

Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows

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Review

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Boritt, Gabor *Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows*. Simon & Schuster, \$28.00 hardcover ISBN 9780743288200

Lincoln's Words

Studying the Gettysburg Address

Seven score and four years ago, the eloquence of Abraham Lincoln's tribute to the fallen soldiers of the nation's war flashed keenly at Gettysburg:

We cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who have struggled here have consecrated it far beyond our poor power to add or detract.

This simple and profound address eventually struck a chord in America's collective heart. However, Gabor Boritt, in his excellent narrative and extensive appendix, points out that at the time it was delivered, the address solicited an entirely partisan response — Republican journalists praised it; opposition journalists condemned it. On the other hand, some newspapers as far away as New England lauded its eloquent brevity. The language was amazingly succinct by contemporary standards. *The Providence Journal* wrote, It is often said that the hardest thing in the world to do is to make a five minute speech. But, could the most elaborate and studied oration be more beautiful, more touching, more inspiring, than those few thrilling words of the President? Actually, at 272 words, it took Abraham Lincoln only two-and-half minutes to deliver it. The author demonstrates how the words became immortal and helped assuage the massive casualties of its namesake battle — over 50,000 dead and wounded.

There have been over 1,500 books and articles already written on the Gettysburg Address. The last major contribution by Garry Wills in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (1992) seemingly covered every aspect of the speech. What else can be said about

Lincoln's declaration at Gettysburg?

Boritt does manage to say more. While praising Wills's scholarly interpretation, Boritt discusses the sentimental as personified by Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews' fictional *The Perfect Tribute*. He goes on to provide a fine story, describing the Town of Gettysburg and its people who lived there after the battle on July 4, 1863. With intricate bric-a-brac and destruction of war all around them, missing people (mostly men), isolation from the rest of the country and the trauma of relatives who had journeyed there to find their soldier boys to bury them:

Gettysburg, July 4, 1863. Stench fills the air. Excrement from perhaps 180,000 men and more than 70,000 horses has been left behind in the area. There are thousands of flies, millions. Dead men barely covered in shallow graves. Seven thousand dead men? Closely, more likely close to 10,000. How many dead horses and mules? Three thousand? Five? None buried. A nurse writes of carcasses steaming in the sun. The smell of putrid animal flesh mingles with the odor of human decay. It extends into the spirit of the people. War had come to them. Then it had gone and left the horror behind.

Boritt believes that Lincoln came to Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, for the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery, in part, to begin his re-election campaign for 1864. Yet, the author also humanizes him and the event by examining the various versions of The Gettysburg Address that Lincoln revised to suit his political needs. Boritt offers an opinion on which speech Lincoln actually delivered and analyzes the various newspaper accounts reported by journalists in attendance.

The effect of the speech was clearly unlike the Emancipation Proclamation, which manumitted slaves still held in Confederate territory. But it was a war speech, a political speech that would be the first the President wrote ahead of delivery during the two-and-half years since his first Inaugural Address. Much more than an Executive Order or a military measure like the Emancipation Proclamation, it was filled with powerful religious imagery directly related to America, nationhood, and democracy. The new birth of freedom served as a metaphor that came from the death of so many soldiers û North and South û with some of the Union soldiers buried in the new National Cemetery. As Douglas Wilson has observed in *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (2006), It would be hard to find a piece of American writing that better

fits Emerson's description of [poetry as] a meter-making argument.

The speech's simple elegance, The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here, has gained a renown of its own. Wills went so far as to say that the speech remade America. Boritt insists that is not what most people thought at the time. Lincoln's remarks were hardly heard by many listeners, who were surprised when he sat down so quickly. Initially, his words were widely misreported — four score and seven years ago, was shortened to ninety years ago in some newspapers and were generally misunderstood. Former Senator Edward Everett had been designated the keynote speaker, so most of the press reported afterwards that the President had given only a few dedicatory remarks.

But the speech was subsequently published in full and it had the desired effect of encouraging the resolve of the country that had faced so much death and destruction. But, Boritt insists that adulation for Lincoln and the speech would only come after the President's assassination. When reconstruction failed, his simple words would take on a deeper meaning. Boritt writes, A generation had to pass before his few appropriate remarks' grew into the Gettysburg Address (161).

Professor Boritt's descriptions of those who accompanied Abraham Lincoln in a luxury rail car, surrounded by a military escort, were something akin to characters from a Charles Dickens novel. As the Cincinnati Enquirer complained, No other president ever traveled so escorted. With the President were the French and Italian ministers, Count Mercier and Chevalier Bertinatti. Lincoln did not write his speech on an envelope while traveling on the train to Gettysburg. According to Boritt, it was written and rewritten before the event.

Lincoln thought that if he were to be remembered it would be for the results of the Emancipation Proclamation rather than this speech. But time has shown that his Gettysburg Address captured the vision and aspirations of America and its citizens. In the end, Boritt does justice to Lincoln and his dedicatory remarks.

Frank J. Williams is Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island and Founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum. His latest book The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views — Political, Social, and Pictorial, which he wrote with Harold Holzer and Edna Greene Medford, was published by Louisiana State University Press in April 2006. A member of the U.S. Abraham Lincoln

Bicentennial Commission, he is at work on an annotated bibliography of all books and pamphlets written about Abraham Lincoln.

In *The Gettysburg Gospel* he reconstructs what really happened in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863. Boritt tears away a century of myths, lies, and legends to give us a clear understanding of the greatest American's greatest speech. In the aftermath of the bloodiest battle ever fought in North America, the little town of Gettysburg was engulfed in the worst man-made disaster in U.S. history: close to 21,000 wounded; very few doctors; heroic women coping in houses, barns, and churches turned into hospitals; dead horses and mules rotting in farmyards and fields; and at least 7, Hay accompanied Lincoln to Gettysburg and briefly referred to the speech in his diary: "the President, in a fine, free way, with more grace than is his wont, said his half dozen words of consecration." The Hay copy, which includes Lincoln's handwritten changes, also is owned by the Library of Congress. Boritt, Gabor. *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows*. Simon & Schuster, 2006. Graham, Kent. By any measure, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is America's most famous speech. That fame was underscored only fifteen years ago when Garry Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* was published to rave reviews, landed on bestseller lists, and earned a Pulitzer Prize. So, on the surface, it would seem that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is the one speech everybody knows. Why, then, does Boritt believe that nobody knows it? He makes the case that the Gettysburg Address was at first forgotten, in part because it was delivered in the shadow of Lincoln's Th