

# Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as Classical Rhetoric

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It is commonly known that Abraham Lincoln was a self-made scholar of the classics, and it is equally well known that he was a powerful political speaker. It then stands to reason that Mr. Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* is a natural example of classical rhetoric. Four facets can be seen in this analysis: The historic context of the speech, its organization, its style, and the means of logical argument. In analysis the reader can make many connections to the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle, and could make the argument that Lincoln used it as a handbook for making one of the most memorable orations in modern world history.

## CONTEXT

Lincoln had pondered the message of the Address for the better part of a decade, not knowing when it would find its moment in the sun. In his earlier debates with Stephen Douglas he maintained a constant stream of thought centered on the premise of the *Declaration of Independence* that "All men are created equal." Nearly two years before issuing the *Emancipation Proclamation* Lincoln told confidant John Hay that the "central idea pervading this struggle is the necessity that is upon us, of proving that popular government is not an absurdity."<sup>1</sup> While the crowd assembled was expecting the President to follow former Harvard President and noted orator, Edward Everett with a similarly long memorial to properly bury the Union dead, they received a powerfully charged, brief nationalist address that did more than memorialize thousands of martyrs. It laid out the needed action of the cause wrapped in the rhetoric of the *Declaration of Independence*.

To fully understand the context of the speech it is necessary to understand the popular opinion that Lincoln was addressing. As Aristotle tells us in his *Rhetoric*, it is necessary for the

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<sup>1</sup> For an in depth study of Lincoln's calculated political maneuvering read Goodwin, Doris. *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Simon and Schuster. NY: 2005. P.585.

speaker to know his audience's opinion, or their accepted truths, before he can effectively lead them a step in his direction.<sup>2</sup> Historian James Loewen reminds us that "Citizens at that time understood Lincoln perfectly. Indeed, throughout this period Americans purchased copies of political speeches, read them, discussed issues, and voted at rates that now seem impossibly high."<sup>3</sup> Lincoln and his audience knew each other and all knew the situation of the war that surrounded them. However, Loewen reminds us that by 1863 we were not the only bastion of hope for democracy in the world and Lincoln knew it. In fact, almost all European nations had outlawed slavery by the time of his speech. This understanding is key to the style of speech Lincoln chose, and will be addressed later.

First, though, it is necessary to understand the presence of Lincoln himself. The people did understand Lincoln the man and respected him with a reverence rarely afforded to mortals. Aristotle tells us the trustworthy character of the speaker is essential to delivery and acceptance by the audience as "character, one might say, has in it just about the most decisive means of persuasion."<sup>4</sup> So when Lincoln stood after two hours of fidgeting in his chair, and repeatedly looking over the single page in his pocket during Everett's speech, the crowd of nine thousand went silent. As fifteen year old George Gitt recalled, "flutter and motion of the crowd ceased the moment the President was on his feet. Such was the quiet that his footfalls, I remember very distinctly, woke echoes, and with the creaking of the boards, it was as if one were walking through the hallways of an empty house."<sup>5</sup>

## ORGANIZATION

The Gettysburg Address is noted and lauded for its brevity. This is a matter of style as well as organization, but surely Lincoln stuck to the teaching of Aristotle that *Epideictic* speech essentially must be brief in order to hit hard at the point. After listening to Everett for two hours, even with an understanding that Americans in 1863 had to be patient listeners, Lincoln knew it

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. (1355a14-18). I also make reference to Socrates belief that the purpose of an orator is to lead his audience a step towards a certain idea. Certainly Lincoln knew not only the Practical approach of Aristotle but the reason for such practicality.

<sup>3</sup> Loewen, James. *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Touchstone. NY: 1995. P. 183. Loewen finds it necessary to remind us of the context of the speech, which High School students are rarely presented. Never by a text book alone. Lincoln was using the occasion for a Nationalist appeal with rationales beyond just saving the Union.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. (1356a12-13)

<sup>5</sup> Goodwin, p585.

was important to strike at the heart quickly noting that what is “more scarce is a greater good, than something plentiful.”<sup>6</sup> Lincoln, like the editor of *The Philadelphia Age*, must have been thinking about the lengthy delivery of Everett compared to his brief passion as he neared the podium. The editor commented the following day about Everett: “He gave us plenty of words, but no heart...he talked like a historian, or an encyclopaedist (sic), or an essayist, but not like an orator.”<sup>7</sup> Later, days after the ceremony, Everett wrote Lincoln, “I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes.”<sup>8</sup>

Further, Lincoln’s text had but three paragraphs, short at the start but building to a larger meaning. He started with the past and moved swiftly to the future organizing his metaphorical theme around the birth of a new nation mothered by Liberty, and moving to the task of saving that child. The crescendo came with the ardent plea for the People to take action. Here it is clear that Lincoln follows the central idea of Aristotle’s *Ethics*: the action of coming-into-being. Lincoln does not merely call for thought or memory, but for the nation to bring about resurrection from the ashes of the battlefield.

## STYLE

Lincoln used signs and metaphors heavily. He began “*Fourscore and seven years ago*” knowing that his audience would make the Biblical connection that this is greater than the allotted span of life provided in the *Good Book* of “threescore and ten.” This set the tone of a sacred text and connected it to the *Declaration of Independence* and the birth of a nation “*our fathers brought forth*” and “*conceived in (mother) Liberty.*” Lincoln used these signs to set up the ultimate enthymeme knowing that the people will not be able to refute the sign as Aristotle says “for whenever people think it is not possible to refute what has been said, they believe they are offering a criterion that has been conclusively demonstrated since a boundary and a conclusion are the same thing in the ancient tongue.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. (1364a25-26). I play with this passage where Aristotle refers to the importance of opposites, as it is related to a manner of style we will discuss later.

<sup>7</sup> Goodwin. p.585.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.586.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. (1357b6-10)

As the President proceeded he showed the child to be still alive but needing protection: “*We have come to dedicate a portion of the field, as a final resting place for those who gave their lives, that that nation might live.*” He deftly moved the audience from the past to present, calling on the beauty and virtue of what had been sacrificed for the child *Liberty*. The President called on the passions of the audience before moving on, for he knew “we do not render our judgments the same way when grieved as when delighted.”<sup>10</sup> He turned the passion into a call for a noble cause for the “*The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here,*” and called for a “*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.*” Lincoln says it is “*fitting and proper that we should do this*” as Aristotle tells us “so too are things in accord with what is fitting, . . . if they are worthy of one’s ancestors or what is accomplished before, since attaining additional honor is accounted as happiness and is a beautiful thing.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus the sacrifices of the dead are praised for the beauty of the choice made, not for the self, but for others. Courage in war is beautiful because it is useful not to the dead, but those who live on in peace.<sup>12</sup> This is the highest sign of virtue and essentially requires encomium, but Lincoln, like Pericles of old, demanded more of the nation. Lincoln called for an “*increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion*” while Pericles declared “that such a death as theirs has been the true measure of a man’s worth,” and that they “freely gave their lives to her (Athens) as the fairest offering they could present at her feast.”

The call to action around the metaphor of the nation as a child is indeed central to the speech, but the demand is encased in powerful language. Lincoln uses asyndetism twice: “*we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground*” and “*of the people, by the people, for the people.*” This style, lacking conjunctions, is akin to “*veni, vidi, vici,*” as its curttness is tantamount to a statement of authority. The Address also provides contradictions and reversals. “*The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here,*” stands as a contradiction and the deeds of present and past are

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. (1356a16)

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. (1367b14-17)

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. (1366a34) and (1367b22-39)

reversed. “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,” another reversal shows the connections to required action: “that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.” Ultimately, when it comes to style, metaphors and technique hold the passion of the audience. Aristotle tells us in Book III of the Rhetoric that language ought to be out of the ordinary and remote because it is admirable and pleasing and that plain speeches, like Everett’s, stand out less.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, then, when we speak of style in *Epideictic* speech, we must speak of exaggeration. Lincoln, many believe, as a true politician is guilty of this. Such critics, like Socrates, refer to it as a “parlor trick.” James Loewen marks Lincoln as exaggerating the importance of this conflagration to the world, as a last best hope of mankind, and as a covenant between the United States and God. Loewen, as a critic, points out that because Lincoln knew his attending audience was in support of him, his words were for anti-war Democrats in the North in an attempt to dedicate them to the cause.<sup>14</sup> In this case, Aristotle would say that such exaggeration and preeminence is necessary and needs to be used.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps he would be successful if, as Socrates desired, they only took a step in that direction.

### LOGICAL REASONING

Loewen also recognizes that Lincoln was a fine lawyer who needed rationale for continuing the war beyond just saving the union.<sup>16</sup> Lincoln does couch several logical thoughts within the speech. First, because the nation conceived in liberty is an ideal worth fighting for those within the nation must fight for it. This logic provides his ultimate enthymeme. Secondly, deeds count for more than words, so what is said will be forgotten but not what is done.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, Lincoln ties the past to the present and the future. While this may be stylistic it is also a logical way to compare the importance of the now with the importance of the beautiful past, and our honorable forefathers, and mother Liberty.

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric* (1404b10-15).

<sup>14</sup> Loewen. P.183.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle. *Rhetoric* (1368a10-30).

<sup>16</sup> Loewen. p.182.

<sup>17</sup> The irony of this logic is that more people do actually remember the words.

## WORDS TO DEEDS

*The Gettysburg Address*, in two minutes, using the practical application of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, became immortal. Lincoln, knowing well his audience, and humbly well knowing he was honored by them, played on their passions with the themes of honor and liberty, sacrifice and dedication, past and present. As the consummate courtroom rail-road lawyer he infused logic and device into a call for renewed freedom and equality for all. As Doris Kearns Goodwin, the Lincoln scholar tells us

Lincoln had translated the story of his country and the meaning of the war into words and ideas accessible to every American. The child who would sleeplessly rework his father's yarns into tales comprehensible to any boy had forged for his country an ideal past, present and future that would be recited and memorized by students forever.<sup>18</sup>

That memory in the heads of each child assured that his nation would remain of the people, by the people, for the people.

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<sup>18</sup> Goodwin. P.587.