IN THIS centennial year of the Civil War, we Americans pause to consider that terrible conflict and its results. One of the most decisive battles of the war resulted in a Union victory at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Probably the most famous words spoken during the war were those with which Abraham Lincoln dedicated the cemetery at Gettysburg. Let us pause a moment to remember the circumstances of that momentous day and the simple greatness of the man and of his brief speech.

July 4, 1863, was unlike any other Independence Day. It was the eighty-seventh anniversary of independence for the Union, and it was also the day which saw halted the powerful advance of Robert E. Lee’s troops into northern territory. After three days of bitter fighting at Gettysburg, the Confederate forces were in retreat. The battle had cost both sides a total of approximately 53,000 men (including those killed, wounded, or taken prisoner), with the toil falling most heavily upon the South. After Gettysburg, the North never again had to fear a Confederate invasion. The fortunes of war, hereafter, were with the Union.

Because of the necessities of the battle, neither side had had time to give its dead proper burial. Many corpses still were exposed on the ridges and in the valleys where they had fallen during the fighting. Some dead who had been given a hasty burial were later disinterred by ploughing farmers. The earth over many of the bodies was not sufficient to cover them completely. David Wills wrote, “arms and legs, and sometimes heads, protrude, and my attention has been directed to several places where the hogs were actually rooting out the bodies and devouring them.” Mr. Wills sought to improve this repulsive situation.

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1 John Russell Bartlett, The Soldiers’ National Cemetery at Gettysburg (Providence, 1874), 2.
A public-spirited man who later became a judge, David Wills had written Governor Curtin of Pennsylvania on July 24, 1863, calling attention to the need for proper burial and suggesting that Pennsylvania, in cooperation with other states, purchase ground at Gettysburg for purposes of burial and commemoration. Governor Curtin agreed to Mr. Wills’ plan, appointing him an agent of the state for the purpose of arranging an official memorial cemetery. Seventeen Union states joined Pennsylvania in bearing the costs of the new cemetery. The board of managers was composed of one representative from each state. David Wills of Gettysburg was the Pennsylvania appointee, and acted as president until 1871 when the title to the cemetery was given to the federal government.

Acting as Governor Curtin’s agent, Mr. Wills began arrangements for ceremonies to consecrate the burial grounds. Accordingly, one of the foremost speakers of the time—a scholar, president of Harvard University, and former vice-presidential candidate—Edward Everett, was invited to deliver the oration at the ceremonies, which were scheduled for October 23, 1863. Mr. Everett replied to Mr. Wills that he would be unable to speak, due to previous commitments. He also said that preparations for such an “occasion of great importance, not to be dismissed with a few sentimental or patriotic common-places,” would take more time than the October date allowed. His letter concluded with the suggestion that the ceremonies be postponed until November 19, so that he could deliver the oration. Mr. Wills met this request.

Having set back the dedication date to November, Mr. Wills continued the arrangements for the ceremony. As a formality, he issued printed invitations to the war governors of the loyal states, to local, state, and national public figures, to the cabinet, the Vice President, and the President. These invitations were in the form of circulars announcing the forthcoming ceremony. Mr. Lincoln received the same form as that sent “to the most obscure congressman from Minnesota.” To the surprise of the cemetery committee, the President accepted this impersonal invitation.

Thus informed, Mr. Wills’ group was faced with a decision—should the President be invited to speak? The commissioners

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2 Ibid., 5.
pondered Mr. Lincoln's ability to speak on such a serious occasion, wondering whether he would have time to prepare himself. Finally, feeling that the Chief Executive should decide for himself, the group had Mr. Wills invite the President to "formally set apart these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks." Mr. Lincoln agreed to do so.

November 19, 1863, began inauspiciously. It was a gloomy day, warm and humid. A rather gala procession from the town to the cemetery had been planned. Many of those scheduled to march, however, declined the honor, preferring to remain along the line of march to see the numerous dignitaries who were present or expected. Mr. Lincoln rode to the ceremony in a place of honor, right behind the military section of the procession. He was seated on a beautiful and spirited chestnut horse, which unfortunately was too small for his gangling figure. This contrast in size was further accentuated because Mr. Lincoln rode most of the way hunched in thought. The procession itself had been delayed because a crowd had surrounded the President when he first mounted. The ceremony was further delayed by Mr. Everett's unexpectedly tardy arrival. (Possibly, he was still going over his notes for the speech when the ceremony was due to start.) Thus, the exercise began an hour late, at noon.

The ceremony began with a prayer by the Chaplain of the House of Representatives, Thomas H. Stockton. During Mr. Stockton's prayer, the sun came out and shone for the rest of the occasion. Mr. Stockton's devotional (as measured by column print in the New York Times of November 20, 1863) was four times longer than the President's address. Mr. Benjamin B. French, buildings' officer for the government in Washington, then introduced Mr. Everett, the principal orator. Mr. Everett spoke for approximately two hours. His oration was an impressive and scholarly work which had been carefully prepared and rehearsed in advance. (A proof copy from a Boston newspaper was in Mr. Lincoln's hands eleven days before the dedicatory services.) After the main oration, the Baltimore Glee Club sang an ode composed by Mr. French. The five stanzas of this ode contain 166 words; the Get-

5 Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln, The War Years, II (New York, 1939), 455.
Gettysburg Address contains 270 words. In choral delivery, the ode probably took longer than the President’s talk.

Finally, Ward Hill Lamon rose to introduce the President of the United States. Mr. Lincoln stood up, waited for the crowd noises to subside, and spoke his “few appropriate remarks.”

It is at this point that fact begins to be clouded by fiction. The main circumstances concerning the Gettysburg Address—its preparation, mode of delivery, audience reception, and critical reaction—are lost in a mass of conflicting recollections by eye-witnesses (many of whom are otherwise reliable). Although the exact story may never be told, from the many reports a few truths emerge.

Words similar to parts of the Gettysburg Address had appeared in previous speeches by Mr. Lincoln and in books he is known to have read (e.g., extempore talk of July 7, 1863—“eighty-odd years since, on the fourth of July . . .” and Parson Weems’ ca. 1800 *Life of George Washington*—“nation to whom, under God, they owed their liberties”). Moreover, despite the famous story about the long train ride from Washington and the speech written on the back of a brown paper envelope, it seems certain that Mr. Lincoln, in possession of Everett’s carefully prepared main oration and aware of the gravity of the occasion, had begun to prepare his remarks before the trip to Gettysburg. An autograph version of the address, on stationery of the executive mansion, is in the Library of Congress. This single page of writing ends with the words:

> It is rather for us the living to stand here

“to stand here” is then lined over and the following words written above them:

> we here be dedica-

Thus the page ends. This draft was written before the trip to Gettysburg. Furthermore, the man who introduced Mr. Lincoln at the ceremonies, Ward Hill Lamon, claims that the President read him the speech before they left for Gettysburg, expressing concern about its quality.\(^6\)

Rather than list other indications of advance preparation, it might be profitable to examine one of the probable reasons why

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\(^6\) *Ibid.*
Mr. Lincoln went to Gettysburg. It seems that in the previous year Mr. Lincoln's visit to the battlefield at Antietam had given rise to a nasty story. The President was accused of having acted with unbecoming levity during his visit. Reports were circulated that he and his party rode around the battlefield in an open carriage, singing light songs and relating humorous stories. The ceremony at Gettysburg was an excellent opportunity for Mr. Lincoln to illustrate publicly his ability to act with decorum at a serious moment. Also, he may have hoped to regain public trust for the forthcoming election. Realizing this, and wishing to quell the cruel report of his behavior at Antietam, the President would undoubtedly have prepared his remarks carefully.

Having given consideration to his words, the Chief Executive was true to the spirit of Mr. Wills' invitation to him—which asked only for "a few appropriate remarks." How were they said? In all likelihood, Mr. Lincoln used the final draft he had copied that morning from previous preparations. This draft he pulled from his pocket before he rose to speak. He apparently did not need to refer to the paper, as his preparations had helped him to memorize it. The speech took less than five minutes (three minutes is a fair estimate). As usual, the President's voice was high-pitched, carrying to the extremity of the crowd—estimated at fifteen thousand people, or more. After finishing, he returned to his seat. The rapidity with which his remarks were concluded most likely accounts for the conflicting stories that he used cards, read from yellow foolscap, spoke extemporely, and so on.

Even more confusing are the tales of how the audience received the Gettysburg Address. Did they applaud during it, after it, or not at all? Was there merely polite applause or a tremendous ovation? The stories differ on these questions. In order to receive a satisfactory answer, the ceremonies must be reconsidered. It was an unseasonably warm and rather humid day. The march, scheduled to begin at ten, was delayed an hour. Once begun, the procession proved to be disappointing. At the stands, bands had played for half an hour while awaiting Mr. Everett's arrival. Before the ceremonies opened, the crowd was no doubt already tired; its excited interest giving way to fatigue and a polite pretense of attention.

Ibid., 459.
Mr. Stockton’s prayer began the ceremonies approximately at noon, probably taking twelve to fifteen minutes. How long Mr. French’s introduction of Mr. Everett took is not indicated, but the main oration consumed around two more hours. The ode took about five minutes. It is not known how long Mr. Lamon’s introduction of the President took. From this schedule, it is likely that the crowd had been waiting and listening for at least three hours when Mr. Lincoln arose. Most of the people were probably tired and almost certainly bored. The President’s appearance was greeted with applause and interested exclamation. He waited for the noise to subside before he spoke.

Many of the thousands at Gettysburg were seeing and hearing Mr. Lincoln for the first time. They noted, as he first stood up, that his height had not been exaggerated. When he began to speak, they were surprised by the thin, high-pitched tones issuing from this big man. Although they could hear him, many jockeyed for position to get a closer view. Before the audience was completely settled, Mr. Lincoln said, “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,” and sat down. So short? Is it over? What did he say? The crowd wondered. They had expected more.

Is it any wonder that conflicting stories are told about the audience’s reception? Under these circumstances it is not unlikely that applause, delayed because no one was sure that the President was through, was scanty and scattered. There may have been applause during the speech, also of a minor nature. As to how the audience felt—most of them probably could not have repeated a single word the President said. But it was a great day. Mr. Lincoln (at least to most Republicans among the spectators) was a great man and a great president. Therefore . . . it was a great speech. Later memories, because of the situation, became clouded with impressions not necessarily based on fact.

Finally, what was the critical reaction of the press to the speech? Again, as with the audience, politics and the circumstances and the brevity of the address color the reactions. The Harrisburg Patriot and Union said:

The President . . . acted without sense and without constraint in a panorama . . . gotten up . . . for the benefit
of his party. . . . We pass over the silly remarks of the President . . . willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they shall no more be repeated or thought of.\(^5\)

Such criticism was obviously partisan.

Actually, few newspapers commented critically on the address, either favorably or unfavorably, although many people later claimed to have appreciated immediately its quality. The first acclaim in the news reports concerning the ceremony was one sentence in the Chicago Tribune: “The dedicatory remarks by President Lincoln will live among the annals of man.”\(^9\) Further appreciation appeared in Harper’s Weekly of December 5, 1863:

> The oration by Mr. Everett was smooth and cold. Delivered, doubtless, with his accustomed graces, it yet wanted one vivid picture, one thrilling appeal.

> The few words of the President were from the heart to the heart. They can not be read, even, without kindling emotion. . . . It was as simple and felicitous and earnest a word as was ever spoken.\(^10\)

By the time of President Lincoln’s assassination, the Gettysburg Address was recognized for its true greatness.

This is the general background of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Within these circumstances was given a short, formal talk—dignified and solemn. Perhaps Gettysburg would be nothing more than another name, lost in Civil War histories, if Abraham Lincoln hadn’t said, “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. . . .” But the world has remembered. The Gettysburg Address has become the best known speech in American history.

\(^5\) Ibid., 472;
\(^9\) Chicago Tribune, XVII (November 20, 1863), 1.
\(^10\) Harper’s Weekly, VIII (December 5, 1863), 770.