

The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

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Review

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Peatman, Jared *The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$34.50 ISBN 978-8093-3310-3

The Legacy of the Gettysburg Address

As the nation commemorates the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, it is not surprising that memorable events of that conflict have caught the attention of scholars and historians. One of the unforgettable moments of those tumultuous years was President Abraham Lincoln's visit to Gettysburg in November 1863. The story of Lincoln's trip to that Pennsylvania town has been told and retold on many occasions. Jared Peatman's book, *The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address* is a fine addition to the literature on the historical significance of that famous speech. Peatman is a Lincoln scholar who enjoys speaking on Civil War topics and is on the faculty of the Lincoln Leadership Institute at Gettysburg. With the support of Pennsylvania governor Andrew Curtin, local Gettysburg attorney David Wills went to work to have a portion of the battlefield preserved as the Soldiers' National Cemetery. Wills selected Edward Everett, the former governor of Massachusetts and vice-presidential candidate of the Constitutional Union party to give the keynote address at the dedication ceremony. The sixty-nine year old Everett, who had also served as the president of Harvard University was arguably the foremost orator in the nation. The ceremony, however, would not be complete without an appearance by the chief occupant of the White House. On November 2, 1863, Attorney Wills officially invited the President of the United States to the Gettysburg dedication, which would take place a little more than two weeks later. According to the invitation, Lincoln's role would be limited to making "a few appropriate remarks." No one knew it at the time, but Lincoln's 272-word oration there would become one of the most enduring documents in world history. The nation's fascination with the Gettysburg Address is a testimony to the important place it occupies in the pantheon of American documents. In observance of the 150th anniversary of the Address, a 90-minute show on the speech recently aired on

PBS. The program was produced by the documentarian, Ken Burns.

The author begins this beautifully crafted and deeply researched monograph by stating that his book focuses “on key moments that illustrate the evolving place of the Gettysburg Address in both American and international discourse” (3). This insightful book delivers on that promise in an engaging and persuasive way. The author makes it clear that the events of November 19, 1863, were shaped by what had happened at Gettysburg fourteen weeks earlier. In his cursory treatment of the greatest battle on the North American continent, Peatman points out that it was an extremely bloody affair with more than 50,000 casualties. It was against the backdrop of the slaughter at Gettysburg that Lincoln went there to be a part of the dedication ceremony.

Peatman does not pass up the opportunity to dispel some of the myths regarding the dedicatory event. He asserts that the sixteenth president did not pen the words to his speech on a scrap of paper while en route from Washington to Gettysburg. But, rather the speech was carefully prepared by Lincoln over several days. The author also demolishes the well-traveled rumor that Andrew Carnegie gave the president a pencil to craft his speech while on the train. This notion has no factual basis. One of the more controversial aspects of the Gettysburg Address centers on the question of whether the audience responded to Lincoln’s speech with applause. Frank L. Klement in his book, *The Gettysburg Soldiers’ Cemetery and Lincoln’s Address: Aspects and Angles* maintains that the time has come to bury that controversy. He posits that Lincoln was interrupted with applause five times, which serves as evidence that the crowd responded enthusiastically to his brief message. On this issue, Peatman was unable to reach a definitive answer. For him, “the question of whether the audience applauded remains to this day” (99).

Peatman draws a straight historical line from the Declaration of Independence to the speech at Gettysburg. Lincoln’s admiration of Thomas Jefferson and his famous document is well known. As Lincoln evolved on the question of race, unlike many of his contemporaries, he embraced the idea of equality of opportunity for all Americans. The Illinois native believed that all men were created equal and had a fundamental right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For Lincoln, freedom could not exist without equality. Therefore, slavery had to be removed from the American landscape in order to make room for freedom and equality to take their rightful place in a democratic society. Although the Emancipation Proclamation was a great document of

liberation, its glaring shortcomings were apparent for all to see. On November 19, the president made it crystal clear that the axis of the Gettysburg Address was equality. Peatman postulates that when the proper contextual analysis is applied to the Address there is no misunderstanding that it "was Lincoln's most profound public statement that a democracy could persist only if equality was at its core" (193). The author gives the impression that the Gettysburg Address was Lincoln's way of correcting the mistakes of the Emancipation Proclamation. This, however, was not the case. The Gettysburg Address was not an extension of or an addition to Lincoln's decree of January 1, 1863. Each document was promulgated by the president for a specific purpose and each stands on its own merit.

Peatman's work is made much richer because of his extensive use of newspapers. He brings his analytic lens into focus when zeroing in on the papers in New York City, Richmond, and Gettysburg. By providing the political affiliations of the papers, a clearer picture emerges of how Americans understood and interpreted the activities that had taken place at Gettysburg. Not surprising, southerners for the most part did not have the chance to experience the solemn occasion even from a distance. The Confederate press relied heavily on the Richmond newspapers to provide them with coverage of the Gettysburg event. Since the Richmond newspapers were under censorship the citizens of the Confederate nation were denied the opportunity of sharing in the dedication of the cemetery. With the exception of New Orleans and a few other places in the Confederacy, southerners had no idea of what the president said during his two-and-a-half minute speech at Gettysburg in 1863.

The real strength of this volume is Peatman's excellent examination of the manner in which individuals and groups whether domestic or foreign appropriated the Gettysburg Address for their own use. They invoked lines from the speech that supported their agenda and ignored the rest. The speech was enthusiastically received around the globe, especially by peoples in pursuit of democracy. On page 131, Peatman writes that in the 1940s "large numbers of foreign nations first began talking about the speech as setting an ideal for governments to strive toward." Doubtless, the democratic ideals of the Gettysburg Address were both inspirational and meaningful to citizens of the world. The international community's appropriation and admiration of the speech was a significant factor in its elevation to the realm of apotheosis. Civil rights leaders frequently referred to the Gettysburg Address in their push for social and political equality. The document was on full display when Martin

Luther King, Jr., the most eloquent spokesperson of the Civil Rights Movement invoked it in his "I Have Dream" speech in August 1963. Lincoln delivered the greatest speech of the 19th century at Gettysburg in 1863 and 100 years later King delivered the greatest speech of the 20th century in Washington, D.C. The revolution of the 1960s had a profound impact on the social and political history of the United States. According to Peatman, "After a century, the nation had come to grips with and was beginning to live up to Lincoln's message in the Gettysburg Address" (150).

In his epilogue, Peatman reassures his readers that the words of the Gettysburg Address are as relevant today as they were 150 years ago. As a moral document, the author reminds us that the speech has no expiration date. On page 203, he concludes that "the speech is ever present, ready to be called to duty at any moment, a moral yardstick with which to measure our progress both in this nation and the nations of the world." The long shadow of the Gettysburg Address has fallen softly on generation after generation of Americans and citizens of the world reminding them "that all men are created equal." Peatman is convinced that Lincoln was great not only in America but around the globe as well. He generously sprinkles his book with praise for Lincoln, but not at the expense of analytical rigor. *The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address*, which consists of sixteen illustrations, documents the evolution of the legendary speech from an American obsession to a revered statement of hope among foreigners. Readers will come away from this study with a deeper understanding of the relevance of the Gettysburg Address to the present age both domestically and internationally.

Leonne M. Hudson is associate professor of history at Kent State University and the author of The Odyssey of a Southerner: The Life and Times of Gustavus Woodson Smith. He is currently working on a book-length manuscript on the reaction of black Americans to the death of Lincoln.