Not all the gallantry of General Lee can redeem, quite, his foolhardiness at Gettysburg. When in doubt, he charged into the cannon’s mouth--by proxy. Ordered afterward to assemble the remains of that doomed assault, George Pickett told Lee that he had no force to reassemble. Lee offered Jefferson David his resignation.

Nor did General Meade, Lee’s opposite number, leave Gettysburg in glory. Though he lost as many troops as Lee, he still had men and ammunition to pursue a foe who was running, at the moment, out of both. For a week, while Lincoln urged him on in an agony of obliteratorive hope, Meade let the desperate Lee lie trapped by a flooded Potomac. When, at last, Lee ghosted himself over the river, Lincoln feared the North would not persevere with the war through the next year’s election. Meade, too, offered his resignation.

Neither general’s commander-in-chief could afford to accept these offers. Jefferson Davis had little but Lee’s magic to rely on for repairing the effects of Lee’s folly. (Romantic Southern fools cheered Lee wherever he rode on the day after his human sacrifice at Gettysburg.) Lincoln, on the other side, could not even vent his feeling by sending Meade the anguished letter he wrote him. A reprimand would ravel out the North’s morale in long trains of recriminations. Both sides, leaving fifty thousand dead or wounded or missing behind them, had reason to maintain a large pattern of pretense about this battle--Lee pretending that he was not taking back to the South a broken cause, Meade that he not let the broken pieces fall through his fingers. It would have been hard to predict
that Gettysburg, out of all this muddle, these missed chances, all the senseless deaths, would become a symbol of national purpose, pride, and ideals. Abraham Lincoln transformed the ugly reality into something rich and strange--and he did it with 272 words. The power of words has rarely been given a more compelling demonstration.

The residents of Gettysburg had little reason to feel satisfaction with the war machine that had churned up their lives. General Meade may have pursued Lee in slow motion; but he wired headquarters that “I cannot delay to pick up the debris of the battlefield.” That debris was mainly a matter of rotting horseflesh and manflesh--thousands of fermenting bodies, with gas-distended bellies, deliquescing in the July heat. For hygienic reasons, the five thousand horses (or mules) had to be consumed by fire, trading the smell of burning flesh for that of decaying flesh. Eight thousand human bodies were scattered over, or (barely) under, the ground. Suffocating teams of soldiers, Confederate prisoners, and dragooned civilians slid the bodies beneath a minimal covering, as fast as possible--crudely posting the names of the Union dead with sketchy information on boards, not stopping to figure out what units the Confederate bodies had belonged to. It was work to be done hugger-mugger or not at all, fighting clustered bluebottle flies black on the earth, shoveling and retching by turns. The buzzards themselves had not stayed to share in this labor--days of incessant shelling had scattered them far off.

Even after most bodies were lightly blanketed, the scene was repellent. A nurse shuddered at the all-too-visible “rise and swell of human bodies” in these furrows war had plowed. A soldier noticed how earth “gave” as he walked over the shallow trenches. Householders had to plant around the bodies in their fields and gardens, or brace themselves to move the rotting corpses to another place.
Soon these uneasy graves were being rifled by relatives looking for their dead--reburying other bodies they turned up, even more hastily (and less adequately) than had the first disposal crews. Three weeks after the battle, a prosperous Gettysburg banker, David Wills, reported to Pennsylvania’s Governor Curtin: “In many instances arms and legs and sometimes heads protrude and my attention has been directed to several places where the hogs were actually rooting out the bodies and devouring them.”

Someone had to halt the unauthorized rummaging to identify the dead, had to deal with states preparing to send commissioners to reclaim their units’ fallen men. An entrepreneur had bought land, foreseeing that demand for reburial would exceed space in the local cemetery. In the meanwhile, the whole area of Gettysburg--a town of only 2,500 inhabitants--was one makeshift burial ground, fetid and steaming. Andrew Curtin, the Republican Governor of Pennsylvania, was facing a difficult re-election campaign. He must placate local feeling, deal with other states diplomatically, and raise the funds to deal with corpses that could go on killing by means of fouled streams or contaminating exhumations.

Curtin made the thirty-two-year-old David Wills his agent on the scene. . . . Wills put up for bids the contract to rebury the bodies--out of thirty-four competitors, the high bid was eight dollars per corpse, the winning bid was $1.59. The federal government was asked to ship in the thousands of caskets needed, courtesy of the War Department. All other costs were handled by the interstate commission. Wills took title to seventeen acres for the new cemetery in the name of Pennsylvania. . . .

Wills meant to dedicate the ground that would hold [the reburied bodies] even before the corpses were moved. He felt the need for artful words to sweeten
the poisoned air of Gettysburg. . . . The normal purgative for such occasions was a large-scale solemn act of oratory, a kind of performance art with great power over audiences in the middle of the nineteenth century. Some later accounts would emphasize the length of the main speech at the Gettysburg dedication, as if that were an ordeal or an imposition on the audience. But a talk of several hours was customary and expected then--much like the length and pacing of a modern rock concert. The crowds that hear Lincoln debate Stephen Douglas in 1858, through three-hour engagements, were delighted to hear Daniel Webster and other orators of the day recite carefully composed paragraphs that filled two hours at the least.

The champion at such declamatory occasions, after the death of Webster, was Webster’s friend Edward Everett. Everett was that rare thing, a scholar and Ivy-League diplomat who could hold mass audiences in thrall. His voice, diction, and gestures were successfully dramatic, and he always performed his carefully written text, no matter how long, from memory. Everett was the inevitable choice for Wills, the indispensable component in his scheme for the cemetery’s consecration. Battlefields were something of a specialty with Everett—he had augmented the fame of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill by his oratory at those revolutionary sites. Simply to have him speak at Gettysburg would add this field to the sacred roll of names from the founders’ battles.

Everett was invited, on September 23, to appear October 23. That would leave all of November for the filling of the graves. But a month was not sufficient time for Everett to spend on his customary preparation for a major speech. He did careful research on the battles he was commemorating—a task made difficult, in this case, by the fact that official accounts of the [Battle of Gettysburg] were just appearing. Everett would have to make his own inquiries.
He could not be ready before November 19. Wills seized on that earliest moment, though it destroyed the reburial schedule that had been arranged to follow on he October dedication. He decided to move up the reburial, beginning it in October, hoping to finish by November 19.

The careful negotiations with Everett form a contrast, more surprising to us than to contemporaries, with the casual invitation to President Lincoln, issued two months later as part of a general call for the federal Cabinet and other celebrities to join in what was essentially a ceremony of the participating states. [Some historians have] argued that Lincoln must have been informally asked to attend [the Gettysburg cemetery dedication], through his friend and bodyguard, Ward Lamon, by October 30, when he told a correspondent he meant to be present. But even that looks to us like a rather late and lukewarm way of including the commander-in-chief of the men being memorialized.

No insult was intended. Federal responsibility or participation was not assumed, then, in state activities. And Lincoln took no offense. Though specifically invited to deliver only “a few appropriate remarks” to open the cemetery, he meant to use this opportunity. . . . Lincoln seems--in familiar accounts--rather cavalier about preparing what he would say in Gettysburg. The silly but persistent myth is that he jotted his brief remarks on the back of an envelope. [Some] accounts have him considering it on the way to a photographer’s shop in Washington, writing it on a piece of cardboard as the train took him on the eighty-mile trip, penciling it in David Wills’s house on the night before the dedication, writing it in that house on the morning of the day he had to deliver it, or even composing it in his head as Everett spoke, before Lincoln rose to follow him. . . . These mythical accounts are badly out of character for Lincoln, who composed his speeches thoughtfully. His law partner, William
Herndon, observing Lincoln’s careful preparation of cases, records that he was a slow writer, who liked to sort out his points and tighten his logic and his phrasing. That is the process vouched for in every other case of Lincoln’s memorable public statements. It is impossible to imagine him leaving his speech at Gettysburg to the last moment.

Lincoln’s train arrived toward dusk in Gettysburg [on November 18]. There were still coffins stacked at the station for completing the reburials. Wills and Everett met him and escorted him the two blocks to the Wills home, where dinner was waiting, along with several dozen other distinguished guests.

Early [the next] morning, Lincoln and [Secretary of War] Seward took a carriage ride to the battle sites. By eleven, Ward Lamon and his specially uniformed marshals were assigning horses to the various dignitaries (carriages would have clogged the site too much). . . . Lincoln sat his horse gracefully (to the surprise of some), and looked meditative during the long wait while marshals tried to coax into line important people more concerned with their dignity than the President was with his. Lincoln was still wearing a mourning band on his hat for his dead son. He also wore white gauntlets, which made his large hands on the reins dramatic by contrast with his otherwise black attire. David Wills had gambled on the weather when he let Everett delay this outdoor ceremony, but the pumpkin time, good for moving corpses, turned out to be just as good for listening to long speeches under a bright November sky.

[The dignitaries gathered on a raised platform that had been constructed some distance from the still unfinished burial operations. A crowd of nearly twenty thousand gathered close around the platform.] Everett [as was he usual practice when speaking] neatly placed his thick text on a little table before him--and then ostentatiously refused to look at it. He was able to indicate with
gestures the sites of the battle’s progress visible from where he stood. He excoriated the rebels for their atrocities, implicitly justifying the fact that some Confederate skeletons were still unburied, lying in the clefts of Devil’s Den under rocks and autumn leaves. Two days earlier, Everett had been shown around the field, and places were pointed out where the bodies lay. His speech, for good or ill, would pick its way through the carnage.

As a former secretary of state, Everett had many sources, in and outside the government, for the information he had gathered so diligently. . . . The setting of the battle in a larger logic of campaigns had an immediacy for those on the scene that we cannot recover. Everett’s familiarity with the details was flattering to the local audience, which nonetheless had things to learn from this shapely presentation of the whole three days’ action. This was like a modern ‘docudrama’ on television, telling the story of recent events on the basis of investigative reporting. We badly misread the evidence if we think Everett failed to work his customary magic. The best witnesses on the scene--[Lincoln’s secretaries] Nicolay and Hay, with their professional interest in good prose and good theater--praised Everett at the time and ever after. He received more attention in their biography’s chapter on Gettysburg than did their own boss. . . .

When Lincoln rose, it was with a sheet or two, from which he read--as had the minister who offered the invocation. Lincoln’s three minutes would, ever after, be obsessively contrasted with Everett’s two hours in accounts of the day. It is even claimed that Lincoln disconcerted the crowd with his abrupt performance, so that people did not know how to respond (‘Was that all?’). . . . A contrast of length with Everett’s talk raises a false issue. Lincoln’s text is startlingly brief for what it accomplished, but that would be equally true if Everett had spoken for a shorter time or had not spoken at all.
The contrast in other ways was strong. Everett’s voice was sweet and expertly modulated; Lincoln’s was high to the point of shrillness, and his Kentucky accent offended some Eastern sensibilities. But Lincoln derived an advantage from his high tenor voice--carrying power. If there is agreement on any one aspect of Lincoln’s delivery, at Gettysburg and elsewhere, it is his audibility. Modern impersonators of Lincoln, like Walter Houston, Raymond Massey, Henry Fonda, and the various actors who give voice to Disneyland animations of the President, bring him before us as a baritone, which is considered a more manly or heroic voice. . . . What should not be forgotten is that Lincoln was himself an actor, an expert raconteur and mimic, and one who spent hours reading speeches out of Shakespeare to any willing (and some unwilling) audiences. He knew a good deal about rhythmic delivery and meaningful inflections. John Hay, who had submitted to many of those Shakespeare readings, gave high marks to his boss’s performance at Gettysburg. He put in his diary at the time that “the President, in a fine, free way, with more grace than is his wont, said his half dozen words of consecration.” Lincoln’s text was polished, his delivery emphatic, he was interrupted by applause five times. Read in a slow, clear way to the farthest listeners, the speech would take about three minutes. It is quite true that the audience did not take in all that happened in that short time--we are still trying to weigh the consequences of that amazing performance. . . .

At the least, Lincoln had far surpassed David Wills’s hope for words to disinfect the air of Gettysburg. The tragedy of macerated bodies, the many bloody and ignoble aspects of this inconclusive encounter, are transfigured in Lincoln’s rhetoric, where the physical residue of battle is volatilized as the product of an experiment testing whether a government can maintain the
proposition of equality. The stakes of the three days’ butchery are made intellectual, with abstract truths being vindicated. Despite verbal gestures to “that” battle and the men who died “here,” there are no particulars mentioned by Lincoln--no names of men or sites or units, or even of sides (the Southerners are part of the “experiment,” not foes mentioned in anger or rebuke). Everett succeeded with his audience by being thoroughly immersed in the details of the event he was celebrating. Lincoln eschews all local emphasis. His speech hovers far above the carnage. He lifts the battle to a level of abstraction that purges it of grosser matter--even “earth” is mentioned as the thing from which the tested form of government shall not perish. . . . The nightmare realities have been etherealized in the crucible of his language.

But that was just the beginning of this complex transformation. Lincoln did for the whole Civil War what he accomplished for the single battlefield. He has prescinded from messy squabbles over constitutionality, sectionalism, property, states. Slavery is not mentioned, any more than Gettysburg is. The discussion is driven back and back, beyond the historical particulars, to great ideals that are made to grapple naked in an airy battle of the mind. Lincoln derives a new, a transcendental, significance from this bloody episode. Both North and South strove to win the battle for interpreting Gettysburg as soon as the physical battle had ended. Lincoln is after even larger game--he means to “win” the whole Civil War in ideological terms as well as military ones. And he will succeed: the Civil War is, to most Americans, what Lincoln wanted it to mean. Words had to complete the work of the guns.

Lincoln is here not only to sweeten the air of Gettysburg, but to clear the infected atmosphere of American history itself, tainted with official sins and inherited guilt. He would cleanse the Constitution. . . . He altered the document
from within, by appeal from its letter to the spirit, subtly changing the recalcitrant stuff of that legal compromise, bringing it to its own indictment. By implicitly doing this, he performed one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting. Everyone in that vast throng of thousands was having his or her intellectual pocket picked. The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. They walked off, from those carving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely.

Some people, looking on from a distance, saw that a giant (if benign) swindle had been performed. The Chicago Times quoted the letter of the Constitution to Lincoln--noting its lack of reference to equality, its tolerance of slavery--and said that Lincoln was betraying the instrument he was on oath to defend, traducing the men who died for the letter of that fundamental law:

It was to uphold this constitution, and the Union created by it, that our officers and soldiers gave their lives at Gettysburg. How dare he, then, standing on their graves, misstate the cause for which they died, and libel the statesmen who founded the government? They were men possessing too much self-respect to declare that negroes were their equals, or were entitled to equal privileges.

Heirs to this outrage still attack Lincoln for subverting the Constitution at Gettysburg--suicidally frank conservatives like M.E. Bradford or the late Willmoore Kendall. But most conservatives are understandably unwilling to challenge a statement now so hallowed, so literally sacrosanct, as Lincoln's clever assault on the constitutional past. They would rather hoe or pretend,
with some literary critics, that Lincoln’s emotionally moving address had no discernible intellectual content, that “the sequence of ideas is commonplace to the point of banality, the ordinary coin of funereal oratory.”

People like Kendall and the Chicago Times editors might have wished this were true, but they knew better. They recognized the audacity of Lincoln’s undertaking. Kendall rightly says Lincoln undertook a new founding of the nation, to correct things felt to be imperfect in the founders’ own achievement.

Abraham Lincoln and, in considerable degree, the authors of the post-civil-war amendments, attempted a new act of founding, involving concretely a startling new interpretation of that principle of the founders which declared that “all men are created equal.”

[“O]riginal intent” conservatives also want to go back before the Civil War amendments (particularly the Fourteenth) to the original founders. Their job would be comparatively easy if they did not have to work against the values created by the Gettysburg Address. Its deceptively simple-sounding phrases appeal to Americans in ways that Lincoln had perfected in his debates over the Constitution during the 1850s. During that time Lincoln found the language, the imagery, the myths that are given their best and briefest embodiment at Gettysburg. In order to penetrate the mystery of his “refounding” act, we must study all the elements of that stunning verbal coup. Without Lincoln’s knowing it himself, all his prior literary, intellectual, and political labors had prepared him for the intellectual revolution contained in those fateful 272 words.