As Union and Confederate forces battled ferociously for three days at Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln waited in Washington, D.C., for news from the front. Hour after hour during those anxious days and nights, an eyewitness remembered, Lincoln’s tall form could be found at the War Department, bent over stacks of telegrams from the battlefield. On the second day, his burden grew even heavier: his fragile wife, Mary, was thrown from her carriage in a freak accident and suffered a head injury.

Finally, after 72 hours of unrelied tension, Lincoln learned that the North had prevailed at Gettysburg. Privately, he was disappointed that his generals did not follow up their victory by pursuing the Confederates as they fled south. Publicly, he sent the army “highest honors” for the “great success.”
He seemed to sense that the Battle of Gettysburg, flawed or not, would be a turning point in the Civil War.

The citizens of Pennsylvania, also aware of their new place in history, moved quickly to create a national cemetery for the nearly 8,000 soldiers who lay dead at Gettysburg. A dedication ceremony was planned, and Lincoln received an invitation to attend. He was not asked, however, to deliver the major speech of the day. That honor was given to a New England statesman and professional orator named Edward Everett. The president was asked merely to give "a few appropriate remarks." Aware that the event was momentous, Lincoln accepted the half-hearted invitation.

As the day grew nearer, Lincoln's wife urged him to reconsider. Their young son, Tad, had fallen ill, and Mrs. Lincoln was near hysteria. On the morning of his father's departure, Tad was so sick he could not eat breakfast. Lincoln himself felt unwell, but he decided to go anyway.

On Thursday, November 19, a balmy, Indian-summer day, Lincoln joined a mournful procession that went through the town of Gettysburg and toward the new cemetery near the battlefield. As Lincoln arrived at the speakers' platform, every man in the immense crowd that had gathered removed his hat out of respect. The president was greeted with "a perfect silence."

For two hours, Everett held the spectators spellbound with his rich voice and soaring words. A hymn followed, and then Lincoln rose to speak. "Four score and seven years ago," Lincoln began in a high-pitched voice. He spoke for barely three minutes.

As Lincoln sat down, some eyewitnesses recalled a smattering of applause, but others heard "not a word, not a cheer, not a shout." A stenographer leaned over to Lincoln and asked, "Is that all?" Embarrassed, Lincoln replied, "Yes—for the present." A photographer in the crowd, fussing with his camera, had not even had time to take a picture.

Lincoln thought his speech was a failure, and some newspapers did dismiss it as "silly," "dull," and "commonplace." But one correctly predicted that the Gettysburg Address would "live among the annals of man." Perhaps the best compliment of all came from Everett. A few days after both of them had spoken at Gettysburg, he wrote to Lincoln, saying he wished he had come "as close to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes." Lincoln replied, telling Everett how pleased he was that "the little I did say was not entirely a failure."

Indeed it was not. It gave the North new hope and purpose as to why it was fighting the war. Today, 148 years later, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is remembered as one of the great speeches of all time.

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The Gettysburg Address

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 this nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

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