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The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

Jared Peatman

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Examining the Influence of an Iconic Speech

When Abraham Lincoln addressed the crowd at the new national cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863, he intended his speech to be his most eloquent statement on the inextricable link between equality and democracy. However, unwilling to commit to equality at that time, the nation stood ill-prepared to accept the full message of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. In the ensuing century, groups wishing to advance a particular position hijacked Lincoln's words for their own ends, highlighting the specific parts of the speech that echoed their stance while ignoring the rest. Only as the nation slowly moved toward equality did those invoking Lincoln's speech come closer to recovering his true purpose. In this incisive work, Jared Peatman seeks to understand Lincoln's intentions at Gettysburg and how his words were received, invoked, and interpreted over time, providing a timely and insightful analysis of one of America's most legendary orations.

After reviewing the events leading up to November 19, 1863, Peatman examines immediate responses to the ceremony in New York, Gettysburg itself, Confederate Richmond, and London, showing how parochial concerns and political affiliations shaped initial coverage of the day and led to the censoring of Lincoln's words in some locales. He then traces how, over time, proponents of certain ideals invoked the particular parts of the address that suited their message, from reunification early in the twentieth century to American democracy and patriotism during the world wars and, finally, to Lincoln's full intended message of equality during the Civil War centennial commemorations and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Peatman also explores foreign invocations of the Gettysburg Address and its influence on both the Chinese constitution of 1912 and the current French constitution. An epilogue highlights recent and even current applications of the Gettysburg Address and hints at ways the speech might be used in the future.

By tracing the evolution of Lincoln's brief words at a cemetery dedication into a revered document essential to American national identity, this revealing work provides fresh insight into the enduring legacy of Abraham Lincoln and his Gettysburg Address on American history and culture.

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Jared Peatman was a doctoral fellow of the Organization of American Historians and the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission in 2009, and he received the Hay-Nicolay Dissertation Prize for the best work on Abraham Lincoln or the Civil War in 2012. Through his company, Four Score Consulting, he provides history-themed leadership development events for government and corporate clients. His second book is about Joshua Chamberlain, the 20th Maine, and the Battle of Gettysburg.