

Essay on the gettysburg address as a beacon for future progress

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Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is one of the most well-known political speeches in American history, its opening line ("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") one of the most oft-repeated sentences in American culture (Lincoln, 1983). The opening line is not only a powerful phrase, but a thesis statement for the Address' goal: to cite the date of the Address, and the fighting of the Civil War, as a jumping-off point for a new destiny for America. In essence, Lincoln used the Gettysburg Address to check in on the nation's progress up to that point, suggesting a new direction related to racial equality and the continued unification of a shattered nation toward its true destiny, supported by both Katula's and Donald's scholarly perspectives on the matter.

In the most general sense, the Gettysburg Address can most definitely be seen as a status report on the nation as a whole, and Lincoln's perspective on it. In Donald's assessment of the Gettysburg Address in his book on Lincoln, he discusses the creation of the Address in its historical context. Faced with the significance of the Civil War, Lincoln realized that there was a "need for a broad statement" on the subject of the war and what it was for – people needed to understand, on both sides, why the Union was fighting the seceding Confederacy (p. 460). Donald writes this as a Lincoln historian more than anything, and so the general attitude revolves around how this would affect Lincoln as a man. In effect, Lincoln chose to make the Gettysburg Address a mission statement for the Civil War, and for the importance of equality. The article mostly goes over the days leading up to the Address,

the day to day conversations and interactions he had with people, and the reactions people had after the fact towards the Address.

The legacy of the speech itself, and the reactions its contemporaries had towards it, are of main concern to this argument. Donald makes copious use of other sources and scholarship, both primary and secondary sources, to create this historically accurate portrayal of the creation and reaction toward the Gettysburg Address. Donald believes the significance of the speech lies in Lincoln's intent for it, and the mindset he had when writing and speaking it – the details of the clothes he wore on the day, the people who were there with him, the intonation he used while writing the speech, etc. Donald paints Lincoln as a festive yet resolute man, someone who wanted to inform the nation of what they were fighting for, and who might have been troubled by the immediate backlash the speech received for being short and perceived as shallow. Despite Donald's focus on Lincoln more than the speech, it demonstrates his motivations toward giving the speech, which were that of a man who understood that America needed to hear where it was going next. While these statements are extremely general, and relate mostly to the tenor of the evening itself, they present an important distinction to be made on the subject of Lincoln's intent with the Address – that of reminding people what they were fighting for. The Address makes much use of the “ brave men, living and dead” at Gettysburg as symbols of the sacrifices America has made in its past to get to this point. To that end, Lincoln urges the American people to make sure that “ these dead shall not have died in vain” primarily by asking people to remember what has come before and what they are fighting for.

Donald's assessment of the Address as generalized mission statement and reminder is extremely accurate, but it also has a hint of the future to it as well. Lincoln's specific agenda with the Address is to emphasize the need for a new, more progressive nation. In Katula's essay "The Gettysburg Address as the Centerpiece of American Racial Discourse," the author argues that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was the turning point at which America's destiny was turned to the search for racial equality. The work itself is largely an opinion piece, only working from speculation of the Address itself in the context of history (citing other importance civil rights events like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Brown v. Board of Education and more) to paint the Address as something that inspired all these other cultural advances. Katula's argument is supported by the text, given Lincoln's emphasis on people and equality in the Address – the speech itself is bookended by statements focusing on "the proposition that all men are created equal" and "government of the people, by the people, for the people," respectively (Lincoln, 1863). As a professor of African-American studies, Katula is primarily concerned with the pursuit of equality throughout American history, making his perspective quite interesting. Katula paints Lincoln as a prescient figure who understood that equality was paramount, but knew that he could not push these advances all at once. By using the language of the Address to only tout 'economic' equality, Lincoln is said to frame the civil rights struggle into a manageable perspective given the still-racist times they were working in.

Katula believes the Gettysburg Address is an incredibly important speech in steering America's goals toward the ends of racial equality – while it took

awhile, and many other figures had to help along the way, Lincoln is where it all starts. The subtlety of the argument itself links well with Donald's perspective, as Lincoln understood that he had to incorporate both messages in a way that was brief, inoffensive and effective. Lincoln does not make strong statements about slavery, but instead frames the racial discourse issue as one more component of the overall assessment of America's destiny he alludes to in the Address.

In conclusion, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address accomplishes two goals. First, as Donald mentions, it acts as a case history for the nation's past and present, noting the sacrifices made to get to where they are, and emphasizing the historical and influential nature of the war itself. Secondly, Katula points out the Address' second goal, that of framing the future as something framed around racial equality and its relevant issues. Lincoln wanted people to pay attention to what was happening, and to understand fully what needed to happen next; in an increasingly certain course of history, Americans needed to adapt to the racial discourse that was going to be unavoidable in the future. Lincoln understood that this was the moment to start that change, and so he tailored the Address to accomplish that goal.

Works Cited

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