

Hello, and welcome back to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

I'm Jerilyn Watson in Washington.

Today on our program, we note the 150th anniversary of The Gettysburg Address. It is one of the most famous and most beautiful speeches ever given in the English language. It is also one of the most important speeches in American history.

We begin in the summer of 1863 in Gettysburg -- then a small farming and market town in the eastern state of Pennsylvania.

On July 1st, 2nd and 3rd, two huge armies clashed in Gettysburg. They fought one of the most important battles of the American Civil War. Because of that battle, Gettysburg became an extremely important part of American history.

Five months earlier, General Robert E. Lee had marched the Southern army of the Confederate states from Virginia into Pennsylvania. He went into the North in hopes of winning a major victory -- a victory that might help the Confederate cause.

Southern states -- where slavery was legal -- were trying to form their own country. They wanted the right to govern themselves. Northern states did not want to let them leave the Union.

Little Round Top, Cemetery Ridge, the Devil's Den, Pickett's Charge...American history books are filled with the names of places in and around Gettysburg where the soldiers fought. These were the places where thousands of them died defending the idea of a United States of America.

General Lee and the Confederate Army fought fiercely at the Battle of Gettysburg. But they went down to defeat. The Northern soldiers refused to break. Lee, at last, had to stop fighting. The Confederate army suffered great losses and was forced to return to the South.

Many more battles would be fought during the Civil War. Some were just as terrible as the one at Gettysburg. Yet few are remembered so well.

Gettysburg was the largest and bloodiest battle ever fought on the North American continent. More than 3,000 Confederate soldiers had been killed. Two thousand five hundred Union

soldiers were killed. Many thousands on both sides were wounded. The terrible job of clearing the battlefield was left to the Union soldiers who had won the battle.

Five months later, the president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, gave his memorable speech at the Gettysburg cemetery.

President Lincoln felt it was his duty to speak at the dedication ceremony. He hoped his words might ease the sorrow over the loss of so many. He knew he needed to lift the spirits of the nation.

For a few moments, let us imagine that it is November 19th, 1863. The weather is cool. There are clouds in the sky. A huge crowd awaits the ceremony. Military bands play.

It is almost noon. We have arrived at the Gettysburg cemetery. Fifteen thousand people have come to hear a famous speaker -- Edward Everett -- and President Abraham Lincoln. A prayer is said, and Mr. Everett begins to speak. For two hours, he speaks. He talks of ancient burial ceremonies. He tells how the young soldiers who had died here should be honored. At last, Edward Everett finishes.

Moments later a man stands and announces: "Ladies and Gentlemen, His Excellency, the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln."

The president leaves his chair and walks slowly forward. He looks out over the valley, then down at the papers in his hand. The huge crowd becomes silent. Abraham Lincoln begins to speak.

"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 battlefield 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 cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot 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 for 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.”

People applauded for several minutes. The president turned to a friend. He said he feared his speech had been a failure. He said he should have prepared it more carefully.

But Edward Everett, the great speaker, knew he had heard a speech that expressed difficult thoughts and ideas clearly and simply. Mr. Everett recognized the power and the beauty of President Lincoln's words. Later, he wrote to the president. He said Mr. Lincoln had said in two minutes what he had tried to say in two hours.

One newspaper said "The few words of the president were from the heart, to the heart. They cannot be read without emotion."

Mr. Lincoln went back to Washington that night. Within a week, his secretary announced that the president was suffering from smallpox.

Edward Everett asked President Lincoln if he could have a copy of the speech. The president wrote a copy and sent it to him. The Everett copy is one of five known copies that President Lincoln wrote by hand.

The speech is carved into the stone walls of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Many who visit the memorial from around the world stand before the huge statue of Abraham Lincoln and read the president's Gettysburg Address.



And that's our program for today. I'm Jerilyn Watson.

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