

The phrase is absent from prior drafts  
Danville News Column  
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"Mother Country"  
Word Count: 750

It's been decades since I've had the honor of participating in our Montour County Memorial Day ceremonies. If I were again asked to speak, I'd share what I wrote years ago, how the most inspirational part of our community's ceremony is the annual recitation of the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln delivered the finest prose poem ever penned, a document for the world. 10 Sentences. 272 words. 210 are mono-syllabic. Only 20 words have more than two syllables. You will find the address etched into the west side of our Memorial Park's Soldier's Monument, on Mother Country's right. Mother Country, facing south, protected by gunner, infantryman, cavalryman, is extinguishing the Torch of Destruction, extinguishing the flames of sectional hatred and division. The sword she cradles is sheathed. This obelisk, dedicated on Memorial Day, 1909, along with the other memorials since, remind us of the great task remaining before us. Will we meet our hour?

Listen to how often Lincoln used the words 'we,' 'our,' and 'us.' 15 of the 272 words. We are engaged. We are met. We have come. This Gettysburg Address was a message for all Americans, northern and southern. Lincoln knew the United States wasn't plural. We do not say: "The United States are conceived in liberty." We say: "The United States is conceived in liberty." Out of many, one. Indivisible.

That's why Lincoln used the arched phrase 'fourscore and seven years ago' (borrowed from Psalm 90). Instead of referring to the adoption of the U.S. Constitution as the birth of our Union, he refers to the signing of the Declaration of Independence. 1863 minus 87 equals 1776. Freedom as divine right. Equality before God and law as divine right. 87 years later, Lincoln achieved what the signers of the Declaration of Independence failed to do: those created equal now include former slaves. Equal before God, equal before the law, to this day a task unfinished. Us? 284 years later, our nation and our world still require our increased devotion.

We each are called upon to do what Lincoln did at that November afternoon's cemetery dedication and "take an ugly reality and transform it." From the horrific Civil War, he voiced purpose in suffering and sacrifice: "By dread deeds thou dost save us (Psalm 65:5). Elton Trueblood, who authored a spiritual biography of Lincoln, wrote how an anguished Lincoln saw the Civil War "as a desperate test whether a democracy of continental dimensions and idealistic commitments could triumphantly survive or must ignobly collapse."

Historian Gary Wills explained how Lincoln surprised the audience. The great task about which Lincoln spoke was neither emancipation nor slavery but popular self-government. By popular, we mean lawful self-government. A nation of law, neither men nor mob. Just as the law protects us from the tyranny of the few, so the law protects us from the tyranny of the majority. Self-government by all the people, not just my kind of people. Since when does unity mean conformity?

Our American Revolution avoided ending up as did the French Revolution. July 4 and July 14 -- Independence Day and Bastille Day -- are a study in contrasts, with the French rabid mob filling baskets with severed heads and ultimately creating a petty despot. The American Revolution continues, for it remains incomplete, an unfinished work. True then, true now. Unfinished liberty, unfinished equality, unfinished justice. Each generation must continue the work, and merit the progress of this United States experiment.

Lincoln likely added the phrase 'under God' during the speech. The phrase is absent from prior drafts. Wrongly we view 'under God' as affirmation, as divine quid pro quo, as boast. Those to whom much is given, of them much more is expected. Lincoln, as a man of deep faith and Biblical knowledge, remained keenly alert to the danger of idolatry of nation and idolatry of religion. He firmly believed that no nation is sovereign, for all nations stand under divine judgment. This is what the phrase "under God" means. It rejects the arrogance that America is spiritually pure or morally superior -- our sin of slavery proved that, as have all our sinful injustices since. To Lincoln, we exist under God's almighty judgment, which reveals itself through human history.

When you hear in this address, "under God," or when you say it during the Pledge of Allegiance, be very afraid. History has judged them. History will judge us. We judge ourselves. Whether or not the men buried at Gettysburg have died in vain is up to us still.