

Lincoln at Gettysburg

BY JOHN CRIBB

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THERE were empty coffins stacked beside the tracks when the train pulled into the station at Gettysburg on the evening of Nov. 18, 1863. A crowd let out a roar as Pres. Abraham Lincoln stepped onto the platform. A band struck up "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." His friend Ward Hill Lamon was there to greet him, acting as bodyguard and chief marshal of ceremonies, a couple of pistols and daggers squirreled away in his coat pockets, no doubt. To his left stood white-haired Edward Everett, the renowned orator, looking in his 69th year like noble Cicero of ancient times. To Lamon's right stood David Wills, local attorney and leading citizen, a man with energy and determination in his eyes.

They walked through the dusk two blocks to Carlisle Street. Gettysburg's town square was packed. People everywhere, cheering and thrusting out hands. Lamon and some soldiers cleared a path. Wills shouted over the noise as they walked, telling the usual facts a host gives a visitor about his town—eight churches, six taverns, three weekly newspapers, two banks, a college, and a seminary. Twenty-four hundred citizens, although many more—perhaps 15,000—had come for the dedication.

"When the fighting started, a good many of us climbed onto our rooftops to glimpse the action," Wills recounted. "When it got close, we went down into our cellars. That's where we were as the Rebels pushed through town and raised their flag over the square." He pointed to buildings scarred by artillery

fire. "When it was all over, we came out to scrape the mud and blood off the pavement."

The Wills home, a handsome three-story brick house, stood on the edge of the square. "It's three-quarters of a mile to the cemetery from here," Wills said as they went inside. "We were hoping to have all the graves filled by now, but we're only about a third of the way through. Moving that many bodies is a difficult process, as you can imagine."

Mrs. Wills presided over a dinner party and reception. She was pregnant, and fatigue showed through her smile. After the battle, her house had been used as a hospital, and the provost marshal had made it his headquarters. Her husband had convened dozens of meetings in their parlor to organize the national cemetery that would hold the remains of so many fallen soldiers. This night, she would find places for 38 guests to sleep under her roof.

Outside, the Fifth New York Artillery Band serenaded the town from the square. Word spread that the President had arrived, and the crowd swelled. Throats lubricated with whiskey called from the street. "Come out, Old Abe!" "We're waiting, Father Abraham!" "Speak to us!"

He stepped to the door and bowed to loud huzzahs. "I have no speech to make just now," he called out. "In my position, it is somewhat important that I should not say any foolish things."

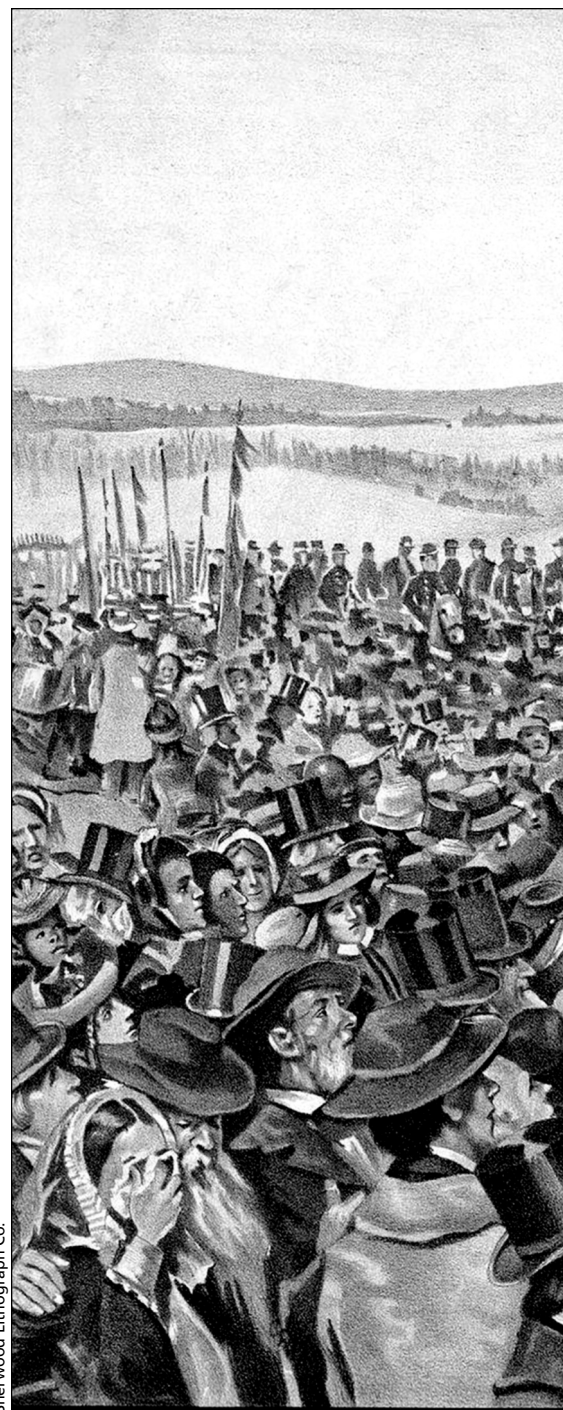
"If you can help it!" someone yelled amid laughter.

"It very often happens that the only way to

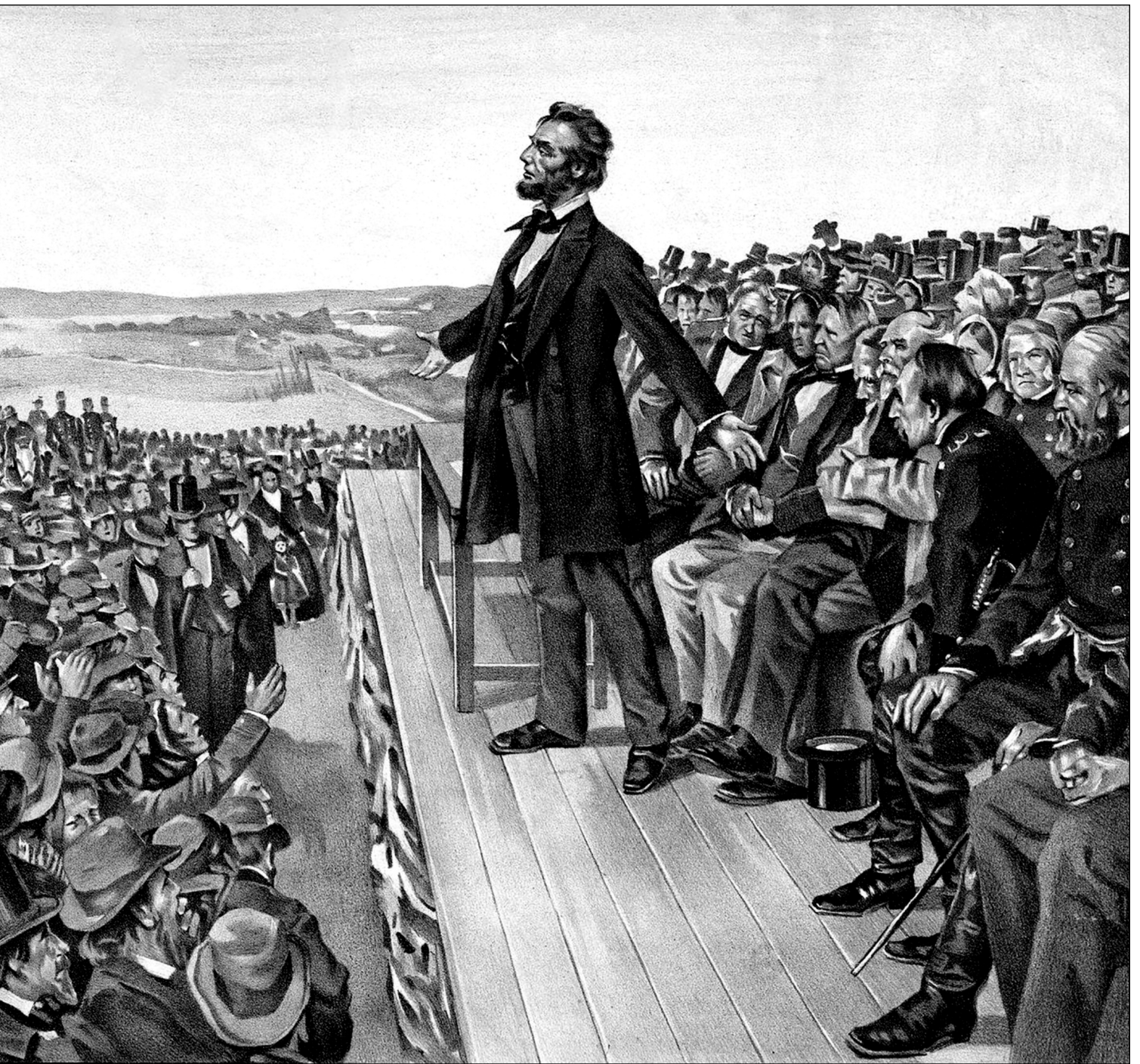
help it is to say nothing at all," he called back. More laughter. "Goodnight, my friends."

He went upstairs to the bedroom that Mrs. Wills had set aside for him and sat at a small writing table to work on the brief address he was to make the next day. It was mostly written, but he had not had time to finish it before leaving Washington. He knew what he wanted to say. The thoughts had been rambling around in his head for years, some of them long before the war had begun.

His pen etched the phrases onto the page. He wanted to use the occasion to remind the Northern people of the true meaning of the



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war. To give them strength to shoulder the burden. He had to tell them why it was necessary for this horrible fighting to go on; why it was necessary for so many to suffer and die. This war could destroy the country—or redeem it.

Every now and then he put his head in his hands and closed his eyes to rest the brain. The train ride had been tiring. Mary had not wanted him to come. Their son Tad was sick with a sore throat and fever—had not wanted any breakfast. Mary had panicked and wept that the boy would die if his father left him. She had grabbed her husband's arm and begged him to stay, but Dr. Stone said there was little

danger. The occasion was too important to change plans over a woman's hysteria. So, he had come.

He got up and stepped to a window. The square was a mass of bodies whooping and singing by torchlight. "Hurrah for Old Abe!" "God save the Union!" A good many of them had sons, brothers, or husbands who had died here four and a half months before. Now, they had come to mourn and find purpose. Many were drunk, staggering from tavern to tavern. It was hard to blame them for letting off steam. They had taken more than most people could take. There was something inside them fierce

and resilient and fundamentally just. The town had nowhere near enough beds for them all. They would lie down in wagons, in barns, on church pews, or walk the streets all night.

He went back to the table and took up the pen. He wanted to tell them that they must fight on, not merely to save the Union or liberate the slaves. They had to salvage the ideals on which the country was founded—and even more, it was up to them to prove that people really could govern themselves; to show that liberty and equality were more than glimmering fables; to preserve the fact of democracy for the whole world.

A knock at the door—a sergeant was there with some telegrams. One from Mary saying that Tad was better. That was a relief. No need to worry about that now, and word from Stanton that all was quiet on the battle fronts. Good. Very good.

He finished his remarks and climbed into bed. The yelling and serenading on the square kept up, but it did not bother him. A rough chorus set him drifting: “John Brown’s body lies a-moldering in the grave, John Brown’s body lies a-moldering in the grave. . . .”

The sun brought a gleaming dawn, then slipped behind gray clouds. A bugle call and cannon salute woke the town. Lincoln was up by then for a brief carriage tour of the battlefield with William Henry Seward, his Secre-

Springfield. Lincoln remembered his flowing hair and boyish eyes. Well, they most likely were not so boyish these days.

He went back to the Wills house, ate a quick breakfast, and wrote out a clean copy of his speech. The sun had reappeared by the time he took his place for the procession to the cemetery. The crowd lining Baltimore Street was in a much different mood now, solemn and respectful. Many wore black mourning bands, including Lincoln, who had one on his tall silk hat in memory of his son Willie. The bay horse he was given to ride was small, and his feet hung near the ground.

Lamon gave the signal that all was ready, and the parade started forward while the Marine Band played a dirge. Black banners hung

scriptions of the great battle. When it was over, Pres. Lincoln stepped to the front of the platform, adjusted his spectacles, and read his address slowly, throwing his tenor voice as far as he could over the heads of the crowd:

“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 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.”

Silence when he finished—a hesitant, awkward silence. Was the audience moved—or disappointed? Had they been expecting more?

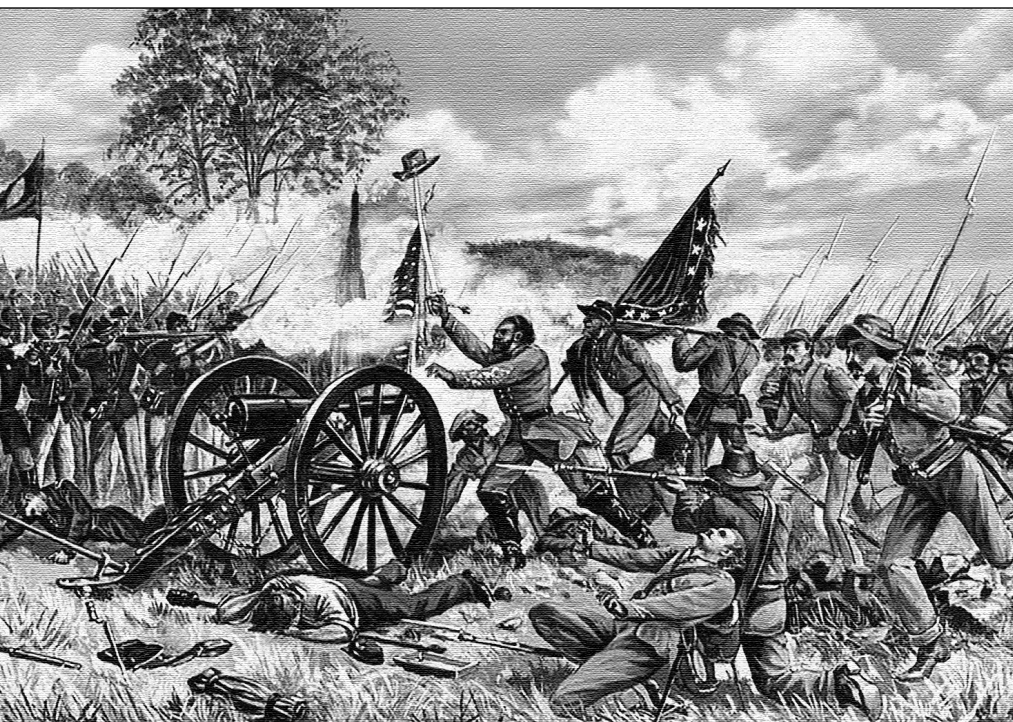
“Lamon, that speech won’t scour!” he whispered as he sat back down.

Then the applause started, deep and sustained, building as it swept through the crowd, rolling across the vast battlefield, across the opened and unopened graves. When it was done, three long cheers went up to the crystalline autumn sky, and he knew his words had struck home.

A dirge from a choir; a benediction from the president of Gettysburg College; an artillery salute and somber recessional. The column of dignitaries slowly made its way back into town. Men uncovered their heads as the president passed, women clasped hands to their breasts, and it seemed to Pres. Lincoln that the faces wore thoughtful looks.

That evening, he boarded a train for Washington and left the people of Gettysburg to finish the task of burying the dead. ★

John Cribb is the author of Old Abe: A Novel, from which this article is adapted. His previous work includes coauthoring The American Patriot’s Almanac and The Educated Child, both New York Times bestsellers, and coediting The Human Odyssey, a three-volume world history text.



Alfred Swinton and Alfred Waud, “General Pickett’s Famous Charge at Gettysburg,” engraving (1903).

tary of State, who had also come from Washington for the ceremony. They rode west toward the high-domed cupola of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, set on a long ridge where the Confederate army had positioned itself during the battle last July. A soft haze floated over rocky hilltops and vacant fields. The wreckage of war covered the ground: ragged jackets, rusting pistols, boots, canteens, the skeletons of horses. Thousands of boards marked shallow graves, hastily dug wherever men had fallen. Many of the Union bodies already had been dug up and reinterred in the new cemetery, or taken home.

Perhaps 50,000 were dead, wounded, or missing on both sides. How could it have come to this? He looked across a long, undulating rise toward a clump of trees and low stone wall nearly a mile away—the objective of George Pickett’s daring, catastrophic charge. Years ago, Pickett had studied law in

from windows. People cheered despite the somber mood as the long line of dignitaries and soldiers made its way to Cemetery Hill. Thousands had gathered in an open area around a wooden platform erected for the speakers and distinguished guests. Nearby, on the slope of the hill, more than 3,500 plots lay in perfect semicircular rows.

The Chaplain of the United States Senate gave a prayer, the Marine Band played the hymn “Old Hundred,” and Edward Everett began his address.

“Standing beneath this serene sky, overlooking these broad fields now reposing from the labors of the waning year, the mighty Alleghenies dimly towering before us, the graves of our brethren beneath our feet, it is with hesitation that I raise my poor voice to break the eloquent silence of God and Nature. . . .”

Everett spoke for two hours. It was a moving speech, full of history and pathos and de-