

Memorializing a nation — and why we celebrate

No greater memorial was ever voiced than President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address. Yet, when we read Lincoln's message — 142 years and seven wars later — it has its ironies. Lincoln said that the world would not long remember what was said that day in 1863, but it could never forget what had happened at Gettysburg.

The reality seems to be the opposite. We have remembered, even memorized, what Lincoln said, but we may not have reflected often or deeply upon that time, that war, those lives, and their place and meaning in our national heritage.

Lincoln's words address the extraordinary reality that a nation such as ours could exist at all. That brutal war, he said, was testing whether any nation as unique and revolutionary as ours could endure. Before the war ended, hundreds of thousands of lives were lost to secure our survival as a nation.

In 1947 Vilate Raile wrote a tribute to the pioneers, but her words recognize equally the liberty given to us by the sacrifice of others.

*They cut desire into short lengths
And fed it to the hungry fires of courage.
Long after, when the flames had died,
Molten gold gleamed in the ashes.
They gathered it into bruised hands
And handed it to their children
And their children's children forever.*

All of this presents us with a question: what are we, the living, doing to ensure that those who sacrificed so much have not sacrificed in vain?

I am moved most by Lincoln's exhortation to those who live, not just to remember but "to be dedicated ... to the unfinished work that they ... so nobly carried on ... 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; we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."

In this nation and in this state, we have, by law and convention, institutionalized seasons of memorial, which are more than mere holidays. The last Monday in May we stop and reflect upon the sacrifices of the hundreds of thousands who gave the last full measure in defense of God, family and country.

We celebrate Independence Day, to honor "our fathers" who pledged to one another their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to give us liberty. Here in Utah we pause again on July 24th to remember not only those who settled this region but all those whose courage and sacrifice compelled them to new firsts that we may follow.

On the first Monday in September we reflect on the struggle of

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

■ Speech delivered by Abraham Lincoln on Nov. 19, 1863, at the dedication of the national cemetery on the Civil War battlefield of Gettysburg, Pa. It is one of the most famous and most quoted of modern speeches. The final version of the address prepared by Lincoln, differing in detail from the spoken address, reads:

"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 that 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 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.

labor to improve the common lot of man and seek freedom from oppression and exploitation.

On the fourth Monday of October we celebrate the end of the World Wars and stop to express gratitude to all veterans.

While Thanksgiving calls to mind the very beginning of our country, it was actually formalized first at our nation's birth and later by Abraham Lincoln. Such gratitude is especially fitting in light of Benjamin Franklin's words at the constitutional convention

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that "if a sparrow cannot fall without the notice of Heaven, it is doubtful that a nation can arise without Its help."

December is a month of universal celebration. Throughout the world, Christians celebrate the birth of mankind's greatest Liberator while Jews celebrate Chanukah, the Jewish Festival of the miraculous burning of the lights at the rededication of the temple by the Maccabees following their victory over the Syrians. Yet another celebration is Kwanzaa, symbolized by the color of the Kwanzaa flag — black, red and green: black for the people, red for their struggle, and green for the hope that comes from their struggle.

In January and February we contemplate Martin Luther King, Jr., George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and reflect upon their courage, sacrifice and contributions.

In March and April we celebrate Easter's incomprehensible message of freedom from death and the miracle of the Passover as ancient Israel was freed from the oppression of Egypt.

The American Dream — the free pursuit of individual dreams without unjust constraints in an atmosphere of peace and stability — is the "molten gold" given us through the sacrifice of others. This is our heritage. We are the beneficiaries of the vision and wisdom of those who sacrificed to establish and preserve this nation.

Such a unique and promising heritage, like anything of value, must be nurtured and protected. At times the price has been blood but at the very least the price is reasoned, courageous participation, by the living heirs. It has been said that ours is an experiment in self-government. If we refuse to govern ourselves, for whatever reason, or if we permit others to steal from us the right and opportunity to govern ourselves, then the Revolution dies by our own hand.

The power of one voice

There is a well-known psychology experiment, a simple examination of human interaction, that I call "The Second Chair."

Six students are seated, presumably to have their visual perception tested. Each of the participants understands the actual purpose of the experiment, except for the person sitting in chair No. 5.

The students are shown a chart and asked which of the three lines on the left side match the one line on the right. Those in the first four chairs always give the wrong answer. The fifth chair (the real subject of the experiment) is stunned. When chair No. 5 gives the correct answer, those in the first four chairs glare in ridicule. The sixth chair also gives the wrong answer.

Predictably, it doesn't take long until 70 percent of those in chair five begin to knowingly give a wrong answer. Of course, thus far the experiment only tells us what we already know. Peer pressure is a real and coercive force; people hate to "go against the crowd."

Then the experiment changes — and this is the fascinating part. The second chair begins to give the correct answer. With the corroborating witness of only one other person, the subject in the fifth chair gains the courage to proclaim the correct answer.

The odds are still against chair five. Yet, with only one other validating voice, the individual in the fifth chair summons the courage to withstand the continued hostile glares of the other participants.

One voice, declaring the truth, can provide the support for a single person, or an entire society, to stand up for what they already, truly believe. FVM

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