How to Speak to a Nation's Suffering

By Garry Wills

EVANSTON, Ill.—It is said that the greatest works of art achieve universality through a paradoxical specificity -- that Hamlet becomes more Everyman the more he is made the Prince of Denmark. However that applies to other works of art, it is certainly true of one masterpiece, the Gettysburg Address, which will be read aloud twice, by politicians of both parties, on the anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Although the Gettysburg Address was criticized early on for dealing in "glittering generalities," it was what would be called today a site-specific artifact. "We are met on a great battlefield . . . to dedicate a portion of that field . . . as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives . . . who struggled here. . . . 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."

It is also time-specific: not only are we met "here," but the day is accurately placed in the flow of time that matters to the polity, coming as it does 87 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Though Lincoln referred reverentially to the Declaration of Independence, he did not think it adequate simply to read the document over the dead bodies at Gettysburg. He had to think its meaning into the new situation. He wanted to know everything he could about that new situation -- to know ahead of time, for instance, what "that field" would look like when he got there. So he called to the White House the landscape architect -- another great artist, William Saunders -- who had laid out the burial ground where Lincoln would be speaking.

Lincoln learned at this conference that Saunders had adapted the semicircular rows of identical graves to the curve of the land, making sure that no one state or regiment or officer was favored over any others. Literally "embodied" in the very earth that these men had made sacred was the truth that "all men are created equal." The pattern of these graves was not completed when Lincoln rose to speak above it, but he knew what Saunders's vision for the cemetery was, and he gave it even more precise focus and explication.

Those rows on rows of dead offered a potential indictment of the living. Why had they been
sacrificed in such numbers? About 6,000 were left dead at battle's end, with many more to die very soon of wounds contracted there. The loss of men to both armies -- killed, wounded, captured or missing -- ran to 50,000, taking out of action a quarter of the Northern forces engaged there and a third of the Southern.

How was Lincoln to find meaning in such a cruel tally? He actually used the scale of payment in dead bodies to boost the value of the thing being purchased. His argument was that the Union would not be worth preserving at that price unless the battle vindicated the entire principle of self-rule ("that the government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth"). And self-rule was not worth this terrible expenditure unless it, in turn, was based on "the proposition that all men are created equal."

By linking the deaths with the Declaration, issued 87 years earlier, Lincoln engaged in a kind of beneficent opportunism. He was redefining the nature of the Union in terms not used in the Constitution. He smuggled into that founding document the language of Jefferson, that "all men are created equal." Only if this truth were at stake could meaning be commensurate with the toll of deaths at Gettysburg. And later generations would have to honor this meaning if they were to keep faith with the dead, with "those who here gave their lives that that nation might live." The dead had set a task for the living -- that we "take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion." Lincoln was creatively upping the ante of the whole American project.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood the nature of the commitment Lincoln made for "that nation." He would say that the 1963 march on Washington came to cash the check issued by the Declaration (which was reissued when Lincoln repeated Jefferson's words). And just as Lincoln did not merely read the Declaration of Independence over the dead, Dr. King did not just read the Gettysburg Address in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial. He, too, thought the old document into his immediate situation. As Lincoln had begun "Four score and seven years ago," Dr. King began, "Five score years ago," adding links to the chain of meanings wrought from national suffering and trial. In this way does creativity give birth to further creativity, Jefferson's to Lincoln's, Lincoln's to King's.

Drawing (Maris Bishofs)