

We gather on this Memorial Day - to honor those who have given "the last full measure of devotion" to this country. We honor those who have given the supreme sacrifice - in mortal combat - in battles throughout American History here in the United States and, indeed, around the globe

But here, on these hallowed grounds, it is difficult to hear beyond the reverberations of the gunfire on Cemetery Ridge -- the voices of those in blue uniforms and grey -- the shouts, the cries, the hoofbeats -- and the echoes of the voice of a President who came here to so briefly and so eloquently speak in the dedication of this consecrated ground.

We might expect that those who survived the battles here would be grateful, even joyous, in their survival. But we cannot be certain. General Pickett, in a letter to his beloved Sally, three days after his disastrous charge, wrote - of the roll call after the battle :

" The 'Here' of those who, by God's mercy, had miraculously escaped the awful rain of shot and shell was a sob-- a gasp - a knell - - for the unanswered name of his comrade called before his. There was no tone of thankfulness for having been spared to answer to their names, but rather a toll and unvoiced wish that they, too, had been among the missing."

We can know of the spirit of those facing battle from the songs they sang. The soldiers in grey sang *The Bonnie Blue Flag* :

Then here's to our Confed'racy, strong are we and brave.
Like patriots of old we'll fight, our heritage to save.
And rather than submit to shame, to die we would prefer,
So cheer for the Bonnie Blue Flag, that bears the single star.

After President Lincoln's 1862 call for 300,000 more volunteers for the Union Army, James Sloan Gibbons wrote a song entitled *Three Hundred Thousand More* which became a favorite of the Union Army:

You have called us and we're coming, by Richmond's bloody tide,
to lay us down for freedom's sake, our brothers' bones beside,
Or from foul treason's savage grasp to wrench the murderous blade,
And in the face of foreign foes - its fragments to parade.

Six hundred thousand loyal men - and true -- have gone before -
We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more.

The President was often called 'Father Abraham', and, I suppose, a variety of other names. With our young nation cleft between North and South, between Republican and Democrat, between hawk and dove, between abolitionist and slave owner, Lincoln did not then enjoy the popular esteem that history has accorded him.

He was a man in the middle, but willing to accept the difficult responsibilities of the office with no dependency on polls to gage popular opinion, and no hesitancy to stand firm against the recommendations of his cabinet officers and closest advisors when he thought it necessary. Yet he did try to find a balanced position. While often expressing his hope that all men could be free, in a letter to the editor of the New York Tribune, Horace Greeley, the President wrote:

"My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that."

Teachers of history often explain that the principal reasons for secession and the war were economic. Indeed, in New York City, the mayor, in early 1861, recommended to city officials that the city secede and become a 'free city' so that it could continue to do business with both North and South.

There certainly were substantial economic considerations, but the slavery issues seemed to predominate in speeches, documents, and newspapers of the time. And without radio or television, the newspaper was the medium -- and the printed page had great power to influence public opinion.

General William Tecumseh Sherman was most critical of the press, blaming them for publishing troop movements, tactical plans and internal military differences in opinion - to the substantial

disadvantage of the Union Army. Such frictions have endured over the years.

President Lincoln, here in Gettysburg, characterized the war as 'testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure'. Thoughtful minds, in every subsequent decade, have wondered whether our nation, constructed as we are, can long endure.

Americans are constantly challenged, both from within and without. We are criticized for our failures and begrudged our successes. We are not without faults, but our political process, clumsy as it sometimes seems, eventually aligns public policy with the will of our citizenry. Such a nation, it seems, should -gt long endure.

General Sherman was very concerned for the future of his country. He worried about groups that valued their own opinions above the Constitution and the laws of the land. Yet he wrote: "Though full of corruption and base materials, our country is a majestic one, full of natural wealth and good people. They have risen not in full majesty, but enough to give all hopes of vitality. Our progress has been as rapid as any philosopher could ask. The resources of the land in money, in men, in provisions, in forage, and in intelligence has surprised us all, and we have had as much success as we could have hoped for."

This became the land that we love. This is the land for which the fallen have given the last full measure of devotion. How can we best honor these heroic souls who lie here and in other such final resting places across the country and, indeed, around the world ?

I suggest it is by building the America that they believed in and hoped it would become , and, for which, they had given their lives. And what would they have hoped this country would become? A nation of which they can be proud.

A nation which guarantees its citizens neither wealth nor station but allows - even encourages - them to excell in the field and manner of their choice

A nation that can compete and win but would not take unfair advantage of others

A nation that others strive to emulate (rather than castigate)

If there has been any good in war, it is that the veterans have learned from their wartime experience. Their character has been tempered by the fires of battle. They recognize - the responsibility for building the America for which so many paid so much - is ours.

Perhaps Lincoln said it best in his first inaugural address:
"The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

The better angels of our nature: compassion, charity, forgiveness, may they guide us as we build a better tomorrow.

And the steadfast sentries of our nature: courage, integrity, and dignity, may they stand guard over these graves and those of their brethren who fought in other wars, in other times, and lie in other resting places .

And may all who are here assembled, veterans and those who come to honor them, remember and thank those who now serve under the stars and stripes to defend and preserve freedom. And may our nation and its people be blessed on this Memorial Day.