

Parnassus House
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Great Founders: Lincoln's Refounding of America

In January of 1838, Abraham Lincoln delivers a speech at the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois. He expresses grave concern about rising mob violence, and the deleterious effects that will have on America's political institutions. After just over 50 years, the nation is already in crisis. Young men of ambition are losing respect for the law; the original sin of slavery has not been abolished; and there is a risk that the spirit of 1776 will be lost, as those with living memory of the revolution pass away. Lincoln calls for a "political religion" to sweep the nation, reinstilling reverence for the law and for the founding principles.

1. Lincoln does not see law or policy as adequate correctives. His prescription takes aim, not at a flaw in the structure of the Constitution, but at the *habitual moral formation* of the American people. His goal is to use political religion to fix "the attachment of the People," which has become unmoored from the sacred principles of the nation.
2. Recall the political theory of the Federalist, in which the founders aim to stabilize the regime by counteracting vice with vice. Lincoln's concerns help us see that, without an adequate moral formation in civic virtue, the nation of their design is likely to perish.
3. However, Lincoln does *not* take the decline of the nation as evidence of an error in its core principles. Quite the opposite. At a time when it would have been tempting for a man of soaring political ambition to doubt the founding, he instead wants to renew it.

After Lincoln is elected President in 1860, the Civil War erupts. In 1863, the armies of Lee and Meade meet in the Battle of Gettysburg – the bloodiest battle in American military history. The Union emerges victorious, but the human cost is staggering, and the ultimate fate of the Union is still extremely uncertain. Lincoln arrives in Gettysburg in November to dedicate a Union cemetery to the fallen, and delivers one of the most powerful speeches in American history.

1. The express purpose of Lincoln's speech is to deliver an elegy. But it has at least two other purposes. First, he aims to rally the Union war effort. The living must dedicate themselves to winning the war, so that the fallen will have not died in vain. But second, and perhaps most significantly, he *interprets* the war for posterity. Americans must come to understand this triumph as the *re-founding* of the nation – "a new birth of freedom."
2. For Lincoln, the Declaration is the "golden apple in the silver frame." He understands the claim, "all men are created equal," to be *the sacred law* of the United States.
3. Lincoln's speech "drapes" the nation's principles in pious language. He understands that, for the nation to persist, the American people must be religiously attached to *honoring* the founders as fathers, and *demonstrating* the truth of their principles.
4. For Lincoln, the Civil War is a great *test* – not just of the American project, but of *any* nation so conceived. Victory in the Civil War would mean that *divine providence* supports the cause of *popular self-government* in the name of radical *equality* and *liberty*.