

## Abraham Lincoln, *Lyceum Address*

*January 27, 1838*

As a subject for the remarks of the evening, the perpetuation of our political institutions, is selected.

In the great journal of things happening under the sun, we, the American People, find our account running, under date of the nineteenth century of the Christian era. — We find ourselves in the peaceful possession, of the fairest portion of the earth, as regards extent of territory, fertility of soil, and salubrity of climate. We find ourselves under the government of a system of political institutions, conducing more essentially to the ends of civil and religious liberty, than any of which the history of former times tells us. We, when mounting the stage of existence, found ourselves the legal inheritors of these fundamental blessings. We toiled not in the acquirement or establishment of them — they are a legacy bequeathed us, by a once hardy, brave, and patriotic, but now lamented and departed race of ancestors. Their's was the task (and nobly they performed it) to possess themselves, and through themselves, us, of this goodly land; and to uprear upon its hills and its valleys, a political edifice of liberty and equal rights; 'tis ours only, to transmit these, the former, unprofaned by the foot of an invader; the latter, undecayed by the lapse of time and untorn by usurpation, to the latest generation that fate shall permit the world to know. This task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us faithfully to perform.

How then shall we perform it? — At what point shall we expect the approach of danger? By what means shall we fortify against it? — Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never! — All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.

At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.

I hope I am over wary; but if I am not, there is, even now, something of ill-omen, amongst us. I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgment of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs, for the executive ministers of justice. This disposition is awfully fearful in any community; and that it now exists in ours, though grating to our feelings to admit, it would be a violation of truth, and an insult to our intelligence, to deny. Accounts of outrages committed by mobs, form the every-day news of the times. They have pervaded the country, from New England to Louisiana; — they are neither peculiar to the eternal snows of the former, nor the burning suns of the latter; — they are not the creature of climate — neither are they confined to the

slave-holding, or the non-slave- holding States. Alike, they spring up among the pleasure hunting masters of Southern slaves, and the order loving citizens of the land of steady habits.—Whatever, then, their cause may be, it is common to the whole country.

It would be tedious, as well as useless, to recount the horrors of all of them. Those happening in the State of Mississippi, and at St. Louis, are, perhaps, the most dangerous in example and revolting to humanity. In the Mississippi case, they first commenced by hanging the regular gamblers; a set of men, certainly not following for a livelihood, a very useful, or very honest occupation; but one which, so far from being forbidden by the laws, was actually licensed by an act of the Legislature, passed but a single year before. Next, negroes, suspected of conspiring to raise an insurrection, were caught up and hanged in all parts of the State: then, white men, supposed to be leagued with the negroes; and finally, strangers, from neighboring States, going thither on business, were, in many instances subjected to the same fate. Thus went on this process of hanging, from gamblers to negroes, from negroes to white citizens, and from these to strangers; till, dead men were seen literally dangling from the boughs of trees upon every road side; and in numbers almost sufficient, to rival the native Spanish moss of the country, as a drapery of the forest.

Turn, then, to that horror-striking scene at St. Louis. A single victim was only sacrificed there. His story is very short; and is, perhaps, the most highly tragic, if anything of its length, that has ever been witnessed in real life. A mulatto man, by the name of McIntosh, was seized in the street, dragged to the suburbs of the city, chained to a tree, and actually burned to death; and all within a single hour from the time he had been a freeman, attending to his own business, and at peace with the world.

Such are the effects of mob law; and such as the scenes, becoming more and more frequent in this land so lately famed for love of law and order; and the stories of which, have even now grown too familiar, to attract any thing more, than an idle remark.

But you are, perhaps, ready to ask, "What has this to do with the perpetuation of our political institutions?" I answer, it has much to do with it. Its direct consequences are, comparatively speaking, but a small evil; and much of its danger consists, in the proneness of our minds, to regard its direct, as its only consequences. Abstractly considered, the hanging of the gamblers at Vicksburg, was of but little consequence. They constitute a portion of population, that is worse than useless in any community; and their death, if no pernicious example be set by it, is never matter of reasonable regret with any one. If they were annually swept, from the stage of existence, by the plague or small pox, honest men would, perhaps, be much profited, by the operation.—Similar too, is the correct reasoning, in regard to the burning of the negro at St. Louis. He had forfeited his life, by the perpetration of an outrageous murder, upon one of the most worthy and respectable citizens of the city; and had not he died as he did, he must have died by the sentence of the law, in a very short time afterwards. As to him alone, it was as well the way it was, as it could otherwise have been.—But the example in either case, was fearful.—When men take it in their heads to day, to hang gamblers, or burn murderers, they should recollect, that, in the confusion usually attending such

transactions, they will be as likely to hang or burn some one who is neither a gambler nor a murderer as one who is; and that, acting upon the example they set, the mob of to-morrow, may, and probably will, hang or burn some of them by the very same mistake. And not only so; the innocent, those who have ever set their faces against violations of law in every shape, alike with the guilty, fall victims to the ravages of mob law; and thus it goes on, step by step, till all the walls erected for the defense of the persons and property of individuals, are trodden down, and disregarded. But all this even, is not the full extent of the evil.—By such examples, by instances of the perpetrators of such acts going unpunished, the lawless in spirit, are encouraged to become lawless in practice; and having been used to no restraint, but dread of punishment, they thus become, absolutely unrestrained.—Having ever regarded Government as their deadliest bane, they make a jubilee of the suspension of its operations; and pray for nothing so much, as its total annihilation. While, on the other hand, good men, men who love tranquility, who desire to abide by the laws, and enjoy their benefits, who would gladly spill their blood in the defense of their country; seeing their property destroyed; their families insulted, and their lives endangered; their persons injured; and seeing nothing in prospect that forebodes a change for the better; become tired of, and disgusted with, a Government that offers them no protection; and are not much averse to a change in which they imagine they have nothing to lose. Thus, then, by the operation of this mobocratic spirit, which all must admit, is now abroad in the land, the strongest bulwark of any Government, and particularly of those constituted like ours, may effectually be broken down and destroyed—I mean the attachment of the People. Whenever this effect shall be produced among us; whenever the vicious portion of population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and thousands, and burn churches, ravage and rob provision-stores, throw printing presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure, and with impunity; depend on it, this Government cannot last. By such things, the feelings of the best citizens will become more or less alienated from it; and thus it will be left without friends, or with too few, and those few too weak, to make their friendship effectual. At such a time and under such circumstances, men of sufficient talent and ambition will not be wanting to seize the opportunity, strike the blow, and overturn that fair fabric, which for the last half century, has been the fondest hope, of the lovers of freedom, throughout the world.

I know the American People are much attached to their Government;—I know they would suffer much for its sake;—I know they would endure evils long and patiently, before they would ever think of exchanging it for another. Yet, notwithstanding all this, if the laws be continually despised and disregarded, if their rights to be secure in their persons and property, are held by no better tenure than the caprice of a mob, the alienation of their affections from the Government is the natural consequence; and to that, sooner or later, it must come.

Here then, is one point at which danger may be expected.

The question recurs, "how shall we fortify against it?" The answer is simple. Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the

blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;—let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children's liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

While ever a state of feeling, such as this, shall universally, or even, very generally prevail throughout the nation, vain will be every effort, and fruitless every attempt, to subvert our national freedom.

When I so pressingly urge a strict observance of all the laws, let me not be understood as saying there are no bad laws, nor that grievances may not arise, for the redress of which, no legal provisions have been made.—I mean to say no such thing. But I do mean to say, that, although bad laws, if they exist, should be repealed as soon as possible, still while they continue in force, for the sake of example, they should be religiously observed. So also in unprovided cases. If such arise, let proper legal provisions be made for them with the least possible delay; but, till then, let them, if not too intolerable, be borne with.

There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law. In any case that arises, as for instance, the promulgation of abolitionism, one of two positions is necessarily true; that is, the thing is right within itself, and therefore deserves the protection of all law and all good citizens; or, it is wrong, and therefore proper to be prohibited by legal enactments; and in neither case, is the interposition of mob law, either necessary, justifiable, or excusable.

But, it may be asked, why suppose danger to our political institutions? Have we not preserved them for more than fifty years? And why may we not for fifty times as long?

We hope there is no sufficient reason. We hope all dangers may be overcome; but to conclude that no danger may ever arise, would itself be extremely dangerous. There are now, and will hereafter be, many causes, dangerous in their tendency, which have not existed heretofore; and which are not too insignificant to merit attention. That our government should have been maintained in its original form from its establishment until now, is not much to be wondered at. It had many props to support it through that period, which now are decayed, and crumbled away. Through that period, it was felt by all, to be an undecided experiment; now, it is understood to be a successful one.—Then, all that sought celebrity and fame, and distinction, expected to find them in the success of that experiment. Their all was staked upon it:—their destiny was inseparably linked

with it. Their ambition aspired to display before an admiring world, a practical demonstration of the truth of a proposition, which had hitherto been considered, at best no better, than problematical; namely, the capability of a people to govern themselves. If they succeeded, they were to be immortalized; their names were to be transferred to counties and cities, and rivers and mountains; and to be revered and sung, and toasted through all time. If they failed, they were to be called knaves and fools, and fanatics for a fleeting hour; then to sink and be forgotten. They succeeded. The experiment is successful; and thousands have won their deathless names in making it so. But the game is caught; and I believe it is true, that with the catching, end the pleasures of the chase. This field of glory is harvested, and the crop is already appropriated. But new reapers will arise, and they, too, will seek a field. It is to deny, what the history of the world tells us is true, to suppose that men of ambition and talents will not continue to spring up amongst us. And, when they do, they will as naturally seek the gratification of their ruling passion, as others have so done before them. The question then, is, can that gratification be found in supporting and maintaining an edifice that has been erected by others? Most certainly it cannot. Many great and good men sufficiently qualified for any task they should undertake, may ever be found, whose ambition would inspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; but such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle. What! think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon?—Never! Towering genius distains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored.—It sees no distinction in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It denies that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen. Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us? And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs.

Distinction will be his paramount object, and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down.

Here, then, is a probable case, highly dangerous, and such a one as could not have well existed heretofore.

Another reason which once was; but which, to the same extent, is now no more, has done much in maintaining our institutions thus far. I mean the powerful influence which the interesting scenes of the revolution had upon the passions of the people as distinguished from their judgment. By this influence, the jealousy, envy, and avarice, incident to our nature, and so common to a state of peace, prosperity, and conscious strength, were, for the time, in a great measure smothered and rendered inactive; while

the deep-rooted principles of hate, and the powerful motive of revenge, instead of being turned against each other, were directed exclusively against the British nation. And thus, from the force of circumstances, the basest principles of our nature, were either made to lie dormant, or to become the active agents in the advancement of the noblest cause – that of establishing and maintaining civil and religious liberty.

But this state of feeling must fade, is fading, has faded, with the circumstances that produced it.

I do not mean to say, that the scenes of the revolution are now or ever will be entirely forgotten; but that like every thing else, they must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time. In history, we hope, they will be read of, and recounted, so long as the bible shall be read; – but even granting that they will, their influence cannot be what it heretofore has been. Even then, they cannot be so universally known, nor so vividly felt, as they were by the generation just gone to rest. At the close of that struggle, nearly every adult male had been a participator in some of its scenes. The consequence was, that of those scenes, in the form of a husband, a father, a son or brother, a living history was to be found in every family – a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received, in the midst of the very scenes related – a history, too, that could be read and understood alike by all, the wise and the ignorant, the learned and the unlearned. – But those histories are gone. They can be read no more forever. They were a fortress of strength; but, what invading foeman could never do, the silent artillery of time has done; the leveling of its walls. They are gone. – They were a forest of giant oaks; but the all-resistless hurricane has swept over them, and left only, here and there, a lonely trunk, despoiled of its verdure, shorn of its foliage; unshading and unshaded, to murmur in a few gentle breezes, and to combat with its mutilated limbs, a few more ruder storms, then to sink, and be no more.

They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence. – Let those materials be moulded into general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws: and, that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last; that we revered his name to the last; that, during his long sleep, we permitted no hostile foot to pass over or desecrate his resting place; shall be that which to learn the last trump shall awaken our WASHINGTON.

Upon these let the proud fabric of freedom rest, as the rock of its basis; and as truly as has been said of the only greater institution, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

## **Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address***

*November 19th, 1863*

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on 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 battle-field 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 can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not 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.

## Leon Kass, *Abraham Lincoln's Re-founding of the Nation*

From the time I was old enough to have a hero, Abraham Lincoln has been mine. At first, it was largely an accident of birth. Born in Chicago on Lincoln's birthday (1939), to immigrant parents who admired Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, I was educated in a public school whose classrooms displayed portraits of Lincoln (and George Washington) and which closed annually (on the exact date, February 12th) in honor of Lincoln's birthday, still in Illinois a civic holiday. One of my prize possessions (a birthday present, I believe) was a large loose-leaf scrapbook bearing a large portrait of President Lincoln as its leather-bound cover. I loved Lincoln well before I really knew why he deserved my—and our—veneration.

Time and study—not to mention living in the United States under thirteen presidents—have steadily increased my love and admiration of Lincoln. He wins my heart because of his exemplary character, his deep understanding of human affairs, his principled and prudent leadership during the Civil, his courageous deeds, and, not least, his way with words and his inspiring speeches. Justly celebrated as the best among those speeches is the address Lincoln gave at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863.

The Gettysburg Address has been memorized, recited, and admired. Countless scholars have discussed its rhetorical devices, literary merit, and political reception. But few have attended to the *thought* of Lincoln's speech and its deeper purposes, purposes that it continues to serve. Many people recognize that this funeral oration, honoring the Union dead in the battle that marked a turning point in the war against Southern rebellion, was clearly even more a summons to the living to prosecute to victorious conclusion a war that, despite the victory at Gettysburg, was not going well enough: what Lincoln calls "the great task remaining before us" is, first and foremost, the winning of the war. But few people see that the speech offers Lincoln's reinterpretation of the American Founding, his construal of the war as a test of that founding, and his own radical call for a second birth of our nation, a nation to be reborn through passing that bloody test. Central to Lincoln's declaration of America reborn is his revisionist reading of our original birth announcement, the Declaration of Independence and, with it, his own as-it-were baptismal teaching on the relation between liberty and equality, crucial to our new birth of freedom.

The express rhetorical purpose of the speech is clearly evident on the surface. The occasion is the dedication of a Union cemetery at Gettysburg for the burial of the nearly 5,300 Union fallen (killed in 3 days; another 17,000 Union soldiers were wounded; 27,000 Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded). Lincoln acknowledges that, "it is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this." But he is much less interested in dedicating a patch of earth to honor the dead than he is in inspiring his listeners, "us the living," who are—despite dispiriting loss and grief—"to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced," dedicated to "the great task remaining before us," namely, victory in the war and the restoration of the Union, now on a more solid foundation. But it is the outer frame of the

speech, and especially its beginning and its end, that bespeaks Lincoln's larger purpose: to create for future generations an *interpretation* of the war, and especially the war's relation to both the once "*new nation*," brought forth by "our fathers" and "conceived in liberty," and "*this nation*," which, through the sacrifice of war and our dedication and resolve, "shall have a new birth of freedom." Before turning to those passages at the beginning and the end, we need to see the relation of this speech to a concern that had preoccupied Lincoln for at least 25 years.

In January 1838, in a remarkable speech to the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln (age 28) worried about the perpetuation of our institutions, now that the Founding generation had gone to rest and those who had known them were also dying out. It is an astonishing speech, informed by profound reflections on law and lawlessness, soaring political ambition (including his own), and the vulnerability of free institutions in democratic times to both mob rule and tyranny. It is in this speech that Lincoln asserts that perpetuating our political institutions requires the development of a "political religion," comprising reverence for the laws and, more generally, sober sentiments "hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason" – among them, the founding principles. As Lincoln put it:

...Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense. – Let those materials be moulded into *general intelligence; sound morality; and, in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws.*

Lincoln remained, throughout his life, obsessed with the problem of attaching his fellow citizens to the American republic. And one might well say that his speeches taken as a whole – unsurpassed in the annals of American political utterance – follow his advice in the Lyceum address: they articulate the clear rational principles of the American Republic, they are molded into persuasive and sound moral arguments, and they are always in the service of enhancing reverence for the constitution and its laws. But his greatest public utterances were prophetic speeches, speeches that soar and move the soul because they display powers higher than cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason. These supremely inspiring speeches, I submit, were crafted by Lincoln with a view to their becoming canonical texts of the much-needed political religion.

The Gettysburg Address is, in both form and substance, the perfect text for the "bible" of American political religion. It is short enough to be memorized: 3 paragraphs of progressively increasing length, 10 sentences, 272 words (only 130 different words), 74% of which are monosyllables. The polysyllabic words stand out against the little words, and only a few pregnant longer words appear more than once: among the disyllabic words, only *conceived, living, rather, people* (three times in the last clause), and especially *nation* (5 times: "*new nation*" in paragraph 1; "that nation," "any nation," and "that nation" in paragraph 2; but "*this nation*" in the last sentence of paragraph 3, this nation that shall be reborn into freedom). Among still longer words, Lincoln uses more

than once only *devotion* (twice), *consecrate* or *consecrated* (twice), and – the most important word in the speech – *dedicate* or *dedicated* (6 times). Noteworthy also is the echoing use of the word “here” – heard 8 times – the importance of which will be clear by the end.

The three paragraphs of progressively increasing length refer to time periods and actors of progressively increasing rhetorical importance: (paragraph 1) the past (“Fourscore and seven years ago”; “our fathers”; 30 words); (paragraph 2) the *very immediate present* (“Now”; *we* who are engaged in a great civil war, but mainly a much smaller *we* who are, right here and right now, met on a great battlefield of that war and who, fittingly and properly, have come to dedicate a portion of that field; 73 words); and (paragraph 3) our *future* in relation to our present and our past (contrasting “the brave men” who fought and died, with “us the living”); and moving from (a) our inability through speech to dedicate ground better consecrated by the deeds of the brave men, to (b) “us the living” dedicating *ourselves* to the great task remaining before us, (c) to “*we* here highly *resolv[ing]*” to win the war, so that (d) certain great things will follow, both for this nation (“a new birth”) and also for people everywhere (169 words, nearly half of them in the last sentence about our dedication). The speech, in its spatial references, has an hourglass structure, widest below: it opens “on this continent,” narrows in its center to “a great battle-field” and, even narrower, to “a portion of that field,” but finishes by suggesting that our dedication “here” can ensure that popular government will never perish from the *whole earth*.

But these are but smaller formal details, important to be sure for the rhetorical effect, but hardly by themselves enough to give the speech canonical standing. That comes from both its content and its elevated tone and expression, and especially from its famous beginning and end. Let us examine them.

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

*Four score and seven years ago.* Why does Lincoln begin with this expression? Scholars note that the language is Biblical, and that it echoes the 90th Psalm:

The days of our years are three score and ten,  
Or even by reason of strength four score years.

But few notice that, by this pious biblical reference, Lincoln is also making a crucial substantive point: the deed he is about to recount, he intimates, happened not in living memory; four score and seven years ago none alive today (in 1863) had yet been born. Lincoln’s beginning reflects and highlights his long-standing concern about perpetuation in a fully post-revolutionary age. He starts by reminding us of things we could not possibly remember.

The theme and imagery of the first paragraph, and indeed of the frame of the speech as a whole, is *birth*: the birth and, at the end, the *re-birth*, of the nation. Four score and seven, or 87, years identifies the birth year as 1776, the year of the Declaration of

Independence, not 1775, the year of Lexington and Concord, not 1787, the year of the Constitution. Lincoln gives no hint of the bloody war of American separation and secession that secured in deed the Declaration's verbal assertion of our independence from Great Britain. Instead, Lincoln gives us an image of quiet generative congress. According to Lincoln, *our fathers*—after pointing out that we could not have known them, Lincoln calls the founders *our fathers*, rather than our *grandfathers* or *forefathers*, bringing us close to them in spirit and inviting pious gratitude for our patrimony—brought forth or sired upon this continent (as mother) a *new* nation. It is new not only in historical fact. It is new also in principle: it was, Lincoln tells us, “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Several points deserve emphasis, especially when we compare Lincoln's description of the founding birth with the birth certificate language of the Declaration of Independence itself.

In the Declaration the signers declare: “We hold these truths to be *self-evident*: that all men are created equal.” In Lincoln's version, three important changes are made. First, Lincoln changes a “self-evident truth” to a “proposition.” Both notions come from geometry (Lincoln had studied Euclid): a self-evident truth is an *axiom* (for example, “The whole is greater than the part” or “Things equal to the same thing are also equal to one another”), which neither admits of proof nor requires proof, for it contains its evidence in itself. If you *understand* the statement, you are compelled also to *affirm* it as *true*. According to the Declaration, human equality is held to be an axiom, evident in itself: if one understands the meaning of “men,” one must immediately see that all men (both male and female<sup>46</sup>) are *equally human*; and, further, one must see that they *equally* possess, by *virtue* of their *equal* humanity, inalienable *rights*, among them, the right to defend their life (when threatened), safeguard their liberty (against enslavement or despotism), and pursue their own happiness as they see fit. A proposition, on the other hand, is like a geometric *theorem*: it is something now put before us—a “pro-posit-ing”—whose truth *must* be proved; yet it may turn out to be either unprovable or even false. According to Lincoln, human equality was less a self-evident *premise*<sup>47</sup> of the American founding, more a proposition in need of *future* demonstration.

The significance of shifting “all men are created equal” from axiom to proposition is revealed by Lincoln's second big change: according to Lincoln “our fathers” treated “all men are created equal” not, as the Declaration states, as a *truth* that

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<sup>46</sup> The term “men” in the Declaration of Independence clearly means “human beings,” and refers equally to male and female human beings. The same is true of both of the putative sources for the Declaration's teaching of human equality: the natural rights teaching of John Locke and the “created in the image of God” teaching of the Bible (“God created man in his own image; male and female created He them”).

<sup>47</sup> It should also be noted that, in the Declaration, “all men are created equal” is but the first of several such self-evident truths. It is closely followed by assertions about (a) (equal) inalienable rights, (b) rights secured by governments, justly instituted (only) by consent of the governed, and (in the event that instituted governments become destructive of those ends) (c) the right of revolution and of instituting new government, according to principles and forms deemed likely to effect the people's safety and happiness. Thus, in contrast to Lincoln's formulation in the Gettysburg Address, in the context of the declaring independence, the claim of human equality, although it is stated first, functions less as a national credo, and more as the beginning of a logical argument for legitimating the American revolution.

“we hold,” but as a proposal to which they were *dedicated*. Lincoln shifts the picture from theory to practice: the proposition is more than an intellectual matter that one holds as a belief and proves in speech; it is a practical and moral goal to which one must devote oneself in action. The effective truth of the proposition of human equality cannot be shown by Euclidean reasoning; it must be demonstrated through deed and devotion.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, we need to clarify what sort of human equality needs proof through deed and devotion. The propositional “created equal” clearly does not mean, “created the same.” Neither does it mean equal in every respect. We human beings naturally differ in body and mind, talents and character, desire and determination. Some of us are sturdy, swift, or striving; others are sickly, slow, or slothful. Some find success and happiness, others failure and misery. Some are rich, powerful, and in positions of authority; most people are not. But these natural, social, or economic inequalities in no way contradict the equal *humanity* of otherwise differing human beings. Neither do they refute the derivative—and politically relevant—idea of natural or God-given equal *rights*, including the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is the Declaration’s (pre-political) equality of intrinsic rights, not social or political equality, to which, according to Lincoln, our nation was dedicated and which, as a proposition, requires proof through deed and dedication.<sup>48</sup>

Third, and most subtly, Lincoln does not ask us to think of the proposition only as a universal truth that we too can try to prove in practice; he wraps that truth in the pious drapery of the dedication of *our fathers*. We should take an interest in this proposition, he implies, not only because it might be true, but as a matter of honoring the memory of our remarkable fathers. In short, Lincoln has transformed a merely intellectual truth, held as self-evident and accessible to universal human reason (the Declaration’s formulation), into a truth requiring *practical* demonstration by *particular* people—our fathers—who dedicated themselves to doing so. In this way, Lincoln summons our ancestral piety and attaches it to the principles of an emerging political religion, whose creed he is here redefining. Yet, as we shall see, ancestral piety alone cannot sustain us, and a new birth is necessary, in large part because our fathers did not get it exactly right—not so much in idea as in practice.

Why does Lincoln change the Declaration? In order to address and correct a deep difficulty in our founding regarding the relation between equality and liberty. A clue is provided in the other big idea in the first sentence, “conceived in liberty.” We know the fathers, we know the mother continent, and we know the child nation and to what it is dedicated. But what is meant by “conceived *in* liberty,” and how does this figure in Lincoln’s revision of the story of America’s birth?

Attending closely to the image of generation, we note that, because conception precedes birth, our fathers who brought forth the new nation, according to Lincoln,

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<sup>48</sup> It is commonly overlooked that, because of the great diversity of talents, ambitions, and efforts of human beings, securing these equal individual rights, especially the right to pursue happiness, virtually guarantees enormous inequalities of outcomes and achievements—economic, social, cultural, political. Neither Lincoln nor the signers of the Declaration of Independence were simple egalitarians.

already enjoyed liberty when they conceived her. But the oddity of the “in” in the phrase, “conceived in Liberty,” has confused me for some time. One astute reader suggested that, just as a natural child is “conceived in love,” so the American national child was “conceived in love of Liberty.” I myself have instead toyed with “conceived *freely*, conceived by *choice*,” not by necessity or nature or in a fit of passion, or, alternatively, “conceived in an act of independence and liberation, from the rule of Britain.” But an illuminating interpretation was given me by my friend, Harvey Flaumenhaft, of St. John’s College, Annapolis. “In Liberty,” he suggests, refers to the political matrix that characterizes both “the before” and “the after” of the “bringing forth” of the new nation, and that matrix is British liberty, the context also of the American colonies. Britain, like her colonies and the new republic, was a liberal polity, but British liberty was mixed with a hereditary principle—not only the monarchy, but especially a hereditary nobility of dukes and barons who lorded it over the commons. The true American innovation is the freely chosen replacement of the hereditary principle with the principle of equality and equal rights: governments, the Founders declared, exist to secure the rights not only of the highborn of hereditary privilege but of *all* men, who are *equally* endowed with unalienable rights. Or, in Lincoln’s formulation, our fathers exercised their liberty to dedicate a new nation to the principle of human equality.

We today take for granted the compatibility of political liberty and political equality. But this novel addition of the principle of equality to the principle of liberty was then an unprecedented experiment. Not unreasonably, it gave rise to two big questions: Can a nation “so conceived and so dedicated long endure”? Can political equality be obtained without the *surrender* of liberty? Taking the second question first, Lincoln had been personally attacked as a tyrant who was destroying liberty in his pursuit of equality: “Maryland, My Maryland,” the state song written in 1861, begins “The despot’s heel is on thy shore, Maryland! His torch is at thy temple door, Maryland!” and the alleged despot is none other than Lincoln! His later suspension of the writ of habeas corpus would eventually be ruled unconstitutional. Yet Lincoln teaches in this speech that commitment to the proposition of human equality is not only compatible with liberty, but is in fact freedom’s only true foundation.

Regarding the first point, the war, Lincoln says, is a test: a test of the durability of a nation committed to equality as well as to liberty.<sup>49</sup> And although he does not say so here, as he does in the Second Inaugural, the war is a test that is now upon the nation because of an offensive defect in the founding. The defect is not mentioned by name in the Gettysburg Address, but its name is slavery. (Lincoln, by the way, also does not

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<sup>49</sup> Lincoln insisted that the civil war was a test also for durability of any nation so conceived and so dedicated. Why might our civil war have such universal significance? In part, perhaps, because of the unprecedented character and great good fortune of America’s founding: what other nation heretofore in the name of certain abstract moral and political principles? But also, as we shall see, because the war was fought precisely to defend those principles against rebellious forces that denied those principles and sought to destroy the nation that rested on them. Victory against a rebellion based on denial of fundamental principles is surely evidence of durability.

mention either the North or the South—or the Union—nor does he here assign blame for the war; in the Second Inaugural he will explicitly suggest that the offense of slavery lies with the nation as a whole.)

The Declaration of Independence was a liberal document, not a republican (or democratic) one. It did not by itself specify any particular form of government: *any* government (including monarchy or aristocracy) is legitimate so long as it secures the rights of all who live under its rule and rules by consent of the governed. Yet despite adding the egalitarian principle to the British liberal principle, and despite the fact that, in Lincoln's reformulation of the nation's birth, equality as the *goal* was to come out of liberty by way of dedication, the new nation was flawed and stained from the start by the institution of slavery.

Contrary to current opinion, many of the Founders understood that America's practice fell short of its founding principles, and they devised instrumentalities that they hoped would place slavery in the course of its ultimate extinction. But by Lincoln's time the situation had deteriorated. Not only was the regime in contradiction with itself, falling short of its stated ideals; worse, the South in rebelling had given effect to the view that the principle of equality was not merely too lofty but, in fact, as a proposition simply false. Lincoln knew that this denial of human equality was the true cause of the war; and Lincoln understood that the bloody struggle over slavery was the true test of the nation. Now that the self-evident truth of equality had been turned into a proposition needing proof, and now that the rebels had repudiated the proposition calling it a self-evident lie, passing the test meant winning the war, in part because winning the war meant a repudiation of the repudiation, a vindication of the proposition of equality. And, in practical terms, only by winning the war and by restoring the Union could slavery be abolished and the equal humanity of all citizens given enduring political legitimacy.

This is made clear in the end of the speech, where Lincoln moves from the deeds of the noble dead to "us the living," and, finally, from the religious language of dedication and devotion to the more political language of resolution.

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.

Why must "we *here* highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain"? The goal for which victory is indispensable, stated in Lincoln's conclusion, is two-fold, both aspects transcending the mere restoration of the now dissolved Union: first, "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom"; and second, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

The new birth of freedom—for which Lincoln is here offering the baptismal blessing and explanation—is a birth made possible only through bloodshed, not through generative congress of ancestral patriarchs and mother continent. More important, this new freedom will differ from the British liberty in which the nation was first conceived. Here equality will not come out of liberty. Rather, if we adhere to our resolve, *freedom will be newly born out of equality*, because the inegalitarian principle and the practice of slavery will be repudiated and defeated as the necessary condition of rebirth. Masters as well as slaves will share in this new birth of freedom, having shed the mutual degradation that enslavement brings to them both. Liberty, says Lincoln, has not only not been destroyed, as the rebels claimed; it will for the first time be put on a truly secure foundation: the radical equality of all human beings, now thrice called “the people,” who will govern and be governed for their own well-being. We the people, we the living rededicating ourselves here on the graves of the fallen and resolving to act hereafter in service to the cause, become, under God, the nation’s new patriarchs and founders.

But it is Lincoln’s final words, those enunciating the second goal of the war, that show why the new birth of freedom goes beyond the mere abolition of slavery, and why the vindication of the principle of equality goes beyond securing the intrinsic human rights of the Declaration of Independence. “Government of the people, by the people, for the people” is, in fact, Lincoln’s final alteration and improvement of the Declaration, going beyond its neutrality regarding the form of government. To the Declaration’s legitimating philosophical principle of consent of the governed Lincoln adds the operative practical (and Constitutional) principle of *popular self-government*. Not only are the people to be governed (“of the people”), but they are to do the governing (“by the people”). Also, the clear purpose of government is not the prosperity of the few, but the well-being of all (“for the people”). The new synthesis of freedom and equality takes the form of democratic self-rule—not just rule of the majority, but that special sort of democratic self-rule that is informed by the proposition of radical human equality and equal human rights.

The nation conceived in liberty got a new birth, a birth of freedom and popular selfgovernment, thanks to the self-sacrificing deeds of “the brave men... who struggled here” and thanks to the dedication of the living, under Lincoln’s leadership, to “the cause for which they gave their last full measure of devotion.” But taking the long view, the nation became better able to attach the hearts and minds of its citizens thanks to the words fitly spoken at Gettysburg by Father Abraham, who presided over its refounding in speech no less than in deed and whose words have inspired all who came afterwards to dedicate themselves to preserve, protect, and perfect our political freedom and equality. Today and tomorrow, our attachment to the republic is greatly enhanced whenever we reanimate Lincoln’s words and, under their still living instruction, remain dedicated to his vision of our national purpose.