

Born to Win

Gettysburg

by Ronald L. Dart

Like every American, I have read and heard the Gettysburg Address more times than I can recall. I had the singular misfortune not to be required to memorize it when I was in school, because *U.S. News* was right when they featured a brand new book about the Gettysburg Address and called it the “greatest speech” in American history. And, in one of the truly great ironies of speeches, it was only 272 words. Ten sentences—the greatest speech in American history.

The book *U.S. News* was featuring is titled *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech that Nobody Knows*, by civil war scholar Gabor Boritt. The title is another irony: How can the Gettysburg Address be the Lincoln speech that *nobody knows*? Well, my copy has not arrived yet, but I can thank *U.S. News* for calling the book to my attention. Sometime ago I watched the movie *Gettysburg* and was *riveted* by the story, the battle, how it was fought; and I was *sickened* at the tragic loss of life. Why, I wondered, do these march in *straight lines* across an *open field* with *no cover*, under Union cannon fire? *It made no sense*. And then when they came within rifle range, the Union soldiers were cutting them down like wheat. And they just kept on coming until finally a few of them got through.

I didn't learn until I watched the extras that came with the DVD I was watching that I was witnessing an effect that's now well-understood by military planners: tactics and strategy (that is, the way you go about fighting a war and fighting the battles) always lag *behind* technology. The South was following a tried-and-true tactic for advancing against *musket fire*. Musket fire...you know, a musket was a smooth-bored gun. The bullet came out of there, not spinning, but just static in terms of that, and it buffeted as it went out into the air. The result of this was that you could hardly have any idea of where the thing was going to strike when it finally did strike. (Well, maybe a little bit; but not much.) And, of course, it would not have had the impact. But the Union soldiers were using guns with *rifled barrels*. That meant it gave the ball a spin coming out of the barrel which extended both the range, the accuracy, and the impact of the ball when it got where it was going. So, the South was marching out with musket tactics against rifles. But I still had very little feeling for what really happened on that day. I could see it in a movie; it was sickening in the movie. But Boritt begins his book, not with the battle, but with the *aftermath* in the town of Gettysburg. He says,

GETTYSBURG, JULY 4, 1863. Dreadful silence. It rains. People crawl out of their cellars, blinking in the gloomy light, trying to find their neighbors, food, news-life. The battle is over, but the smell of putrid animal flesh mingles with the odor of human decay. It extends into the spirit of the people. War had come to them. Now it had gone and left the horror behind. No toasts are offered today, no fireworks, no parades, no services in the churches filled with grievously wounded men.

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So, the people of Gettysburg began to recover. They finally got out of their homes into the streets. Then he said a band begins to play. After all, it's the 4th of July. The armies are leaving. Continuing to read from Boritt's book:

The armies are leaving. But the wounded and dead remain, on the fields, in houses, in barns, and in hospital tents. Twenty-one thousand wounded; perhaps 10,000 dead.

Dead everywhere. Day follows day. Disinfectant powder spread over the muddy streets turns them white for a little while and adds to the odors. Snow in July. Must try "to extinguish, as far as possible, the sense of smelling," one woman writes. Must try to control disease. Pour kerosene on the bodies of horses and mules. Three to five thousand of them. Light the fire over them. Let them go up in smoke. The smell of burning flesh dissipates after a while; the smell of rotting carcasses stays around for months.

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You know, Boritt's description of the events of that day will linger longer than that in my mind; because for the first time someone has summoned the descriptive powers to evoke what it was really like to those who were *there*—not the soldiers, but the survivors who wandered *stunned* through the streets of that town, coming to grips with what happened to them there. Boritt writes,

When people approach the town, "the odors of the battle-field" attack them long before they get there. But the visitors come, many to help, some to gawk, some to plunder, most looking for their lost loved ones.

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Somehow I had never thought about the people who went to Gettysburg looking for lost loved ones. Probably some were never found. But the realization of the loss of life, the realization that someone they loved was there at the time and was fighting in the armies and might be dead *compelled* them to go look for their own. And, as I said, some were never found.

Visitors are "compelled to roost in the barns, or upon the steps of dwellings." A man feels lucky when he gets a chair to sit through the night in front of a hotel; better than wandering till daybreak. On July 13, the small Broadhead house, in addition to a family of three, has three wounded soldiers, and 20 visitors. The strangers "are filling every bed and covering the floors." But these problems shrink in the face of the suffering of the wounded and the dying.

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I just hadn't thought about some of the aftermath and some of the implications of what had *happened* on this particular occasion—to realize that to even approach and enter the town, you hit the stench of death before you even get the village in sight. It must have been heart-wrenching. I don't know how they did it. Boritt writes,

Eliza Farnham, a volunteer nurse from Philadelphia, writes the same. "The whole town ... is one vast hospital ... avenues of white tents ... But, good God! What those quiet-looking tents

contained!... Dead and dying, and wounded ... torn to pieces in every way.” Moans, shrieks, weeping, and prayer fill the houses, the barns, the tents, the fields and woods, the whole area. The land itself seems to wail. Hell on Earth.

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Letters like Eliza's that come from this place must have torn at the very heart of the people who received them—people who were not there, people who could not even *imagine* what had *happened* down there—and then to read it, to go to bed then and try to sleep at night. According to Boritt:

The more measured tones of an Army medical officer's report are blunt: “The period of ten days following the battle of Gettysburg was the occasion of the greatest amount of human suffering known in this nation since its birth....”

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And, you know, as if all this were not enough, the two armies, expecting yet another battle, took most of the medical personnel *with them*. Of the few medical personnel the Union army left at Gettysburg, a mere 35 were competent to do surgery. And *thousands* of broken bodies—living men—filled every possible form of shelter there was in the town; and the crying and the wails and the pain were probably more, sometimes, than these men could stand.

Six days after the Battle of Gettysburg, nurse Ellen Orbison Harris writes home about wounded men drowning in flash floods and thousands who are “still naked and starving. God pity us! God pity us!” This is the place where Abraham Lincoln will have to come and explain why the bloodletting must go on.

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And that's what we have to think through.

When Lincoln opened his speech on that day with this *memorable* phrase, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty”. When he said this, he was calling people's mind to the fact that the War of 1776—the Revolutionary War—had been a war of great sacrifice in *so many* ways. It had required great courage to sign the Declaration of Independence. It had required *enormous* courage to fight those battles. And, even when they were losing, it took great courage to cross the Delaware and defeat the German army. The stakes and the sacrifices of this day, and the courage it required, are no less. The stakes were every bit as high as they were in the Revolutionary War. And looking back on these times from the comfort of the 21st Century, we marvel at men like these and we wonder: Do we have what it takes to do it all again? If we must? For freedom? We did, of course, at Normandy Beach. Our boys charged into *withering* enemy fire. They took (all the allied forces) 209,000 casualties. The Battle of Normandy cost the allies 39,000 dead in ground forces alone, not counting all the losses ahead of that time—just as great—in the air attack paving the way. Do we have that kind of courage now? Could we come down out of one of those landing craft and charge right into the face of machine gun fire, with men dying all around us, and carry on the battle to the top of the hill and win? I am persuaded that our *armed forces* have that kind of courage; I am not so sure about the rest of us.

On that day in Gettysburg, Lincoln recalled the courage and sacrifices of the earlier freedom fighters of the Revolution. “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” In analyzing what Lincoln said on this day, Gabor Boritt wrote,

Looking back to the Revolutionary War reminds people that the birth of the nation had cost great sacrifices. July 4, 1776, has been much on the minds of Americans for decades, and for most, “created equal” now meant the right to rise in life. But quoting the Declaration of Independence in 1863 also defended the Emancipation Proclamation that had drastically changed the character of the Civil War. It presented a strong message about liberty without speaking of slavery outright and so alienating those who only wished to fight for the Union and not the ending of bondage.

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You know, it’s hard to understand how men who owned slaves could have signed the Declaration of Independence with those words:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

United States Declaration of Independence - July 4, 1776

But they did sign them. Even men who owned slaves signed them. It just took a while to move from where they were to where they should have been. The Emancipation Proclamation and this Civil War were what it took to preserve the union and to grant freedom from slavery for thousands upon thousands of men. Boritt continues,

But here was Gettysburg, the bloodiest of American battles, in the bloodiest war of her history. A “*great task*” remained before the country: carrying the war to victory. “*We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain,*” Lincoln says, and the crowd interrupts with applause as he conjures words that had been hidden inside of so many since their childhood.

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I never knew that. I’ve heard the speech. I’ve heard it read; I’ve read it written. It’s a very fine speech, but it’s *only* a speech. To know how the people *felt* who heard the speech *on the ground* is a treasure. To realize that after that phrase, “We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain”, to know that they interrupted Lincoln with applause is important to me. As heavy as they were at this cemetery, as deep in mourning as they could have been, the fire and the determination still burned.

“We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.” It’s a sentiment that could have been expressed after Normandy. We don’t want these men who died here to have died in vain; we have got to go to Berlin. Even after the Korean War we had to say that: Did the men who died in Korea die in vain? Hard to say that we *won* that war and yet...there’s a satellite picture circulating on the Internet of the world at night. You can see the points of light of just thousands upon thousands of cities. And when it comes to Asia, South Korea is brightly lit with points of light everywhere; North Korea totally dark

with one point of light—Pyongyang, the capital. And, oddly, the more recent satellite photos show even Pyongyang in the dark. Think about this. 48 million South Koreans live free today because we fought alongside them for their freedom. Did those men who died in that war die in vain? Well, 48 million Koreans may have forgotten how it is that they can demonstrate in the streets against an American presence in their country, but I pray *we* don't forget how it happened. We have made an investment in American lives in that country—an investment in *freedom*—and those people are free in a way that their neighbors to the north simply are not.

The applause quiets and Lincoln finishes: “*that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*”

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At first, there was silence (Boritt described what happened at that time). The speech was so short the people weren't sure he was finished. Then there was long sustained, applause. I never knew that. Nobody, until this book, every explained that to the public it seems; and it's important to know that. Long, sustained applause as the people (in the way of the clapping of hands) said, “Amen”, to Lincoln's speech. That's important.

But there's another aspect of what Lincoln said on this day; and it is really the point of Boritt's book, which he titles *The Gettysburg Gospel*. He went on to explain:

And yet, whatever expectations he may have taken to Gettysburg, however reluctant he was to make a personal profession of Christianity, much of what Lincoln said carried the sounds of the Bible. This was the music of the ancient Hebrew turned into King James's English. This was the language he was raised on. “*Four score and seven years ago.*”

Psalm 90: “The days of our years are three score years and ten”; one of the best-known sentences of the Book. “*Brought forth*” is not only the biblical way to announce a birth, including that of Mary's “first born son,” but the phrase that describes the Israelites' being “brought forth” from slavery in Egypt.

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Now, there's a point to be made here: Nearly all the Founding Fathers of this country believed in God at some level. They were readers of the Bible. It was a part of their whole...even their language structure, which was affected by the King James Version of the Bible. It was a part of the education of educated men. Much has been said about the nature of their faith. Some have suggested that they were Deists—they spoke of a generic God, but that they didn't have any *specific* religion. I think what we must bear in mind is that these men were *highly sensitive* to the words of the Constitution.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof[.]

First Amendment to the United States Constitution

These men realized that the presidents of these United States are the presidents of *all the people*. God help us that they are men of faith, but they have long felt that their personal faith should not intrude into the public sphere. It's not shame, it's not embarrassment, or anything like that whatsoever that would keep them from being more explicit in their belief in their God. It is respect for the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. And the president of *all people*, who is the president of all *the people*, has to keep that in mind.

The Gettysburg Address was delivered in a cemetery. It was really the occasion of what amounted to a funeral. Lincoln's speech, since he was president, could not be a sermon; but as Boritt aptly points out, it was *loaded* with biblical language. As he puts it,

Birth, sacrificial death, rebirth. A born-again nation. At a less-than-conscious level, Lincoln weaved together the biblical story and the American story. "*Fathers.*" "*Conceive.*" "*Perish.*" "*Consecrate.*" "*Hallow.*" "*Devotion.*" The devout in the cemetery heard Lincoln speak an intimately familiar and beloved language. His words pointing to rebirth went even deeper than the Christian message, reaching the primeval longing for a new birth that humankind has yearned for and celebrated with every spring since time immemorial.

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I don't think it is well enough realized and understood that the heart and core message of the Bible is *freedom*, and that the fight for freedom has to go *on and on* through the lifetime of man. From the Exodus from Egypt, to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, it is *all about freedom*. One of the themes of the apostle Paul is *freedom*—not merely *of* religion, but freedom *from* man-made religion. One of the biblical laws, which usually comes as a surprise to readers of the Bible, is a law concerning slavery. In a way, it's a metaphor. It's shocking enough to realize that slavery was actually permitted in the Law, but it is there for a reason. First of all, Israel was a society without prisons; there was no jail to send anybody to. But a man could be sold into slavery for his crimes against society. The way it worked was simple: If he stole a sheep, he had to restore more sheep than what he stole [**Exodus 22**]. And if he couldn't afford to do that (which, frankly, very few thieves are going to be able to do), he was put up on the auction block and he was sold and restitution was made to the person he had stolen from for his crime. It was simple; it was just. And he was put to meaningful work for up to six years; at the seventh year he had to be let go.

Now, this was all well and good, but his next of kin could, if he chose to do so, redeem his brother by paying his debt [**Leviticus 25**]. No one else could do this. In other words, a stranger couldn't pay it. No one else could let him off. The court had to require payment, but the one person who could make the payment was his next of kin. And the term in Hebrew for this next of kin is "redeemer" [Strong's #1350]. He's the one who could buy you back. And this is at the heart of the Christian message. Christ died *in our place* to free us from slavery.

When you think back to the history of slavery in this country, there was a price to be paid by the nation for the practice. Egypt saw the death of all their first-born children as the price *they* had to pay for killing the Israelite little boys. They also saw the destruction of their slave-built economy. Why should anyone imagine that there would not be a price to pay for the practice of slavery in these United States. God only knows how many people were killed in Africa, on the ships coming across, who died in their circumstances in the holds of those ships, and who were finally sold on the auction block and died in slave labor in this country. Why would we think that there would not be a price to pay for the practice of slavery in these United States? A large part of that bill was paid on the fields of Gettysburg.

Freedom is a terrible burden to bear, and it can only be maintained at *great cost*; and I feel quite certain we are going to have to pay it yet again, and it weighs *heavily* to think about it. Oddly enough, the men

and women who actually do the fighting are ready *and willing* to go on. It is those of us here at home, who can watch the war from our recliners, who are ready to give up the fight for Iraqi freedom. There's not a thing in the world unusual about what we're doing in Iraq. We have done it again, and again, and again for other nations in our history because we believe in freedom. And the day is coming, regardless of what happens in Iraq, when we will *have to do it yet again*. Another Gettysburg may well be in our future.

Boritt notes that the bloodbath of the war and the loss of his own son had slowly changed Lincoln's religious outlook.

In his Second Inaugural Address he would explain his course: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right. ..." God helped Lincoln "to see the right" of abolishing slavery and leading the country toward black citizenship.

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