

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 12: Slavery in America: From the Founding to America's Second Founding
12.4 Primary Source

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS (1863)

View the document on the Constitution Center's website [here](#).

SUMMARY

On November 19, 1863, Abraham Lincoln delivered one of the most famous speeches in American history: the Gettysburg Address. The Union victory at Gettysburg was a key moment in the Civil War—thwarting General Robert E. Lee's invasion of the North. President Lincoln offered this brief speech in a dedication ceremony for a new national cemetery near the Gettysburg battlefield. Lincoln was not even the featured speaker that day. Noted orator Edward Everett spoke for nearly two hours, while Lincoln spoke for a mere two minutes. In his powerful speech, Lincoln embraced the Declaration of Independence, recalling how the nation was “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” By resurrecting these promises, Lincoln committed post-Civil War America to “a new birth of freedom.” Following the Civil War, the Reconstruction Amendments—the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments—abolished slavery, wrote the Declaration of Independence's commitment to freedom and equality into the Constitution, and promised to ban racial discrimination in voting. In so doing, these amendments sought to make Lincoln's “new birth of freedom” a constitutional reality.

Excerpt

Our nation began with the Declaration of Independence and its promise of freedom and equality. 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.

We are fighting a massive war to defend the American experiment; we are gathered here to honor the soldiers who have died for this noble cause. 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 battle-field 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.

Our words and deeds today pale in comparison to what these soldiers did on the battlefield; we must not forget them. But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate – we can not consecrate – we can not 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.

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 12: Slavery in America: From the Founding to America's Second Founding

12.4 Primary Source

We must complete their unfinished work, fight for “a new birth of freedom” for America, and defend the future of republican government. 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.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**



★ constitutioncenter.org ★