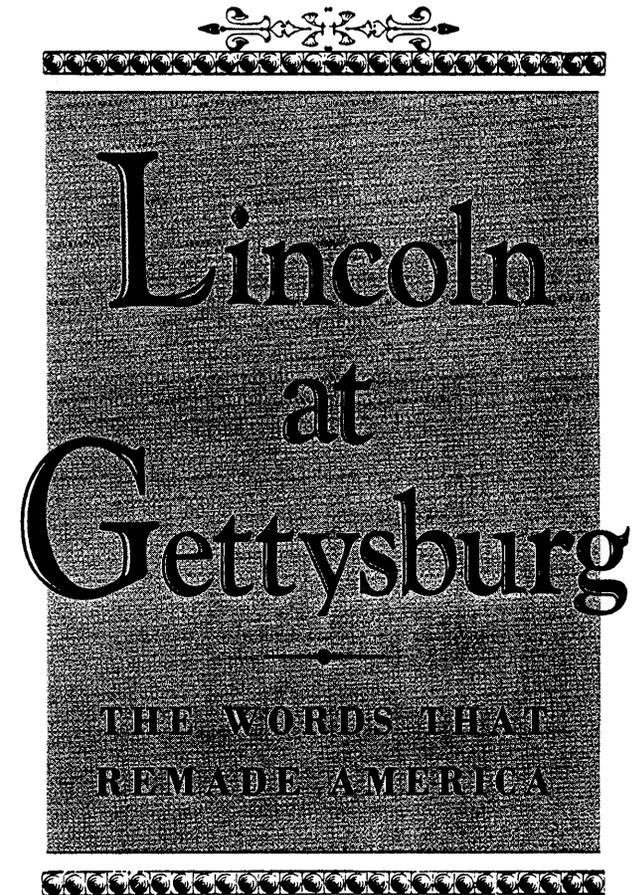


Garry Wills

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK

Published by Simon & Schuster

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore



"Although we spit upon such a platform and although we spit upon such a ticket, a glorious victory awaits us." [SW 1.277-80]²⁵

Lincoln's responsive Whig audience could anticipate where he was going, yet there was a natural climax in the way he ordered Douglas's "synonyms," giving this passage an inexorable air of letting nonsense work itself out to its own demise.

When the Dred Scott decision said that the Constitution applied only to free subjects in the eighteenth century, Lincoln took Douglas's defense of that position and did another of his word substitutions, to reduce his opponent to absurdity:

Suppose after you read it [the Declaration of Independence] in the old-fashioned way, you read it once more with Judge Douglas' version. It will run thus: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all British subjects who were on this continent eighty-one years ago, were created equal to all British subjects born and *then* residing in Great Britain." [SW 1.400]

Parker had made a similar substitution in 1848: "To make our theory accord with our practice, we ought to recommit the Declaration to the hands which drafted that great state paper and declare that 'All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights if born of white mothers; but if not, not.'"²⁶

In his quest to use the right words himself, Lincoln often achieved a clarity that is its own source of aesthetic satisfaction. There is no better description of this effect than Blair's:

Perspicuity in writing is not to be considered as only a sort of negative virtue, a freedom from defect. It has a higher merit. It is a degree of positive beauty. We are pleased with an author, we

~~consider him as deserving praise, who frees us from all fatigue of searching for his meaning, who carries us through his subject without any embarrassment or confusion, whose style flows always like a limpid stream where we see to the very bottom."²⁷~~

In a text like Lincoln's famous letter to Horace Greeley, even the sentence structure seems to present its own case. The grammar argues. By ordering a series of simple and disjunctive sentences, Lincoln patiently exhausts all alternatives. Beginning his sentences with repeated "If"s (anaphora), Lincoln rings all changes on the concessive clause (granting irrelevant assertions or assumptions for now) and the hypothetical clause (posing case after case for its own treatment). The analysis of every permutation of the subject seals off misunderstandings as if Lincoln were quietly closing door after door. The points are advanced like a series of theorems in Euclid, as clear, as sequential, as compelling:

I have just read yours of the 19th instant, addressed to myself through the *New York Tribune*.

If there be in it any statements or assumptions of fact which I may know to be erroneous, I do not now and here controvert them.

If there be in it any inferences which I believe to be falsely drawn, I do not now and here argue against them.

If there be perceptible in it an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it, in deference to an old friend whose heart I have always supposed to be right.

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing," as you say, I have not meant to leave anyone in doubt. I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution.

The sooner the national authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be—the Union as it was.

If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them.

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and not either to save or destroy slavery.

If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

What I do about slavery and the coloured race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union.

I shall do less whenever I shall believe that what I am doing hurts the cause; and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause.

I shall try to correct errors where shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views as fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my views of official duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere be free.²⁸

This is the highest art, which conceals itself. The opening sentences perform the classical role of an exordium, limiting one's task, disarming hostility, finding common ground with one's audience. The traditional *captatio benevolentiae* (claim on good will) could not be better exemplified than in Lincoln's address to his old friend's heart.

While making his own position clear, Lincoln professes a readiness to alter course if he is proved wrong. But he promises to do that only within the framework he has constructed. (He will change *only* if the change saves the Union.) He sounds deferential rather than dogmatic, yet he is in fact precluding all norms but his own. It is the same kind of rhetorical trap he used in his most famous statement of alternative possibilities:

"A House divided against itself cannot stand."

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*.

I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved*—I do not expect the house to *fall*—but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become *all* one thing or *all* the other.

Either the *opponents* of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its *advocates* will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in *all* the states, *old* as well as *new*—*North* as well as *South*.

Have we no *tendency* to the latter condition? [SW 1.426]

Lincoln's own underlinings reinforce sentence structure in suggesting that these two and only these two outcomes are possible.

The language seems stripped of all figurative elements—though Lincoln has begun with a biblical figure that seems to pre-empt criticism of its premise. Lincoln's logic can be, and has been, challenged; but the ordering of the words *seems* logical, perspicuous. It is also, in its clipped quality, urgent. The rapid deployment of all options seems to press on the reader a need to decide. Lincoln's language is honed to a purpose.

Looking back to the nineteenth century's long speeches and debates, we might deplore the more disjunct "blips" of communication in our time. Television and other modern developments are blamed for a shortening of the modern attention span. But a similar process was at work in Lincoln's time, and he welcomed it. The railroad, the telegraph, the steamship had quickened the pace of events. Thoughts and words took on new and nervous rhythms. Lincoln, who considered language the world's great invention, welcomed a cognate invention, telegraphy. He used the telegraph to keep up with his generals—he even experimented with telegraph wires strung to reconnaissance balloons.²⁹

As president, Lincoln worked intimately with the developer of telegraphy in America, Joseph Henry, the president of the Smithsonian Institution.³⁰ He had praised the lightning “harnessed to take his [man’s] tidings in a trifle less than no time” (SW 2.3). Lincoln spent long hours in the telegraph center at the War Department, and was impatient with the fumbling and imprecise language still being used on this instrument, which demands clarity as well as concision.³¹ Hay reflects Lincoln’s relief when he found an efficient user of modern language in one of his military engineers:

This is Herman Haupt, the railroad man at Alexandria. He has, as Chase says, a Major General’s head on his shoulders. The President is particularly struck with the business-like character of his dispatch, telling in the fewest words the information most sought for, which contrasted strongly with the weak, whiney, vague, and incorrect dispatches of the whilom General-in-Chief [McClellan]. [P. 46.]³²

Lincoln’s respect for General Grant came, in part, from the contrast between McClellan’s waffling and Grant’s firm grasp of the right words to use in explaining or arguing for a military operation. Lincoln sensed what Grant’s later publisher, Mark Twain, did, that the West Pointer who once taught mathematics was a master of expository prose. Sitting his horse during a pause in battle, Grant could write model instructions for his subordinates—a skill John Keegan compares to the Duke of Wellington’s. Keegan even says: “If there is a single contemporary document which explains ‘why the North won the Civil War,’ that abiding conundrum of American historical inquiry, it is *The Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*.”³³ In an answering hyperbole, James McPherson has claimed that Lincoln won the war by his language.³⁴ The two half-truths contain at least one whole truth—

that well-focused words were the medium through which Grant and Lincoln achieved their amazing degree of mutual sympathy and military accord.³⁵

There was no possibility of misunderstanding a dispatch like Lincoln’s of August 17, 1864, “Hold on with a bull-dog gripe, and chew & choke, as much as possible”—a message that made Grant burst into laughter and say, “The President has more nerve than any of his advisers.”³⁶ Lincoln’s telegraphic eloquence has a monosyllabic and staccato beat:

Have none of it. Stand firm. [SW 2.190]

On that point hold firm, as with a chain of steel. [CW 4.151]

Watch it every day, and hour, and force it. [SW 2.615]

Events were moving too fast for the more languid phrases of the past. As a speaker, Lincoln grasped ahead of time Twain’s insight of the postwar years: “Few sinners are saved after the first twenty minutes of a sermon.”³⁷ The trick, of course, was not simply to be brief but to say a great deal in the fewest words. Lincoln justly boasted, of his Second Inaugural’s six hundred words, “Lots of wisdom in that document, I suspect.”³⁸ The same is even truer of the Gettysburg Address, which uses roughly half that number of words.

The unwillingness to waste words shows up in the Address’s telegraphic quality—the omission of most coupling words—that rhetoricians call asyndeton.³⁹ Triple phrases sound as to a drum-beat, with no “and” or “but” to slow their insistency:

we are engaged . . .

We are met . . .

We have come . . .

LINCOLN AT GETTYSBURG

*we can not dedicate . . .
we can not consecrate . . .
we can not hallow . . .*

*that from these honored dead . . .
that we here highly resolve . . .
that this nation, under God . . .*

*government of the people,
by the people,
for the people . . .*

Despite the suggestive images of birth, testing, and rebirth, the speech is surprisingly bare of ornament. The language is itself made strenuous, its musculature easily traced, so even the grammar becomes a form of rhetoric. By repeating the antecedent as often as possible, instead of referring to it indirectly by pronouns like "it" or "they," or by backward referential words like "former" and "latter," Lincoln interlocks his sentences, making of them a constantly self-referential system. This linking up by explicit repetition amounts to a kind of hook-and-eye method for joining the parts of his address. The rhetorical devices are almost invisible, since they use no figurative language or formal tropes.

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 *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.

REVOLUTION IN STYLE

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not 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.

Each of the paragraphs printed separately here is bound to the preceding and the following by some resumptive element. Only the first and last paragraph do not (because they cannot) have this two-way connection to their setting. Not all of these "pointer" phrases replace grammatical antecedents in the technical sense. But Lincoln makes them perform analogous work. The nation is declared, again, to be "consecrated" and "dedicated" before each of these terms is given a further two (separate) uses for individuals present at the ceremony, who repeat (as it were) the national consecration. By this reliance on a few words in different contexts, the compactness of the themes is emphasized. A similar linking process is performed, almost subliminally, by the repeated pinning of statements to *that field*, *these* dead, who died *here*, for *that* (kind of) nation. The reverential touching, over and over, of the charged moment and place leads Lincoln to use "here" six times in the short text, the adjectival "that" five times, "this" four times.⁴⁰ The spare vocabulary is not impover-

ishing because of the subtly interfused constructions, in which Charles Smiley identifies "six antitheses, six instances of balanced sentence structure, two cases of anaphora, and four alliterations." "Plain speech" was never *less* artless. Lincoln forged a new lean language to humanize and redeem the first modern war.

Some have claimed, simplistically, that Lincoln achieved a "down-to-earth" style by using short Anglo-Saxon words rather than long Latin ones in the Address. Such people cannot have read the Address with care. Lincoln talks of a nation "conceived in Liberty," not born in freedom; of one "dedicated to [a] proposition," not vowed to a truth; of a "consecrated" nation whose soldiers show their "devotion"—Latin terms all. Lincoln was even criticized, in the past, for using so "unliterary" a word as "proposition."⁴¹ These criticisms are based on a misunderstanding. Though Lincoln used fertility *imagery* from the cemetery movement, his *message* was telegraphic (itself a Latin term, from the Greek). He liked to talk of the theorems and axioms of democracy, comparing them to Euclid's "propositions" (SW 2.19). He was a Transcendentalist without the fuzziness. He spoke a modern language because he was dealing with a scientific age, for which abstract words are appropriate. His urgency was more a matter of the speech's internal "wiring" and *workability* than of anything so crude as "calling a spade a spade." He was not addressing an agrarian future but a mechanical one. His speech is economical, taut, interconnected, like the machinery he tested and developed for battle. Words were weapons, for him, even though he meant them to be weapons of peace in the midst of war.

This was the perfect medium for changing the way most Americans thought about the nation's founding acts. Lincoln does not argue law or history, as Daniel Webster did. He *makes* history. He does not come to present a theory, but to impose a symbol, one tested in experience and appealing to national val-

ues, with an emotional urgency entirely expressed in calm abstractions (fire in ice). He came to change the world, to effect an intellectual revolution. No other words could have done it. The miracle is that these words did. In his brief time before the crowd at Gettysburg he wove a spell that has not, yet, been broken—he called up a new nation out of the blood and trauma.