

A Gettysburg Address November 19, 2008 By Ken Burns

Good morning. November 19th. This day is one of my most favorite of days, a day of possibilities. Indeed, this day is one of the most important and sacred days in our national life. It celebrates the speech that symbolizes the moment of our rebirth as a nation; the beginning of our collective second act as a democracy; the moment when we outgrew the ancient animosities and hypocrisies that had impeded us since our inception; the moment when a handful of carefully constructed sentences altered the course of human events. I am honored—and grateful—that you feel that what I have to say to you today, on such a momentous occasion, is worthy of your precious time and attention. And I thank you in advance for that.

Listen. “The cheek of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat, dish-watery utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to intelligent foreigners as the President of the United States.” That was the Chicago Times’ response to Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. It shows, among other things, that the partisan politics we so bemoan today has been with us for a very, very long time. On the other hand, Edward Everett, the featured speaker that November day in 1863, who by the way, himself spoke for more than two hours without notes, wrote to Lincoln after the tall, thin lawyer man from Illinois had delivered his now immortal address and said, “Mr. President. 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.”

What is that “central idea” that has animated our imaginations for so long, that pulls us here today, that gives us the possibilities we feel? Why are we still so drawn to this man, this horrific battle and these words that seemed to define us—so urgently—as a people?

In many ways we are ourselves forced back, four score and seven years before Lincoln spoke his magical words, to our founding, and the profound contradictions embodied in the words and deeds of the man who wrote our creed; the man who distilled a century of enlightenment thinking into one remarkable sentence, that famous second sentence the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal...” it began. But the man who wrote those words owned more than a hundred human beings, never saw the contradiction, never saw the hypocrisy, and most important never saw fit in his lifetime to free those human beings, and so set in motion an American narrative that has been constantly bedeviled—but also ennobled, particularly now so ennobled—by a question of race. The bloody war that prompted Lincoln to this hallowed spot would not have come had we not ignored “the sleeping serpent” of slavery, as one observer put it, which lay coiled under the table as we started this complicated Republic of ours.

In defense of poor Mr. Jefferson, we are obliged to point out to ourselves that he could have followed the British philosopher John Locke and argued, at the end of that famous sentence, for “life, liberty and property” as the cornerstone of the new government he and others were creating for us. Instead, he left us with a miraculous legacy of restless search when he instead substituted the inscrutable phrase “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” That has made all the difference for us Americans.

Most other societies have seen themselves as an end in and of themselves. We Americans still quest, relentlessly. Not just for a hedonistic pursuit of objects in a marketplace of things, but for a lifetime of learning and self-perfection, happiness to Jefferson and his contemporaries, in a marketplace of ideas. And the key to that mysterious sentence is not the word “happiness” at all; rather, it is the pursuit. We weren’t meant to actually achieve happiness, but to pursue it, restlessly, energetically, our whole lives. In a sense, we are a nation in the process of *becoming*.

And the conscious vagueness of those words, that one sentence, have pulled us inexorably into our future, constantly enlarging as the generations pass what “all men are created equal” actually means. If you had asked Thomas Jefferson to please be more specific, he would have said it meant all white men of property, free of debt. But he didn’t, he didn’t, and now that phrase means all men and women, men and women of all colors, our vulnerable children, the elderly, the handicapped; and we still debate today the unborn, those of different sexual preferences, and more. More possibilities, for a nation forever becoming, tilting toward a more perfect union.

Abraham Lincoln magnifies as he comes down the ages to us. The momentum of his collected words reminds us, we think, of those “mystic chords of memory” and “better angels of our nature” he tried so hard and so often to summon, the difference between his actual achievements and those we too generously and posthumously bestow on him, simply our collective wish for ourselves. It is interesting that we come back again and again and again to this now distant war and Abraham Lincoln for the kind of sustaining vision of why we Americans still agree to cohere, why unlike any other country on earth, we are still stitched together by words, and most important, their dangerous progeny, ideas. It is altogether fitting and proper that some of those powerful words and ideas of Lincoln’s should have echoed at ground zero on the first anniversary of September 11th and amplified our own feeble and yet terribly moving attempts at memorial. We have counted on Abraham Lincoln for more than a century and a half to get it right when the undertow in the tide of human events has threatened to overwhelm and capsize us. We return to him continually for a sense of unity, conscience and national purpose. (That is why we stand together on this cold, cold day.)

We are all constantly moved by Lincoln’s ability to reconcile the contradictions that have attended, and at times, indeed bedeviled us since our inception. He never lost sight of what was worth fighting for and what the cost would be; he seemed to instinctively comprehend and then tried to bridge the innate tension between our psychological and civic lives. He gave our fragile experiment a conscious shock that enabled it to outgrow the monumental hypocrisy of slavery inherited at our founding and permitted us all, slave

owner as well as slave, to have literally, as he put it here, “a new birth of freedom.” New possibilities. Possibilities in the midst of a challenge almost too great to comprehend, a challenge mirrored in the difficult times we face today, a challenge we can not begin to solve without the kind of shared sacrifice, the kind of mystical kinship that Lincoln evoked, that we pay homage to today.

A little more than a year before he gave this address, on September 22, 1862, just five days after the battle of Antietam, the bloodiest day in all of American history, the President issued his Emancipation Proclamation. “If my name ever goes into history,” he said with characteristic modesty, ‘it will be for this act.” A few days later, at a Washington dinner, John Hay, Lincoln’s 23 year old, impossibly young, secretary, noted that, “Everyone seemed to feel a new sort of exhilarating life. The President’s proclamation had freed them as well as the slaves.” “It was no longer a question,” a Frenchman fighting for the North wrote, “of the Union as it was that was to be re-established. It was the Union as it should be ; that is to say, washed clean from its original sin...We were no longer merely soldiers of a political controversy...we were now the missionaries of a great work of redemption, the armed liberators of millions...The war was ennobled; the object was higher.”

That December—December of 1862—this gift of a man who was once mocked by his rivals as having almost no political experience, this one-time, one-term former congressman who had recently lost two consecutive senate races, this tall, skinny lawyer from Illinois who had been thrust into the Presidency in the midst of the gravest crisis in our history, understood better than anyone what the stakes were for his fragile Republic, and in his Message to Congress, what we now call the State of the Union address, he said, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present...As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

And he went on: “Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history...The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for Union. The world will not forget that we say this...In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last, best hope of earth.”

Lincoln’s words and deeds had their deep and meaningful effect; their “higher object.” Just a few weeks later, on December 31st, a large crowd of abolitionists, including Harriet Tubman and Wendell Phillips, gathered together in the Music Hall in Boston. At midnight, the Emancipation Proclamation would finally take effect. On the stage William Lloyd Garrison wept with joy beside Frederick Douglass. The cheering crowd called for Harriet Beecher Stowe. She stood in the balcony, tears in her eyes.

At a Washington, D.C. contraband camp, former slaves testified. One remembered the sale of his daughter. “Now, no more of that,” he said. “They can’t sell my wife and children any more, bless the Lord.” On the Sea Islands off South Carolina, federal agents read the Proclamation aloud to former slaves under the spreading boughs of a huge oak

tree. As the commander of a new all-black regiment unfurled an American flag, his men broke into song. “It seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed,” he wrote.

(In the beauty of the lilies,
Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom
That transfigures you and me:
As He died to make men holy,
Let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.
Glory, glory hallelujah, etc.)

The Civil War was fought in ten thousand places, from Valverde, New Mexico, and Tullahoma, Tennessee, to St Albans, Vermont, and Fernandina on the Florida coast; at Big Bend, Big Sandy and the Big Sunflower River; from Bunker Hill, West Virginia and Cairo, Illinois to Golgotha Church, Georgia and Christianburg, Kentucky; at Citrus Point on the Cimarron River, and along Cowskin Bottom; at Pebbly Run and La Glorietta Pass and here, in Gettysburg, where armies totaling more than 150,000 men fought over three days, the greatest battle in the Western Hemisphere, leaving more than 7,000 dead, more than 50,000 wounded and a heretofore peaceful town of 2,400 with ten times their number to care for—and to bury; leaving a war weary President with the opportunity to remind his fellow citizens of the possibilities they had—even in crisis; even in a civil war which was tearing his beloved country apart.

Possibilities. It is now our responsibility, in our full awareness of the power of words, specifically these words, spoken on this spot one hundred and forty five years ago today, that we, the living, as the great man said, must re-dedicate *ourselves* “to the unfinished work which they have thus far so nobly carried on.”

We find ourselves today captive again to the forces that threaten the Union, from which so many of our personal as well as collective blessings flow. The dogmas of past *are* inadequate to our stormy present. We *know* that the fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the latest generation. We sense *again* that we might be the last, best hope of earth. And we *heed* the voice of our wise father Abraham, *sense* through tears of our own joy, a higher object and new possibilities for this our momentous time, and *welcome* a new skinny lawyer from Illinois into our hearts and prayers. And we concur on this important day, marking the delivery of the greatest speech ever given in our English language, that we, as our flawed Mr. Jefferson said, do solemnly “pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor” to the great tasks—the great possibilities—that lie just before us.