



Abraham Lincoln portrayal made by W. Britain.



Figures by Tradition of London Ltd. help re-create Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg Address.

The Gettysburg Gospel

James H. Hillestad reflects on Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD

The words U.S. President Abraham Lincoln spoke at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pa., Nov. 19, 1863, comprise arguably the most famous speech in American history. It has been quoted by popes, presidents, prime ministers and revolutionaries around the world.

"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," Lincoln said in part.

Spoken while the Civil War still raged, his words echo to this day in the American conscience.

The cemetery dedication was held only 4½ months after Union forces defeated a Confederate army in the Battle of Gettysburg fought July 1-3.

At the dedication, Lincoln shared the speakers' platform with Edward Everett, a renowned orator of the day.

On the train from Washington, D.C., to Gettysburg, Pa., Lincoln received the support of only three of his cabinet ministers. Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, who was scheming to unseat Lincoln in the next year's presidential election, refused to go. U.S. Treasurer Francis E. Spinner snickered bitterly at those who went: "There's a damned good scripture for that ... let the dead bury the dead."

Speaking before the president, Everett delivered a 13,607-word, two-hour oration. Lincoln spoke for just a few minutes, delivering a speech of just 10 sentences.

As might be expected, reaction to the president's brief remarks was mixed. Southern Democrats vilified it. Northern Republicans extolled it. The Tribune newspaper of Chicago pro-

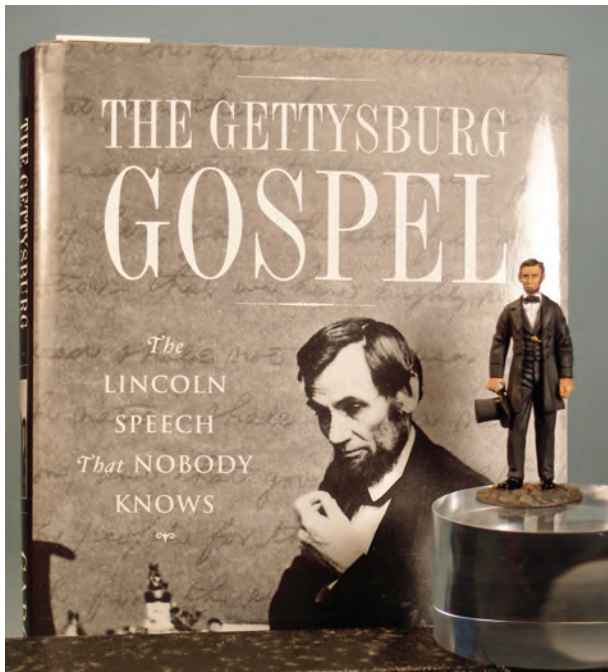
claimed that Lincoln's speech would "live in the annals of mankind."

Perhaps the greatest tribute came from Everett, who wrote to Lincoln, "Permit me to express my admiration. I would be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

During the dedication, journalists had to transcribe the text as it was spoken. This led to conflicting reports as to what exactly Lincoln said and how he said it.

Adding to the confusion, there are five known copies of the speech in Lincoln's own handwriting, which the president gave to his secretaries and friends. Each has a slightly different text.

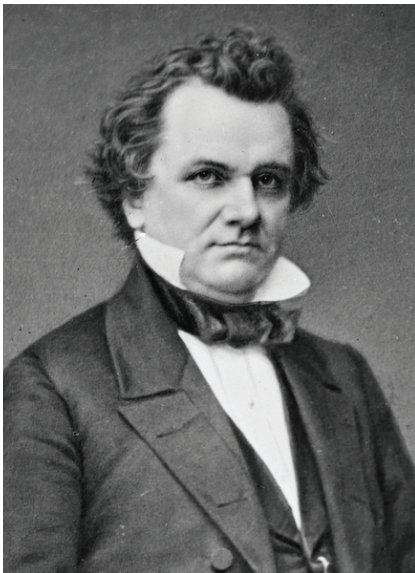
The Bliss version, named for Col. Alexander Bliss, the stepson of historian George Bancroft, has been the one most often reproduced, most notably at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.



A W. Britain figure of Lincoln is shown with the book, “The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech Nobody Knows,” authored by Gabor Boritt and published by Simon & Schuster in 2008.



President Lincoln reviews Union troops outside Washington, D.C., accompanied by his wife, Mary; and son, Todd; in 1863. This vignette was created by Martin Ritchie of U.S. Military Miniatures.



U.S. Sen. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois.

In November 1858, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas defeated Republican Abraham Lincoln for election to the U.S. Senate from Illinois. Lincoln received 4,085 more popular votes than Douglas. However, at that time, senators were elected by state legislatures, and Douglas secured victory by eight votes. Two years later, in the 1860 presidential election, Lincoln won both the popular and electoral vote. In an expression of graciousness, Douglas held Lincoln’s hat at the president’s inauguration.

Contrary to widely-circulated stories asserting that Lincoln dashed off his remarks on a scrap of paper aboard the train to Gettysburg, he is known to have carefully prepared his major speeches in advance. Further, his steady, even script in every manuscript is consistent with a firm writing surface — not the slapdash writing that would result on a notoriously bumpy 1860s train.

It should be remembered that the Gettysburg Address was, above all, a war speech. It helped people come to terms with a terrible conflict. It

Throughout the day of the speech, a group of 40 veterans stood up front. They had been wounded in the battle. Many of them shed tears as they listened to the proceedings. After concluding his remarks, Lincoln went to the soldiers and said that the men on their crutches were orators and that their very appearance spoke louder than tongues.

At Gettysburg, Lincoln was suffering from a mild form of smallpox (variola). On his return to Washington, D.C., he was sick for three weeks. Republican newspapers wished him speedy recovery. Democratic ones made snide remarks. Never at a loss for words, Lincoln quipped, “I have now something to give to everybody.”

gave courage, solace, and hope to the people — and the resolve needed to continue the struggle.

The beauty of the language explains its glory through the years. Though Lincoln believed that the world would “little note, nor long remember, what we say here,” the strength and humility of his words helped ensure the world could, indeed, “never forget what they did here.” ■



ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is a military historian and proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pa., USA.