

## Historical Context for “The Turning Point”

In November 1863, only four months after the end of the Battle of Gettysburg and as the Civil War waged on, President Abraham Lincoln visited the battlefield, where 40,000 Union and Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded during three days of intense fighting earlier in July. His visit was a somber one, to dedicate a new national cemetery. Both the outcome of the battle and this national consecration marked a turning point for the country, the war, and Lincoln’s prospects for reelection a year later. Lincoln’s address would follow the primary speaker Edward Everett’s two hour oratory, and was only two minutes in length -- so brief that the photographers weren’t prepared to even capture a photo. Lincoln’s eloquent and simple address was a solemn tribute and reconfirmation that the nation remained steadfast in its cause of unification and equality, and would ultimately prevail based upon this important strategic victory, and the change of tide in the war that Gettysburg had represented.

A lens through which to view the gravity of this historical period is captured poignantly in Lincoln’s address -- a time when our fledgling form of government remained in the midst of a vicious struggle for its existence. The Civil War which had already raged for two and half years still continued with the uncertainty of final victory in the near future. A sad testament to this is the fact that there were more soldiers killed in the war after the Gettysburg campaign than before. In retrospect, Lincoln’s vision and understanding of the cruel nature of this war as an existential threat to the very survival of the republic was more prophetic and succinctly captured in his address. Lincoln re-dedicates himself and the Union Army to the “great task” and implores the American people to remain resilient and stay the course. President Lincoln’s supplication captured below, and his challenge on the afternoon of November 19, 1863, in many ways still remains as relevant today, 150 years later, as it was then:

*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.*

This painting depicts the address with the rear of the Evergreen Cemetery gate in the far left and Culp’s Hill to the right. On the podium from left to right are: COL W. Yates Selleck, parade marshal; Ward Hill Lamon, Lincoln’s personal body guard and master of ceremonies that day; obscured behind Lamon is Thomas H. Stockton, Chaplain US House of Representatives who gave the invocation; then Edward

Everett the keynote speaker; David Wills, the President's host in Gettysburg is directly behind Everett; then William Seward, the Secretary of State; Abraham Lincoln, 16<sup>th</sup> U.S. President; Andrew G. Curtin, Governor of PA; standing at the back of the podium is Frances Gibbon, wife of Brigadier General John Gibbon, who gallantly commanded at the battle and was also in attendance for the address; then Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War; Horatio Seymour, Governor of NY; Major General Abner Doubleday, NY, who commanded at the Gettysburg Battle; Charlotte Wise, Edward Everett's daughter; and David Tod, the Governor of OH.