Ten Sentences**

**The Story of the Gettysburg Address**

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I range the fields with pensive tread

And pace the hollow rooms,

And feel (companion of the dead)

I'm living in the tombs.

-Abraham Lincoln, 1844

When William Penn granted a parcel of green and rolling Pennsylvania farmland to James Gettys, he little knew that these fields would be the site of the greatest battle ever fought on the North American continent, and one of the greatest and most important battles in history. Here, in the summer of 1863, the Union army of the United States of America would defeat Robert E. Lee's massive invasion of the North, leaving 51,000 men wounded and dead, and preserving democratic government for the future of the earth.

It was an extraordinary event for a small, country town. Thirty-five miles south-west of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Gettysburg was settled in 1780. Twenty years later, in 1800, it became the county seat. In the pre-Civil War town cemetery, a sign read: "All persons found using firearms on these grounds will be prosecuted with the utmost rigor of the law." In 1832 Gettysburg College, a coeducational Lutheran liberal arts school, was founded.

In 1863, just thirty-one years later, 75,000 Confederate troops led by General Robert E. Lee stormed north into Pennsylvania, to win the Civil War by attacking the discouraged North. On July 1 at Gettysburg, by then a town of 2,700 inhabitants, Lee's Rebels met the 88,000-man Union army of George G. Meade, who had replaced Joseph Hooker, and for three bloody days, these armies filled the fields with death. In the end, Lee, with his storied cast of Longstreet, A.P. Hill, R.S. Ewell, George Pickett, and J.E.B. Stuart, would suffer catastrophic defeat, and be forced to retreat back to the South. Many would see these bloody summer days in Pennsylvania as the high tide of the Confederacy, as the turning point of the war.

Had Lee and the Confederate army won, they would have continued their invasion of the North. They might have wreaked such destruction that Lincoln's attempt to save the Union would have failed. The United States of America would have been split; slavery would have survived, and the course of history would have changed.

But the Union defeated Lee. The new United States, conceived fewer than 100 years before the battle at Gettysburg, had survived a bloody test, and the idea that the United States—not any individual state—is the real nation, continued to grow. After the Civil War, people thought of themselves as Americans.

After the cannon smoke had drifted from the blood-soaked fields, eighteen Northern governors agreed to put a seventeen-acre National Soldiers' Cemetery on the battle site. The dedication ceremony was set for Thursday, November 19, just four months after the battle. In October the cemetery board invited the North's most admired orator, Edward Everett, to give a major address on the solemn occasion.

Everett had been a United States Senator, the governor of Massachusetts, and a member of Congress. He had been Secretary of State under Millard Fillmore, had served as Minister to Great Britain, and had been a Phi Beta Kappa poet at Harvard, where he had also been professor of Greek and president of the university. As president of Harvard, Everett had upheld the admission of a Black applicant, saying that "If this boy passes the examinations, he will be admitted." Despite his glowing career, his life was shadowed with sorrow, for his wife had gone incurably insane.

When he accepted his invitation to the Gettysburg dedication, Everett did not know that he would be sharing the platform with the President of the United States, but he did not have a good opinion of Mr. Lincoln. In his diary, Everett had once written of Lincoln and his speeches:

These speeches thus far have been of the most ordinary kind, destitute of everything, not merely of felicity and grace, but of common pertinence. He is evidently a person of very inferior cast of character, wholly unequal to the crisis.

Six weeks after Everett had been invited, and only seventeen days before the Gettysburg dedication, Judge David Wills, the chairman of the cemetery board, wrote to President Lincoln—the sixteenth president of the United States and a self-taught man whose total formal education had amounted to less than one year—asking Lincoln if he would make a few appropriate remarks, following Everett’s speech:

It is the desire that after the oration, you, as Chief Executive of the nation, formally set apart these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks.

Lincoln—whose speeches often lasted more than three hours—accepted Wills’s invitation, and began working on his few remarks, that Wills had asked him to make appropriate.

It was no easy matter to write appropriate remarks, for Gettysburg was steeped in horror; thousands of temporary wooden crosses covered the fields, and ever since the battle, burial parties had been disinterring the hastily buried Union dead and moving them to the new cemetery. By mid-November only a third of the bodies had been moved, and amidst the wooden crosses, the blasted trees, and decaying carcasses of horses that still littered the battleground, ghastly digging continued.

The dedication came at a bad time for Lincoln. He was being ridiculed in the press as a “baboon,” whose mind was “untutored.” His ten-year-old son Tad was sick, he himself was ill, the November weather was raw, and Lincoln did not relish the six-hour train ride from Washington, where he had urgent matters facing him. But it was an opportunity to speak to the country, and Lincoln felt that it was important to go. His cabinet members were surprised that he accepted.

Travelling the day before the ceremony, Lincoln stayed in David Wills’s house and spent only twenty-four hours in Gettysburg. On the morning of the dedication, Lincoln rode on horseback to Cemetery Hill and joined other dignitaries on the platform in front of 15,000 people. Edward Everett arrived a half-hour late, but soon began his two-hour oration.

When Everett’s speech finally ended, a band played a dirge, and the sad-faced president slowly rose to speak, his high voice sounding over the thousands of faces, to the fields where

souvenir hunters scrounged for bullets. Lincoln spoke only ten sentences:

### **Ten Sentences**

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. 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. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

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