



Thoughts from Linda:

Lincoln at Gettysburg  
*The Words That Remade America*

Garry Wills  
1992

Read it aloud, as Abraham Lincoln did with most of his speeches, and hear the magnificent 272-word speech, which we now call with reverence, *The Gettysburg Address*. He delivered it at the consecration of the burial site in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the village of 2,500 people that had become the largest 'killing field' of the American Civil War. In this amazing speech, President Lincoln re-defined the purpose of the Civil War and made the deaths of over 51,000 Union and Confederate soldiers (7% of all deaths in the Civil War) worthy of their sacrifice.

But he did so much more. This Pulitzer-prize winning 1992 classic illustrates in great detail aspects of the war itself, this specific battle of Gettysburg, and the subsequent machinations that followed to properly bury and acknowledge the fallen soldiers of that horrific battle. Lincoln's words were almost immediately recognized as profound, and the speech was labeled a 'masterpiece.'

As Garry Wills notes, "Lincoln...(with this speech) would cleanse the Constitution...by altering it from within...He altered it by appeal from its letter to the spirit, subtly changing the recalcitrant stuff of that legal compromise, bringing it to its own indictment. By implicitly doing this, he performs one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting..." In a brilliant passage, he notes, "The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new Constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. They walked off, from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. *Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution*, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely."

As the *Lexington Herald-Leader* noted in their review of this book, "BRILLIANT...Unwritten law requires reviewers to use this word at least once about every Garry Wills book." There is no doubt about it; this most interesting, scholarly book is quite a *tour de force* on the speech at Gettysburg and so much more. It takes the reader through the history of the day. It goes inside the mind of Abraham Lincoln and through a vast understanding of the specifics of Gettysburg, the battle, and the funeral oratory of the time.

Wills is a classics scholar, proficient in Ancient Greek and Latin. His classical training is quite evident throughout, especially in Chapter One, *Oratory of the Greek Revival*. He explains that his home in Illinois is 'filled with books,' including a converted bedroom dedicated to English literature, with another containing Latin literature and books on American political thought. He says his hallway is filled ½ with books on economics and religion, including four shelves on St. Augustine and another ½ with shelves on Greek philosophy and literature.

This book contains five main chapters: *Oratory of the Greek Revival*, *Gettysburg and the Culture of Death*, *The Transcendental Declaration*, *Revolution in Thought*, and *Revolution in Style*. There is a fascinating epilogue and a most informative set of documents in the appendices. Included are sections on *What Lincoln Said: The Text*; *Where He Said It: The Site*; and *Four Funeral Orations*, including the one by Everett, another by Pericles, one by Gorgias, and finally, the Gettysburg Address itself in its 'Final Text Version.' There are helpful indices to other documents, including several other major Lincoln letters and speeches.

Wills begins with an overview of the horror of the battle and field of death that developed at Gettysburg. He describes the foolishness of Robert E. Lee in the battle itself and the mysterious timidity of General Meade, failing to capture Lee when he most likely could have.

While Meade pursued Lee, he was hindered by the remains of the battle. As Wills says, he relays the wire that General Meade sent as he pursued Lee in slow motion, which read, "I cannot delay to pick up the debris of the battlefield."

As Wills notes, that debris consisted of rotting horseflesh and man-flesh as well. As he notes, "...there were thousands of fermenting bodies, with gas-distended bellies, deliquescing in the July heat. For hygienic reasons, five thousand horses and mules had to be consumed by fire, trading the smell of decaying flesh for burning flesh. Human bodies were scattered over or barely under the ground. Suffocating teams of

Union soldiers, Confederate prisoners, and dragooned civilians slid the bodies beneath a minimal covering as fast as possible, crudely posting the names of the Union dead with sketchy information on boards, not stopping to figure out what units the Confederate bodies had belonged to...All of Gettysburg had become one makeshift burial ground." It is difficult to overstate the gruesome nature and aftermath of this one event on July 1-3, 1863.

In both the prologue and the first chapter, Wills takes you through the work of Edward Everett, one of the most erudite and well-known men of the day, who was invited to be the main speaker and deliver the Eulogy at Gettysburg. He was the President of Harvard and teacher of Emerson and other notables of the time. He was, as Wills notes, "...that rare thing, a scholar and Ivy-League diplomat who could hold mass audiences in thrall. His voice, diction, and gestures were successfully dramatic, and he always performed his carefully written text, no matter how long, from memory." In this case, his speech was a three-hour long carefully researched history of the battle with his assessments and key insights, following the approach that was popular at that time, in the style of the ancient Greek Pericles.

Lincoln was invited to speak as was the custom of the day, but it was not customary for governmental officials to take center stage at such events. In this light, he followed the three-hour speech with his three-minute, 272-word set of comments. It was so brief that many at the time asked, "is that it?"

Wills explores the various theories of how and when Lincoln wrote the speech, concluding that President Lincoln devoted much time to think about his message and carefully crafted every word for a specific purpose as he usually did. In so doing, Wills explores the competing theories of speech construction and provides many interesting viewpoints about Lincoln and his approach to writing and communicating his message to others. He takes you through the intricacies of the trip to Gettysburg made by President Lincoln and reveals many details about the approach to the field, to the speaker platform, and to the crowd of 20,000 who attended the event.

The central theme that Wills offers regarding the *Gettysburg Address* is that it represents the firm belief held by Lincoln regarding the values as stated in the Declaration of Independence rather than the Constitution itself as our most seminal of documents guiding the republic.

To quote Wills from the chapter, *Revolution in Thought*: "The Gettysburg Address has become an authoritative expression of the American spirit—as authoritative as the

Declaration itself, and perhaps even more influential since it determines how we read the Declaration. For most people now, the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as a way of correcting the Constitution itself without overthrowing it. It is this correction of the spirit, this intellectual revolution, that makes attempts to go back beyond Lincoln to some earlier version so feckless. The proponents of states' rights may have arguments, but they have lost their force, in courts as well as in the popular mind. By accepting the Gettysburg Address, its concept of a single people dedicated to a proposition, we have been changed. Because of it, we live in a different America."

For people who love to read letters and speeches that show an individual's thinking, there must be no better book than this one to fully understand Abraham Lincoln's mind.

Garry Wills has written over 50 books and has been a frequent reviewer for the *New York Times* Review of Books. He earned a BA from Saint Louis University and a MA from Xavier University, both in philosophy. Wills joined William F. Buckley Jr. as a drama critic for the *National Review* at 23. He gained his Ph.D. from Yale in Classics and later taught at Johns Hopkins and the University of Edinburgh.

The *New York Times* literary critic John Leonard once said that Wills "reads like a combination of H.L. Mencken, John Locke, and Albert Camus." Roman Catholic journalist John Allen called him "perhaps the most distinguished Catholic intellectual in America over the last 50 years."

Without a doubt, Wills is the perfect writer for this task, and it is an amazing thing to read original work from Lincoln with the interpretations offered by this scholarly author. His understanding of the context of our historical moment, his background in the classics, and his brilliant literary skill set make him an ideal writer for this topic. It is a 'page-turner' for those interested in American history and the mindset of our greatest of Presidents, Abraham Lincoln.