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## The new Gettysburg Address: fusing history and memory

Barry Schwartz\*

*University of Georgia, Department of Sociology, 113 Baldwin Hall, Athens, GA 30602-1611, USA*

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### Abstract

Different observers, according to Karl Mannheim, encircle the same event from different locations, see it from different perspectives, arrive at different insights. Yet, Mannheim never asks whether there are standpoints that lead to unique distortions as well as unique understandings. To answer this question few sources of evidence are more useful than the changing meaning of the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln's and succeeding generations believed that the Gettysburg Address consoled, inspired the people to continue their fight, and, above all, celebrated democracy and Union. Many contemporary historians and artists, however, believe that Lincoln at Gettysburg spoke about emancipation and racial justice. Their fusing of *history*, the objective recording of the past, and *commemoration*, the idealization of the past in terms of present concerns, occurs amid the rise of egalitarian and minority rights movements. Far from history's pulverizing commemoration, as the conventional wisdom of collective memory scholarship, from Maurice Halbwachs to Pierre Nora, asserts, commemoration often insinuates itself into and distorts history. Karl Mannheim's synthetic method—integrating the partial insights of separate generations—awaits a future generation of ideologically detached scholars.

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In February, 2002, the Gilder–Lehrman Institute gave its book prize to David Blight for *Race and Reunion* (2001). The fact that the Civil War was a struggle against racial oppression was finally in the open and the “emancipationist memory” of the war could assume its rightful place. Such was Blight's claim. After David Brion Davis named Blight's book as one of the best of the decade, the author politely thanked the Institute and delivered a few remarks about Frederick Douglass's views on the evils of slavery. Historian James

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\* Tel.: +1 706 542 2421.

E-mail address: [cmsbarry@uga.edu](mailto:cmsbarry@uga.edu).

Horton then introduced the Yale Cappella Group, “Shades,” which sang black spirituals and civil rights songs for the evening’s audience. The ideological tinge of the evening, which could not be clearer, was reminiscent of Maurice Halbwachs’s account of traditional society wherein “memories were closely tied to rites of commemoration and adoration, to ceremonies, feasts, and processions” (Halbwachs, 1991, p. 222).

The name of Blight’s award is the Frederick Douglass Book Prize, appropriate to the present topic, for in Blight’s later book Douglass appears as “the godfather of the Gettysburg Address” (Blight, 2002, p. 82). Blight’s interpretation makes intuitive sense in our times, but is it a valid interpretation? Does his new reading illuminate heretofore ignored aspects of the old, or does it distort what is vital in the old? This is no idle question. To know what Lincoln meant when he wrote the Gettysburg Address and what his audience, as opposed to later readers, assumed it meant is important because it helps to clarify vexing problems in the field of collective memory. What are the limits to the past’s capacity to frame and make present situations meaningful? Can we assume, as Karl Mannheim (1936) does, that there are few false perceptions of history since every generation sees aspects of the past that are less visible to other generations, or are some generations, despite Mannheim’s optimism, so constituted as to inculcate a fundamentally false past?

Modern societies represent the past for their members through history and commemoration. *Commemorative symbolism* includes hagiographies (eulogy and ritual oratory), monuments, shrines, relics, statues, paintings, prints, and ritual observances; *history* refers to research and analytic monographs, and popular statements appearing in magazines, newspapers, television, film, stage productions (usually on commemorative occasions). History and commemoration shape what ordinary individuals believe about the past; they are the vehicles of collective memory. The problem is whether memory and history get in one another’s way, and under what conditions one can be confused with the other. Maurice Halbwachs asserted, as a general principle, that “history starts when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up” ([1950] 1980, p. 78). Pierre Nora (1989, pp. 8, 9) followed suite, claiming that history’s goal is the total secularization of the past and the suppression of any effort to sanctify it. Memory [commemoration] and history “appear now to be in fundamental opposition. . . . History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it.”

Has the memory of the Gettysburg Address been thus suppressed and destroyed? We can never know until we explore the contexts in which Abraham Lincoln spoke and in which successive generations contemplated his words.

## 1. Lincoln at Gettysburg

When David Wills invited President Lincoln to make “a few appropriate remarks” at the Gettysburg cemetery dedication, he also defined what “appropriate” meant:

It will be a source of great gratification to the many widows and orphans that have been made almost friendless by the great battle here, to have you here personally; and it will kindle anew in the breasts of the comrades of these brave dead, who are now in the tented field or nobly meeting the foe in the front, a confidence that they who sleep

in death on the battlefield are not forgotten by those highest in authority; and they will feel that, should their fate be the same, their remains will not be uncared-for. We hope you will be able to perform this last solemn act to the soldier dead on this battlefield (Nicolay and Hay, 1886, pp. 8,190).

Wills's letter was an unambiguous charge for a statement of national gratitude. To this end, Lincoln had to know not only what the war meant to his listeners but also what they were prepared—and not prepared—to die for themselves. Lincoln's ([1863] 1953, vol. 7, p. 23) knowledge informed the content of his eulogy:

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 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 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.

## 2. Contemporary readings

Lincoln's words may have impressed those who heard them or later read them, but most literate Americans in 1863 never knew what he had said, let alone how to interpret what he had said. Among the 35 white-owned newspapers I tracked, including Democratic and Republican, Southern and Northern, Eastern and Western papers, 11%, or about 31% of the total, made no mention of the Gettysburg Address. Seventeen newspapers, a little less than half, reprinted the Address without comment. The six newspapers that did assess Lincoln's words split along party lines. The Democratic *Harrisburg Patriot and Nation* (U.S.b, 1863) condemned the entire proceeding as a “panorama that was gotten up more for the benefit of [Lincoln's] party than for the glory of the nation and the honor of its dead.” *The Chicago Times* (November 23, 1863, pp. 1–2) found in Lincoln's speech a plan to make blacks and whites equal. How dare he deny the true cause for which they died! The fallen of

Gettysburg “were men possessing too much self-respect to declare that negroes were their equals, or were entitled to equal privileges.” But the *Times*, even more—indeed far more—than the average Democratic newspaper (Sanger, 1931) had found this evidence in every speech Lincoln ever delivered, just as it found the same evidence in every Republican speech of the previous decade (Foner, 1970, pp. 261–300). As *The Harrisburg Telegraph’s* (November 24, 1863, p. 2) abolitionist editor put it, “[I]n the utter distraction and bitterness of the copperheads, every proceeding of the American people is now denounced as the acts of Abolitionism.”

Republican editors remarked on the appropriateness and beauty of Lincoln’s words; few found in them any reference to abolition or racial equality. His speech seemed instead to stir feelings of militancy: “More than any other single event,” the *Gettysburg Times* (November 19, 1863, p. 6) reported, “will this glorious dedication nerve the heroes to a deeper resolution of the living to conquer at all costs.” *The Boston Transcript’s* (U.S.a., 1863) editor, too, reported: “The ideas of duty are almost stammered out...as the inspiration not only of public opinion, but of public action also. One sentence should shine in golden letters throughout the land as an exhortation to wake up apathetic and indolent patriotism. “It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work that they have thus far so nobly carried on.”

### 3. New readings

Lincoln’s contemporaries had no reason to remember his Gettysburg speech. Not one lithograph or statue of Lincoln at Gettysburg appeared during or after the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Neither the press nor the public regarded the Address as a great production; few intellectuals described it as such (Barton, 1930, p. 201; Dennet, 1934, p. 48). Not until the early twentieth century, when most of the Civil War generation had died and an industrial democracy replaced a rural republic did his speech become part of the “New Testament” of America’s civil religion (Bellah, 1966). In 1909 Major William H. Lambert (1909, pp. 391–392; see also p. 399) told the Pennsylvania Historical Society that none of Lincoln’s contemporaries saw unusual merit in his Gettysburg Address. “It is difficult to realize that [the Address] ever had less appreciation than it does now.” “The true applause” for the Address “comes from this generation,” Charles E. Thompson wrote in 1913 (*New York Times*, Sec. V, June 6, 1913, p. 3).

The Gettysburg Address became prominent in the early twentieth century because it was more resonant with the life of the Progressive Era than with Lincoln’s own generation. Lincoln’s references to the equality of all men and the government belonging to the people seemed so right to a twentieth-century society concerned to regulate growing inequities of political power and wealth. A *Nation* commentator complained: “Nobody knows, and there is nothing in Lincoln’s acts or words to tell, whether or not he would have been for the initiative and referendum, for endowment of motherhood, or for single tax; yet enthusiastic advocates of almost any ‘advanced’ proposal of our day find little difficulty in

<sup>1</sup> Albion Harris Bicknell’s life-size painting of *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1875) was the first significant commemoration of the Gettysburg Address.

persuading themselves that it is a corollary of the Gettysburg Address” (*Nation*, July 10, 1913, p. 27).

From the Progressive Era and World War I through the 1920s, Gettysburg Address commemoration focused on its references to democracy’s virtue. Depression Era oratory magnified the theme. On Memorial Day, 1930, after children strew flowers on Gettysburg’s soldier graves, Republican President Herbert Hoover rose and declared that the “appeal for the unity of our people and the perpetuation of the fundamentals of our democracy is as vital today in our national thinking as it was when Lincoln spoke” (*New York Times*, May 31, 1930, pp. 1, 3). Two years later, Albert Griffith, a well-known Lincoln enthusiast writing in *National Republic* also found in the Gettysburg Address a paen to “the mighty reality, the fundamental essential,” of “people’s government” (Griffith, 1932, p. 16). Lincoln, thus, pleaded with the living to devote themselves to the sacred task of preserving democracy for the world and its posterity.

In the 1930s, however, democracy meant more than representative government and electoral equality; it meant, on the one hand, the entry of the mass of the population into proximity to the state and, on the other, the state’s active concern with the welfare of the masses (Shils, 1975, pp. 92, 102–103). Artist Leon Bracker marked this milestone by picturing “proximity” literally. He dresses elderly men and women of his own day (c.1935) in Civil War era clothing and situates them directly in front of Lincoln as he speaks at Gettysburg.<sup>2</sup> Norman Rockwell, too, places Lincoln’s listeners close enough to touch him (1942). Rockwell’s is the vintage Lincoln—long-legged and bespectacled, his right hand grasping the lapel of an open coat while reading from a small piece of paper reminiscent of the mythic scrap on which he is said to have written his speech on the way to Gettysburg. New pictures of Lincoln at Gettysburg are figurations of the new relationship between the modern state (symbolized by Lincoln) and the masses (symbolized by Lincoln’s audiences). As spatial proximity denies social distance, the Gettysburg Address is democratized.

But something new had occurred: a realignment of the relation between history, commemoration, and memory. Between Lincoln’s death in 1865 and the mid-1920s, hundreds of historians romanticized the Civil War, emphasizing the gallantry of both sides and how the bloody battles reflected the glory of the nation. Such writers held history hostage to nationalism, while Lincoln’s biographers held him hostage to their own imagination. For at least sixty years after his death, amateurs determined what Americans knew about Lincoln. At the turn of the 1930s, however, James G. Randall and his students and followers<sup>3</sup> professionalized and dominated Lincoln studies. Dubbed a “revisionist” because he sought to divorce himself from party, regional bias, and the “hero tradition,” Randall (1934) dismissed the vast store of existing Lincoln writings. What seemed to be a

<sup>2</sup> Bracker must have been anticipating the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, to be observed in 1938 by a camp reunion of its veterans. In the background of Bracker’s drawing there appears a ghostly assemblage of soldiers preparing for the battle—the topic of Lincoln’s address.

<sup>3</sup> Prominent revisionists include Paul M. Angle, T. Harry Williams, Benjamin Thomas, Richard Current, Harry Pratt, William E. Baringer, Theodore Calvin Pease, Tyler Dennett, Howard K. Beale, Avery O. Craven, and Reinhard H. Luthin. David Donald, perhaps Randall’s most famous student, is for some reason better known for his few criticisms of Randall than his devotion to the revisionist agenda. The influence of revisionism ended during the civil rights movement, when historians, convinced that the rights of oppressed peoples must be defended, re-evaluated the Civil War and Lincoln’s place in it.

saturated field, with tens of thousands of books and articles, was in fact a derivative and hagiographic blank. (For the best summary of Randall and Civil War revisionism, see Neely, 1979, pp. 25–28; 1982, pp. 255–256.)

Filling in the blank must have disillusioned many. Lincoln admirers, like Carl Sandburg (1926, 1939) told Depression-era Americans trying to overcome personal tragedies why they should be inspired by Lincoln's having overcome them. Randall recognized the utility of Sandburg's words, "but this portrait", he said, "is not Lincoln, however much it may have comforted the victim of the depression and hard circumstance" (Randall, 1947, p. 4). His history was sensitive to ideals yet chilling, based on documentary evidence alone and indifferent to the needs of his own time. He saw in the Gettysburg Address the "wider world significance of democracy's testing, the enduring importance of success in the American democratic experiment as proving that government by the people is no failure" (Randall, 1945, p. 320). But Randall was referring to 1863. The numerous parallels drawn between the Civil War and World War II, when Randall wrote, were politically appropriate but unhistorical. Randall never saw the Gettysburg Address as a metaphor for anything happening during World War II or after.

#### 4. Gettysburg and the civil rights movement

Don Fehrenbacher (1968), writing at the peak of the civil rights movement, was among the first to foresee a new Civil War history. He envisioned future historians defining the war as an inevitable and desirable step toward universal equality. They indeed sympathized with abolitionists and Radical Republicans, considered the Union worth preserving mainly because slavery ended, and placed John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison, and Thaddeus Stevens in the national pantheon. "We are disappointed," Edward Ayers declared sardonically, "with those many white men who died for the Union who would not willingly have risked their lives for the end of slavery." The story—and its commemoration—had to change. White Northerners once thought content to live with slavery confined to the South are now said to have believed "the war had to be a war to end slavery, and not merely one to save the Union" (Ayers, 1998, pp. 157–158).

On November 19, 1963, in the midst of civil rights strife and a polarizing Civil War Centennial, Secretary of State Dean Rusk observed that "Lincoln's reaffirmation of the American commitment to the "proposition that all men are created equal" had been preceded by the Emancipation Proclamation." Lincoln pledged freedom to be only a first step toward racial justice. Poet Archibald MacLeish was present at the Gettysburg Address Centennial, too, and he echoed Rusk's thought: "[T]here is only one cause to which we can take increased devotion"—the cause of race relations. "Lincoln would be disappointed at the slow pace of their improvement." William Scranton, Republican Governor of Pennsylvania, amplified Rusk's and MacLeish's comments by including the civil rights issue in his official centennial address: "Today, a century later, our nation is still engaged in a test to determine if the United States, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, can long endure. Blood has been shed in the dispute over the equality of men even in 1963" (*Gettysburg Times*, November 19, 1863, pp. 1, 4).

By the last decade of the twentieth century, historians began to represent the Gettysburg Address as a prelude to the civil rights movement. This transformation resulted not from the elapsing of time or accumulation of previous misinterpretations, let alone new evidence, but from a new perspective that de-emphasized the themes of sacrifice, death, and Union. Thousands of young bodies lying in fresh graves faded from thought as new abstractions, seemingly drawn from nowhere, fed on one another. “Though seldom recognized as such,” explains Webb Garrison, “the Gettysburg Address is a fervent eulogy to the Declaration of Independence. In it the birth of the nation is linked not to the year the Constitution was ratified but to 1776, the year of the Declaration” (Garrison, 1993, p. 240). For Allen Guelzo, the Gettysburg Address “was yet another opportunity for Lincoln to establish the Declaration of Independence as the moral spirit animating the Constitution, and to see the war as a struggle for that moral spirit rather than an overgrown dispute about certain procedural niceties of the Constitution” (Guelzo, 1999, p. 370). Among the procedural niceties to which Guelzo refers is the right of states to secede from the Union.

Other writers went further, defining the Declaration of Independence as Lincoln’s instrument for denigrating the Constitution. Garry Wills’ Pulitzer-Prize winning and best-selling *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Changed America* is the pioneering statement. Distinguishing between a Declaration affirming the equality of all men and a Constitution legitimating slavery, Wills asserts that Lincoln invoked the former to cleanse the latter. In this “open-air slight of hand,” he subverted the Constitution by convincing his generation that it was designed to institute and preserve equality (Wills, 1992, p. 38).<sup>4</sup>

How did Wills reach his conclusion? Can we even credit it to Wills alone? In 1991, Merrill Peterson asserted: “The Gettysburg Address cannot be explained, nor can it be fully understood, except as the culmination of Lincoln’s . . . dedication to the Declaration of Independence’s concepts of liberty and equality. Lincoln at Gettysburg was a preview of Gunnar Myrdal’s (1944) classic *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*” (Peterson, 1961, pp. 18–20; see also Andrew Delbanco, 1989, p. 38). Further reiteration of Wills’s point is found in Mark Neely, Jr. (1993, p. 156), David Donald (1995, pp. 562–566), Paul Rahe (1993), Howard Jones (1999), Jeffrey Meyer (2001, p. 204), Carl Wieck (2002), Harry Jaffa (2000, p. 79), Phillip Paludin (1994, pp. 229, 231), and George Fletcher (2001, p. 26). These scholars attributed to Lincoln’s words revolutionary consequences: the centralization of the American state; collection of federal income tax; prohibition of the manufacture and distribution of alcohol; women’s suffrage, subordination of the Constitution to the Declaration of Independence; canonization of the Emancipation Proclamation; setting the national stage for a racially just and integrated America. Above all else, Lincoln at Gettysburg affirmed the true purpose of the Civil War to be the abolition of slavery. “Only in the killing, and yet more killing if necessary,” David Blight declares, “would come the rebirth—a new birth of the freedoms that a republic makes possible” (Blight, 2001, p. 13). Such was Lincoln’s stern message to the grieving masses at

<sup>4</sup> Garry Wills’s argument resonates with the perspective of the political left, but its appeal is not confined to the left. Before Wills’s book appeared, conservative political philosopher Wilmoore Kendall (1989) claimed that Lincoln falsified the Declaration of Independence and Constitution by attributing them with an egalitarian spirit, thus confounding the American people’s self-understanding. Kendall’s claim conforms perfectly to the claims of his left colleagues. The only difference is that the right condemned Lincoln’s trick; the left applauded it.

Gettysburg Cemetery. The Civil War was a Holy War, a *jihad* against the enemies of the good.

Proponents of the new interpretation appeared frequently on Public Television and C-Span—usually on Lincoln’s Birthday, the Gettysburg Address anniversary, or one of the many other Civil War anniversary dates. Postmodernity’s distinguishing mark, the opposition of history and memory, disintegrates in the process. Historian James Horton declared in the Great American Writers Series (C-Span 2) that Lincoln at Gettysburg reiterated the Emancipation Proclamation (see also Quarles, 1962, p. 151), highlighted the Declaration of Independence’s celebration of equality, and redefined the Constitution in terms of it. Harold Holzer, appearing alongside Horton, added that Lincoln knew he was making a “definitive statement” that provided a new evaluation of the Declaration of Independence. Holzer constantly referred to the Gettysburg Address as an “opportunity” for Lincoln to announce that the freeing of slaves was no longer a measure to preserve the Union, save white lives, and end the war more quickly; that it was instead the war’s principal purpose.

Among the earliest forms of commemoration are icons—pictorial representations, signs that resemble what they represent. Pierre Nora defines these signs as the “remains” of an age that history has beleaguered and pulverized. That we study the historiography of any event, including the Gettysburg Address, that we reconstitute its myths, implies that we no longer unquestionably identify with its heritage and that we no longer pass it on intact (Nora, 1989, p. 10). But in the present case, historians are the champions, not the destroyers, of myth. The Greystone Production of “Lincoln at Gettysburg”, an episode of the *Civil War Journal* broadcast on A&E Television and hosted by African American actor Danny Glover, introduces the Gettysburg Address as not only the “greatest speech ever given by an American” but also “the defining moment of the war.” One expert historian after another explains that Lincoln used the Gettysburg Address to tell the nation what the war was about. Their words, systematically paired with visual images, make the point. The phrase “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (quoted constantly throughout the documentary) is invariably accompanied by pictures of African American slaves and soldiers.<sup>5</sup> African American images also accompany verbal references to “a new birth of freedom.” This phrase, as historian James McPherson explains, meant not the new foundation of an indivisible nation but the Union idealized in the Declaration of Independence’s affirmation of equality. What kind of equality? As McPherson speaks, pictures of slaves define his words.

Illustrated texts of the Gettysburg Address add another layer of redundancy to the new history. The authors, as if agreeing on the strategy beforehand, take each line of the Gettysburg Address and illustrate it with a picture intended to define its meaning. Sam Fink’s *The Illustrated Gettysburg Address* represents the phrase “all men are created equal” with a drawing of Lincoln and an African American on a balance scale that displays their equal weight. “[T]hat this nation shall have a new birth of freedom” is illustrated by Lincoln sewing seeds, presumably referring to racial justice as an ideal not yet realized but

<sup>5</sup> *The Titans* (2000), a motion picture starring Denzel Washington, effects a different juxtaposition. A football coach seeking to reduce racial antagonisms on his team takes the players to Gettysburg battlefield, where they can see where men died presumably in order to rid the world of racial prejudice.

planted by Lincoln in the mind of the people (Fink, 1994). Michael McCurdy's *Gettysburg Address*, prefaced by Garry Wills, illustrates this "proposition that all men are equal" with a picture of African Americans, some still in chains, fleeing slavery. "New birth of freedom" is illustrated by a picture of whites and blacks celebrating victory together (McCurdy, 1995). Roberta Landon introduces her *The Illustrated Gettysburg Address* by quoting Garry Wills to document a specific claim: America would not be the kind of multiracial nation it is today if Lincoln had not said what he did at Gettysburg. Documents, photographs, and prints buttress her point. The first line of Lincoln's Address, containing the proposition that all men are created equal, appears above photographs of Frederick Douglass and African American children reciting from a book; the line referring to a "new birth of freedom" accompanies the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and a copy of the Nashville black citizens' petition asking the Union Convention to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation when the war ends—an ironic request, given the present-day belief that the Proclamation was, somehow, self-enforcing (Landon, 2000, pp. 20–21, 93).

Gettysburg Address representations conform to the temper of our time, but they make no sense in terms of prevailing, postmodernist, models of the past. "Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic". By contrast, "history, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism" (Nora, 1989, pp. 8–9). Commemorative occasions are sites of memory, not history; yet historians are now legitimating such sites as ritual participants. Historians are drawing their own affective, magical, symbolic connections. At the November 19, 2000 anniversary of the Address, James McPherson announced that Lincoln's "new birth of freedom" prefigured Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. King had, in truth, asked President Kennedy to issue a "Second Emancipation Proclamation" abolishing segregation in America; but King himself believed that Lincoln was not, as Frederick Douglass declared, "our man or our model." Given McPherson's pairing of Lincoln's and King's speeches, however, the average television viewer cannot fail to see Lincoln at Gettysburg as a forerunner of King in Washington. The television documentary "Abraham and Mary: A House Divided" leads to the same conclusion. After a voice reads the Address, Professor Margaret Washington explains that the entire Civil War was a fight over what the Declaration of Independence represented. Upholding the Declaration's moral standard of equality and "paying a very, very heavy price for it," Lincoln's words expressed the great catharsis that the American people had achieved. That Professor Washington feels no need to document her claim about Lincoln's expressing Americans' sense of being purified of their inner racism is another example of the historian's new commemorative role.

## 5. What Lincoln meant

The new historians have made mistakes, but have they not also made a genuine discovery, revealing for us a side of the Gettysburg Cemetery dedication about which no one knew about before? The answer boils down to what it takes to know an alien mind and its generation. To put oneself in Lincoln's place, to go directly from his words to his mind,

is impossible, but we can infer his meaning, as we infer any other, by placing words against the context in which they are conceived and spoken (Geertz, 1973). We know, first of all, that Lincoln considered the Constitution a sacred charter of American self-government and instrument for the expansion of human rights (Guelzo, 2000). We also know that he could not respond to David Wills's invitation to dedicate the Gettysburg Cemetery without acknowledging this charter, without recognizing that the Civil War was an existential struggle, a fight for the survival of the world's only democracy: "Now we are engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and dedicated, can long endure. . . . We have come to dedicate. . . a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live." By their sacrifice, the "government of the people, by the people, for the people, *shall not perish from the earth*" (Lincoln, [1863] 1953, vol. 7, p. 23; emphasis added). Such was Lincoln's message: not only did the fallen save democracy for America; they saved it for the world. By the end of the twentieth century, however, racial justice, not national survival, was America's preoccupation, and the meaning of Lincoln's dedication turned on three different phrases that we have bent to our new worries: "Four score and seven years ago," "the proposition that all men are created equal," and "new birth of freedom."

Lincoln's opening words, "Four-score and seven years ago," refers to the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. George Fletcher (2001, p. 37) believed that Lincoln considered the Declaration a prelude to the Emancipation Proclamation because he dated the latter "the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh" (July 4, 1776). Fletcher did not know that the wording was a formal slogan appearing on many official documents, including naturalization certificates. His interpretation exemplifies the danger of aligning words to one another rather than to social purposes.

Among a people that took divine intervention for granted (Hay, 1969), July Fourth was a day of wonder, not a prelude to emancipation. On July 4, 1776 America was born; on July 4, 1826 two of "our fathers" who brought forth the nation, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, died together; on July 4, 1831, James Monroe, a third founding father, died; on July 4, 1863, four-score and seven years after the year of "the independence of the United States," the embattled nation turned the tide of war. Lincoln recognized these correspondences in his July 7 speech following the simultaneous withdrawal of Lee's army from Gettysburg and the surrender of Vicksburg (which cut the Confederacy in half). "Gentlemen, this is a glorious theme, and the occasion for a speech, but I am not prepared to make one worthy of the occasion" (Lincoln, [1863] 1953, vol. 6, p. 320).

Lincoln also defined equality in a way that many today misunderstand. He believed that the Declaration of Independence's phrase "all men are created equal" referred to the equal right of every man, black and white, to enjoy the fruit of his own labor, but he had always been wrong. In his 1856 debate with Lincoln, Stephen Douglas insisted that "all men are created equal" appeared at the introduction to a list of grievances that no man living in England would endure. Lincoln's response to Douglas was clever and even persuasive, but it failed to capture the Declaration drafting committee's intent. "[Stephen] Douglas's history," according to Pauline Maier, "was more faithful to the past and to the views of Thomas Jefferson, who to the end of his life saw the Declaration of Independence as a

revolutionary manifesto. . . . Lincoln's version of what the founders meant was full of wishful suppositions" (Maier, 1997, p. 206).<sup>6</sup>

Lincoln, however, thought about the Declaration as did most Americans. After 1815, the Declaration of Independence and its equality proposition were "sacralized" and deployed by every interest group seeking the moral high ground, including workers, farmers, women's rights advocates. Since the phrase "all men are created equal" had become America's credo (Maier, 1997, pp. 189–208), Lincoln naturally invoked it at Gettysburg, for no other phrase expressed better the ideals of the day or justified sacrifice on their behalf.

"The proposition that all men are created equal" meant that all citizens, although stratified in terms of talent, virtue, and endowment, are equal in terms of legal rights and economic opportunity. That Republicans included blacks in this principle did not think it subsumed racial equality as either a social or military goal. Lincoln made this clear when he explained the war's purpose in 1864 to a regiment of Ohio soldiers:

It is in order that each one of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations—it is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright. . . . the nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel" (Lincoln, [1864] 1953, vol. 7, p. 512).

So soon after Andrew Jackson's struggle against gentility and privilege, the young men understood intuitively what Lincoln meant. The "inestimable jewel" worth fighting for is the free market, the right of every man to improve himself. Lincoln at Gettysburg referred to capitalism—a fair chance in the race of life—when he recognized the equality of man. If there had been no slaves in America and the Civil War were fought over geopolitical issues, Lincoln's Address would have still opened with the same phrase, "the proposition that all men are created equal."

Lincoln used the phrase, "all men are created equal", to express *anti-slavery* convictions when writing to friends, like Joshua Speed (Lincoln [1855] 1953, vol. 2, pp. 320–323) and *equal opportunity* convictions when speaking to public audiences, knowing each would interpret it differently. Since Lincoln himself believed in its double meaning, he must have been thinking of emancipation as he penned successive drafts of his address. He must have also been thinking deeply, very deeply, about the sacredness of free government and equality of opportunity, which his listeners' children, kinsmen, and friends had died to preserve. He must have known which meaning his words at Gettysburg would evoke.

The third phrase around which Gettysburg Address revisionism winds itself is "New birth of freedom." "What [Lincoln] meant by 'a new birth of freedom' for the nation", Carl Sandburg (1939, p. 413) observed, "could have a thousand interpretations"; yet, some

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<sup>6</sup> If its second phrase is read as a statement about racial equality, then the entire Declaration of Independence from Great Britain becomes a non-sequitur. Southern delegates would have never signed the Declaration if they believed it to be an assertion of racial equality. Many Americans, surely the vast majority of the Democrats and many if not most Republicans, shared Douglas's interpretation, and Lincoln knew it.

interpretations are more reasonable than others. A new birth resulting from the purging of “the terrible sin of slavery” made more sense on the 1963 centennial of the Gettysburg Address (Petersen, 1963, p. 63) than it could have in 1863. In 1865, Lincoln’s eulogists announced that “the foundation of ‘our second temple’-a regenerated nation-has been laid in our firstborn” (Howlett, 1865, p. 5). Reverend Howlett linked the president’s death and soldier dead to the 1775–1783 battle for independence. So did Reverend J.G. Butler:

Nations, as well as individuals, may have their second birth-*must be born again*-before they are prepared for a pure, vigorous, and useful manhood. Our nation *has* been born again, amid the terrible carnage of the battlefield, and baptized by the tears and blood of the entire land... and now we rise to the purity and dignity and responsibility of our renewed nationality (Butler, 1865, p. 11).

This new birth of freedom was expressed in many ways, but always with emphasis on renewed nationhood: the war “created a feeling of nationality such as never before existed, and our country commences a new career, sanctified by its baptism of blood” (Kip, 1865, p. 8; see also Booth, 1865, p. 5; Boardman, 1865, p. 10). America’s rebirth involved emancipation but can never be reduced to it.

Abraham Lincoln dedicated the Gettysburg Cemetery in 1863, not 2003, and this fact is essential to our understanding his Address. To claim that his two-minute speech contributed to the racial integration of American society, as the new historians claim, is insurmountably difficult. Speeches that change nations are declarations of new economic, political, or military policies, not funeral eulogies. If the Gettysburg Address was such a policy speech-not the commemoration of a historical event but a historical event in its own right-then we must specify what would have happened to American society if Lincoln had made a different speech. If Lincoln determined how Americans interpret the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Civil War, how would they interpret these if he had not spoken? Which alternate interpretations and, above all, which political possibilities (Fascism? Authoritarianism? Permanent Apartheid?) did Lincoln’s words negate?

Matters of fact do not always apply to the Gettysburg Address. A touching speech that affirms the equality of all men makes sense to a society that disdains invidious distinctions of race, ethnicity, and religion, but it would have made no sense to Lincoln’s society where such distinctions were key foundations of moral commitment and identity. It would have made no sense during the commemoration of a great battle and dedication of a cemetery for thousands of dead young men for whom these distinctions were valid. It would have made no sense to the political officials sharing the platform with Lincoln-particularly governors representing states with strong Democratic constituencies: Governor Horatio Seymour of New York, Governor Joel Parker of New Jersey, Governor William Denison and former Governor David Tod of Ohio, and Governor Augustus Bradford of Maryland.<sup>7</sup> These four states, largely antiwar and neutral toward slavery, filled 41% of Gettysburg’s graves.

Lincoln had no reason to torment his listeners by expressing a conviction they did not share. He was not about to tell them, in the midst of thousands of fresh graves, that they had

<sup>7</sup> Governor Oliver Morton of Indiana, a staunch Republican, was also on the platform, but his presence, no less than the Democratic governors, was not lost on Lincoln. Lincoln knew that in Indiana, as in Illinois, the 1862 elections created legislatures that favored immediate armistice and repudiation of the Emancipation Proclamation.

been tricked, that the purpose of the war was different from what they believed it to be. Most people believed they were fighting to save the Union, and the last thing Lincoln wanted to do, especially in south-central Pennsylvania—a stronghold of “rebel sympathizers” (*Indianapolis Daily Journal*, November 23, 1863, p. 2)—was to give the impression he had maneuvered them into risking their lives on behalf of emancipation. To do so would have transformed a solemn event that unified a people in grief into a partisan rally that divided a people by cynically exploiting rather than honoring their dead.<sup>8</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Since different observers encircle the same object from different “locations” and see it from different perspectives and depths of penetration, each is right in his own way. But there are patterns of social experience—“existential conditions”, as [Karl Mannheim \(1936, pp. 193–194\)](#) called them—that lead not to unique insights but to unique failures of insight, conditions that distort rather than enhance historical understanding. What we take to be exciting new ways of knowing history are in fact episodes of history being absorbed by memory.

The Gettysburg Address assumed the character of a sacred text as it was assimilated into Progressive Era political reform, regional reconciliation, World War I, the economic emergencies of the 1930s, and the military crises of the 1940s and 1950s. Throughout, the Address retained much of its original meaning, but this deposit eroded seriously during the early years of the civil rights movement and, thereafter, amid the growing acceptance of African American and other minority demands for justice and recognition, which the academy, more than any other American institution, passionately supported.

The Depression, in its own way, was as traumatic as the racial strife of the late twentieth-century, yet revisionist Lincoln scholars ignored the problems of their day, tried to know the past as it actually was, drew no parallels to the present. Since contemporary scholars have been more engaged personally in the civil rights movement than historians of the 1930s were engaged in New Deal reform, emancipation bears more heavily than Union in present thinking about the Civil War. If historians are to work more as agents commemorating a sacred cause than disinterested social scientists seeking new facts and producing new knowledge, they are more likely to do so when the groups with which they sympathize ([Felson, 1991](#)) are targeted victims of racial oppression and not random victims of economic collapse ([Maier, 2002](#)). Passionately righteous reaction to injustice bequeaths the fusion of history and commemoration.

The traditional role of the professional historian has been to document the causes, nature, and consequences of historical events. However, “there are periods in history,” [Emile Durkheim \(\[1915\] 1965, p. 261\)](#) observed, “when, under the influence of some great collective shock, greater activity results in a general stimulation of individual forces. Men see more and differently now than in normal times.” In the academy, many cast aside traditional standards, including value-neutrality, announce whose side they are on, help

<sup>8</sup> The “memorial service” following the death of liberal Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone (November, 2002) is a case in point.

society consecrate selected events of the past not according to their qualities, determined after extended and dispassionate deliberation, but according to their enlarged and invigorated moral resonance. The new historians' claims can thus be seen as parts of an unintentional secular ritual of consecration that promotes the trust needed to accept an emancipation-centered reading of the Gettysburg Address as true. Whatever these historians believed they were doing, their function has been to legitimate a sacred text for a new generation. This fusing of history and commemoration occurs in the presence of a moral movement to which historians and artists commit themselves emotionally. To know how this fusion occurred is to know how Lincoln scholarship assumed the authority to transmit values and sustain legitimation; and how, in a new symbiosis, history lifted its siege on memory and became part of it.

The question raised at the beginning of this essay, "whether we can assume, as Mannheim does, that there are no false perceptions of history since every generation sees aspects of the past that are less visible to other generations, or whether some generations are so constituted as to inculcate a fundamentally false past," can now be tentatively addressed. Since every generation, within limits, sees itself in history, refinements of collective memory are likely to involve emphasis and de-emphasis as long as essential continuities with the past exist. When these continuities rupture, the past must be fundamentally altered if it is to remain an effective frame of normative reference. The rupture occurred in America soon after World War II.

Long before Lincoln became their symbol, white Americans treated one another as "equals," but their conception of equality differed from ours. Equality afforded white people equal dignity but did not necessarily make them good neighbors. Irishmen and Yankees, laborers and merchants, immigrants and native-born saw themselves alike in God's sight but did not allow their children to marry one another. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, equality of opportunity prevailed in practice among whites, and in principle between blacks and whites, in the context of rigid social boundaries. In both its industrial and pre-industrial ages, America was a "high-grid" (Douglas, 1973, pp. 77–92) society, one in which distinctions were deemed essential to communal dignity and order.

After World War II, a new welfare state imposed itself on social as well as economic practices, regulating racial, ethnic, and gender relations that were once the province of local authority. This phase of the egalitarian revolution involved a breakdown of communal power centers. The Supreme Court's overruling local discrimination ordinances, the great suburban movement and increased inter-metropolitan mobility (which scattered the city's once compact ethnic communities), the expansion of national communication networks, largely although not exclusively through television—these developments accelerated the country's cultural integration. As the forces of this revolution shattered the boundaries of the old generation, new historians gave the new generation a new conception of its past.

What of the new historian himself? Does his progressive bias, his passion for a racially equal, just, and inclusive society (see, for example, Cimbalá and Himmelberg, 1996) give him special insights into Lincoln's words? Can he embrace the ideal of racial equality without revising the past, or is the worthiness of this ideal dependent on Lincoln's having articulated it at Gettysburg? Mannheim's unattached, "interstitial" intellectual was not totally free of biased affiliations, but "over and above these affiliations he is motivated by

the fact that his training has equipped him to face the problems of the day in several perspectives and not only in one, as most participants in the controversies of the time do” (Mannheim, 1956, p. 105). No aspect of Mannheim’s aspiration has been more thoroughly frustrated. Clinging to if not celebrating their partisanship, many contemporary intellectuals, including the most influential, have become the ideologically attached intellectuals that Mannheim feared. Scorning predecessors dedicated to objectivity, the new historian is eager to make known his emotional attachment to his topic, to trumpet his role as champion of virtue and resurrector of ancient faith. What, then, is the prospect of restoring the once vibrant opposition between history and commemoration—a tension that Pierre Nora (1989) prematurely regretted as disenchanting the world but which remains a necessary condition for the protection of historical truth, whose erosion is disenchanting in its own way?

Pre-civil rights generations saw Lincoln at Gettysburg consoling, inspiring the people to continue the fight, and, above all, celebrating democracy—the right of ordinary men to govern themselves—a precious thing practiced nowhere else in the world in 1863. The political culture of the late 20th-century—itsself a precious thing, with its elevation of human rights and human dignity to a sacred principle—has made it difficult for us to understand the essence of Lincoln’s words. The new historians, in their effort to sustain the illusion that racial equality is inherent in America’s heritage—a heritage going back to the eighteenth century’s Declaration of Independence—have projected their own ideals into the past rather than taking the past for what it is. Instead of recognizing the strangeness of the Civil War generation, they have asserted its familiarity and endeavored to reconcile the distance separating it from us. That the essential meaning of the Gettysburg Address might be irrelevant to contemporary problems, including race relations, has never been discussed anywhere. It is not a conceivable option. Thus, the great synthesis Karl Mannheim envisioned—bringing together partial viewpoints of separate generations into a whole that includes the unique insights of each—awaits a future generation of historians and social scientists, one not only capable of recognizing but also considering ideological viewpoints differing from their own. In its place we have a synthesis of history and commemorative celebration: emancipationist theories of the Civil War are honored to the strains of choir music.

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**Barry Schwartz**, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Georgia, received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Since 1982, Schwartz has examined collective memory issues through his work on American presidents and in comparative studies of the United States, Germany, Japan, Korea, China, and ancient and modern Israel. His book, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* traces popular images of Lincoln from 1865 to 1922. His second volume, *Abraham Lincoln at the Millennium*, nearing completion, traces Lincoln's images from the Depression decade through the turn of the twenty-first century. Throughout these topics appear common themes, including the enduring need of individuals to find orientation and meaning for their lives by invoking, rejecting, revising, and judging the past.