

# The Gettysburg Address as Foreign Policy

by Jared Peatman

During the Cold War agents of the United States government frequently invoked the Gettysburg Address in an attempt to spread pro-American sentiment across the globe. Throughout this period the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement were the U.S.'s two main concerns. While the one was seemingly an international issue and the other a domestic one, in reality they were closely linked. At a time when America was competing with the Soviet Union for global influence, particularly in the newly independent nations in Africa, the racial discord in the country was a major tool used against the United States. Consequently, in the early 1960s American officials began to look for ways to counter the negative image racial discrimination was giving the country. An examination of the ways the Gettysburg Address was invoked in 1959 during the Lincoln Birth Sesquicentennial, and then in 1963 as a part of the Civil War Centennial, shows how the speech's meaning was recast from democracy to equality.

- 1 At the centennial commemoration of the Gettysburg Address in its namesake town, Secretary of State [Dean Rusk](#) declared, "The central commitments of the American experiment are probably known to more people in other lands through the words of the Gettysburg Address than through those of the Declaration of Independence" (Simon 98). Rusk was certainly correct. During the Cold War agents of the United States government frequently invoked the Gettysburg Address in an attempt to spread pro-American sentiment across the globe.
- 2 But the "central commitment" alluded to by Rusk changed over the course of those years. Throughout this period the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement were the U.S.'s two main concerns. While the one was seemingly an international issue and the other a domestic one, in reality they were closely linked. In her book *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Mary Dudziak argues that "civil rights reform came to be seen as crucial to U.S. foreign relations" (6). At a time when America was competing with the Soviet Union for global influence, particularly in the newly independent nations in Africa, the racial discord in the country was a major tool used against the United States. Consequently, in the early 1960s American officials began to look for ways to counter the negative image racial discrimination was giving the country. An examination of the ways the Gettysburg Address was invoked in 1959 during the Lincoln Birth Sesquicentennial, and then in 1963 as a part of the Civil War Centennial, shows how the speech's meaning was recast from democracy to equality.

## Gilded Age Politics

- 3 During the nineteenth century, a number of observers had used the Gettysburg Address to attack the corruption of Gilded Age politics and business. In 1889 Joseph Keppler of *Puck* magazine drew a cartoon revealing the control monopolies held over the senate that include a twist on Lincoln's words: "This is a senate of the monopolists, by the monopolists, and for the monopolists."

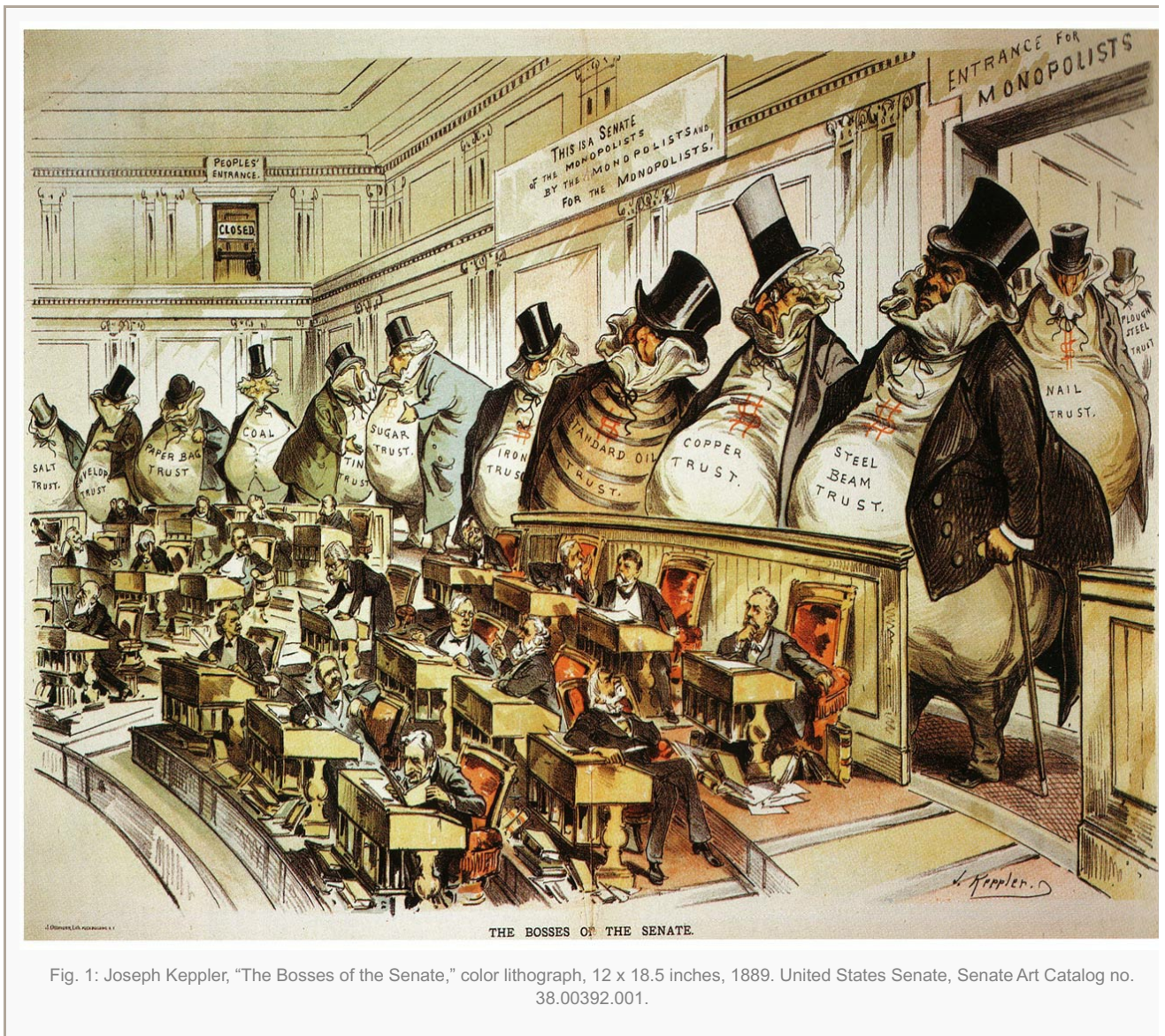


Fig. 1: Joseph Keppler, "The Bosses of the Senate," color lithograph, 12 x 18.5 inches, 1889. United States Senate, Senate Art Catalog no. 38.00392.001.

- 4 The following year, Populist orator [Mary Elizabeth Lease](#), famed for allegedly exhorting Kansas farmers to "raise more hell and less corn," categorized the United States "no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street" (Lease). In 1896, the *Denver News* spewed, "Lincoln ought to rise from the grave and make one more speech at Gettysburg in recognition of the fact that government by the bosses, for the bosses and of the bosses has pretty effectually supplanted government by the people" (rpt. in the *Atlanta Constitution* 17 April 1896: 9). Thus, in the late nineteenth century the Gettysburg Address was most often invoked to comment on domestic problems.

## An Internationally Significant Document

- 5 That began to change during World War I. For the first time, most Americans came to see the Gettysburg Address as an internationally significant document. In 1917, Orton H. Carmichael dedicated his book on the speech, "To all those who love the great Lincoln and who believe that at Gettysburg he voiced the message of America to the world." Henry Jacobs, who as a college student had attended the dedication ceremonies, certainly agreed with Carmichael's sentiment, titling his 1919 work *Lincoln's Gettysburg World-Message*. But it was during the Cold War that the United States government began intentionally invoking the Gettysburg Address abroad. The twin advent of the Lincoln Birth Sesquicentennial and Civil War Centennial melded political, academic, and popular considerations of the address, giving it an immediacy never before enjoyed.

## Cold War Public Diplomacy

- 6 In announcing 1959 as the sesquicentennial year of Lincoln's birth, President [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) noted, "In his writing and speaking Lincoln described the nature of American democracy—'of the people, by the people, for the people'—which such clarity and splendor that it became the inspiration for movements toward free and responsible government the world over" (*Abraham Lincoln Sesquicentennial* 5). Eisenhower's invocation of the address was not a rarity, but rather the first of many over the year-long celebration. On Lincoln's birthday, the President spoke at the National Lincoln Sesquicentennial dinner, focusing on Lincoln as "A World Figure." After noting the establishment of a Lincoln Society in New Delhi, India, Eisenhower observed, "The first President of modern China, [Sun Yat-sen](#), found his three basic principles of government in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address." Simultaneously, the Common Council for American Unity sent a press release to 600 foreign newspapers and 700 foreign radio stations discussing the international significance of the Gettysburg Address. Four months later the government presented the Vatican with a Latin translation of Lincoln's speech (*Abraham Lincoln Sesquicentennial* 44; *Lincoln Sesquicentennial Intelligencer* 3; *New York Times*, 12 Feb. 1959: 22).<sup>[1]</sup>
- 7 On November 19, leaders from Great Britain, India, Germany, Brazil, Ghana, Malaya, Vietnam, and Japan all offered tributes to Lincoln's words. In Lincoln, Argentina, four large plaques inscribed "Of the People, by the People, and for the People" were placed around the town. El Salvador concluded a year-long celebration of Lincoln with a ceremony on November 19, 1959, marking the Gettysburg Address. In Rome a program on the address was seen by a capacity crowd at the Embassy Theater. Morocco produced a souvenir pamphlet celebrating the life of Lincoln that featured an Arabic translation of the address on one cover and an English translation on the other. Honduras produced stamps with six different scenes from Lincoln's life, including one of him delivering the address at Gettysburg. All told, the Lincoln Birth Sesquicentennial was marked in ninety countries around the globe (*Abraham Lincoln Sesquicentennial* 46–47, 50, 100, 107, 110, 116, 121).
- 8 The U.S. government fostered this international attention whenever possible. The State Department distributed 50,000 reproductions of the address, many with dual translations of the speech, while the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission produced a comic book on the life of Lincoln. The book featured the Gettysburg Address on the inside cover, and the explanation that Lincoln's words "will endure forever as an expression of the spirit of the United States of America."
- 9 When it came to 1863, the comic book carried an entire page on the Gettysburg Address, declaring it the speech "which so classically expresses the democratic ideal." On the facing page was an illustration of Lincoln giving the address. Foreign nations must come to know America through Lincoln, the book seemed to say, and the way to know Lincoln was through the Gettysburg Address. Over 100,000 copies were translated into a variety of languages and distributed throughout southeast Asia (*Abraham Lincoln Sesquicentennial* 51).<sup>[2]</sup>
- 10 It is difficult to judge the impact of these comic books in encouraging democracy and pro-Americanism in southeast Asia. However, a 1983 work published in Korea by Donggill Kim titled *Abraham Lincoln: An Oriental Interpretation* is suggestive. Kim says, "In the minds of the Orientals, Abraham Lincoln is the champion of democracy [...]. For millions of Asians, Lincoln is, then, the 'symbol of the free man' and the personification of democratic ideals." In concluding, Kim wrote, "Abraham Lincoln transcends his own race, nationality, and age" (Kim ix–xi).
- 11 A subtle yet massive Cold War dispersion of the address came via the United States Postal Service. From 1960 to 1965 customers sending mail abroad did so with a 25¢ stamp containing the image of Lincoln surrounded by the words: "of the people, by the people, for the people."
- 12 What better way to promote democracy abroad than by reminding everyone who received a letter from the U.S. of Lincoln's most famous discourse on popular government. In many ways this stamp accurately summarizes the U.S.'s invocation of the Gettysburg Address up to 1960. In the contest between democracy and communism, the eloquent and internationally renowned Gettysburg Address admonished all listeners that "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," was the most appropriate. Thus, when the struggle was between communism and democracy, it was the democratic lines of the speech that were most often cited.

## Equality in the 1960s

- 13 That changed by the time the centennial of the address was celebrated in 1963. Though just four short years separated the two commemorations, it was an eventful period. The [Bay of Pigs](#) and [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) had made the Cold War more immediate than ever before. Simultaneously the Civil Rights Movement had gained ground. When Governor George Wallace tried to block African-American students from registering at the University of Alabama, international audiences took particular notice, thereby strengthening the government's resolve to win the Cold War in part by dealing with the Civil Rights Movement. [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)'s, "I Have a Dream" speech in August of 1963 explicitly invoked the Gettysburg Address in calling for America to live up to its founding promises. For at least a brief period the Cold War was no longer a struggle between communism and democracy, but rather between the ideal of democracy and the present reality of the institution in America. In the 1960s the Gettysburg Address lent itself as well to this new discourse on equality as it had to that of democracy in the 1950s.
- 14 The first event commemorating the centennial of the Gettysburg Address began on November 17. The opening program was explicitly an international consideration of the Gettysburg Address, and featured brief remarks from the then minister at the British Embassy in Washington, Sir John Chadwick, French Ambassador [Hervé Alphand](#), and Italian Ambassador Sergio Fenoaltea, before a keynote from U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Chadwick noted that while the significance of Lincoln's words were not immediately grasped in Britain, over time "the address which we commemorate today came to be adopted and established as one of the noblest expressions of British ideals" and helped cement the bond between the British and Americans. "For us in Britain, as for you in the United States, and for our great allies, the standard which we upheld, the standard which we must proclaim to all the world, is the moral and spiritual standard defined by Lincoln in the Gettysburg address." Fenoaltea observed simply that Italy was also fighting the forces of separation in the 1860s, and that his countrymen had thought much of the speech. Alphand noted the parallels between Lincoln's speech and the French national motto: liberty, equality, fraternity. The ambassador added that his country's phrase had preceded the musings by Lincoln, and concluded "your Government is still struggling against the dark forces of discrimination." That all three men traveled to Gettysburg that day to comment on the speech makes clear the status of Lincoln's words throughout the world in 1963 (*Gettysburg Times* 18 Nov. 1963; Simon 49, 100–105).
- 15 Rusk's keynote address was titled "International Aspects of Lincoln's Address." The inclusion of Rusk, like that of the ambassadors, was an attempt to mirror the 1863 program when William Seward had accompanied Lincoln to Gettysburg and delivered a speech on the night before the dedication ceremonies. Unlike his 1863 predecessor who had arrived on the train after a six-hour trip, Rusk was brought to the event via helicopter after a journey of less than an hour (*Gettysburg Times* 18 Nov. 1963).
- 16 As befitted the Secretary of State, Rusk emphasized America's role as a world model, particularly through documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address, and noted the major themes of Lincoln's speech: liberty, freedom, and democracy. As to the importance of the Gettysburg Address, Rusk left no doubt in the minds of his listeners: "The central commitments of the American experiment are probably known to more people in other lands through the words of the Gettysburg Address than through those of the Declaration of Independence." More so than any other speaker, Rusk linked the domestic and foreign policy aspects of the Gettysburg Address, noting:



Our commitments to freedom are the source of our foreign policy [...]. They explain also our concern about our failures here at home to live up fully to our own great commitments [...]. We will not be at ease until every one of our own citizens enjoys in full the rights pledged by

the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution [...]. The rest of the world is watching closely the struggle for full equality in this country. Our failures distress our friends and hearten our enemies. But this is not the main reason why we must complete this task. We must complete it as a duty to ourselves. It is past time to complete the task which Lincoln began with the Emancipation Proclamation.  
(Simon 98-99).

- 17 Rusk's participation signified his appreciation of the significance of the address as a foreign policy document. Furthermore, his comments make clear that he viewed its essence to be about equality, not just democratic forms of government. The audience must have agreed, for they offered an enthusiastic standing ovation when he finished (*Gettysburg Times* 18 Nov. 1963).
- 18 The activities on November 17 concluded with the annual Fortenbaugh lecture by [David Herbert Donald](#), professor of history at Johns Hopkins University. Donald's subject was "Abraham Lincoln and American Nationalism," and he argued that while Lincoln mentioned liberty and equality, the Great Emancipator dared not offend his listeners, and thus his call for equality was intended only to be applicable to white men (*Gettysburg Alistair Cooke* *Times* 18 Nov. 1963).
- 19 The next day, a panel considered Donald's lecture. The panel was moderated by [Alistair Cooke](#), the *Manchester Guardian's* legendary journalist, and featured Judge [Raymond Alexander](#) of Philadelphia, Iowa Representative [Fred Schwengel](#), poet [Archibald MacLeish](#), and Gettysburg College professor Robert Bloom. The panel disagreed with Donald's main point, noting that at Gettysburg Lincoln "rose above nationalism," and focused on the issues of liberty and equality. Alistair Cooke observed that "Lincoln's words have given the people of our country for the last three or four generations a sense of what this nation is in its noblest sense." Further, "the African people feel Lincoln single-handedly freed the slaves." MacLeish noted the great steps Lincoln had taken towards ensuring equality, and lamented that he would be "disappointed by the lack of progress on many fronts" regarding contemporary race relations. Alexander, the only African-American on the panel, asserted his belief that if Lincoln had lived African Americans would have been "raised to full citizenship a half century or more ago." In a fitting close to the day, the Pennsylvania State Legislature, meeting in Harrisburg, adopted a resolution to "recommend the words of the Gettysburg Address to school children and all citizens in freedom loving countries of the world" (*Gettysburg Times* 19 and 22 Nov. 1963).
- 20 On November 19, the actual anniversary of the great speech, a commemoration in the cemetery was attended by 10,000 spectators, nearly the number who had been present in 1863. The number of people on the speakers' platform, 58 as compared to just 20 in 1863, revealed just how much had changed since 1863: Despite their best efforts to mirror the original program, the event planners simply could not keep the politicians off the stage (*Gettysburg Times* 20 Nov. 1963; Simon 56).
- 21 In their report, the Gettysburg Centennial Commission noted three main differences between the ceremony in 1863 and that in 1963: the use of a loudspeaker, that the audience "was spared listening to anything as lengthy as [Edward Everett's](#) two-hour oration" and lastly:

Of even greater import is that in 1963 it was possible for two distinguished Americans of Negro ancestry to take an impressive part in a tribute to the man who set their race on the path toward liberty. So it was that the words of Mr. E. Washington Rhodes were listened to with rapt attention, and the exquisite singing of Miss Marian Anderson charged the atmosphere, bringing forth a deeply felt emotional response from all, and tears to the eyes of many.  
(Simon 57)

- 22 Indeed, E. Washington Rhodes, the President of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, delivered the opening address at the cemetery ceremonies. Echoing Lincoln's prediction and fear that a house

divided could not stand, Rhodes declared, “Second-class citizenship with all of its attendant evils must end. Unless men of substance and creative minds take positive action, move forward with alertness and stout hearts to remove this injustice, I fear that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, will soon be endangered beyond repair” (Simon 116).

- 23 Rhodes was followed by Governor [William Scranton](#), who noted “the tyranny of prejudice is doomed because the American people in their deep common sense realize it is wrong.” But his focus was more heavily on the raging Cold War and the need to spread democracy, noting that the United States “must never abandon the ultimate effort to free captive peoples wherever they are imprisoned in the world” (Simon 118).
- 24 As Scranton sat down, former President Eisenhower, Gettysburg’s most prominent citizen, took the speaker’s stand. Those in the crowd must have expected more of the same from Eisenhower. But that day, Eisenhower reversed course, declaring that Lincoln, “Foresaw a birth of freedom, a freedom which, under God, would restore the purpose and meaning of America, defining a goal that challenges each of us to attain his full stature of citizenship.” Furthermore, he declared Lincoln’s legacy was “a nation free, with liberty, dignity, and justice for all” (Simon 119–20). Whether it was the March on Washington or some other factor that led to Eisenhower’s new interpretation is unclear, but what a change it was. The following day the *Gettysburg Times*’ lead story was a review of Eisenhower’s speech titled “Unfinished Work of Which He Spoke Is . . . Unfinished” (ellipsis in original).
- 25 The shift from 1959 to 1963 was unmistakable. Until 1963, when people talked about the Gettysburg Address in the context of international relations, it was to cite that document as establishing the proper form of government, democracy. But beginning in 1963 invocations of the speech focused on Lincoln’s assertions about equality. In the 1950s America’s promoters had viewed their primary job as simply exposing the world to democracy, as articulated by Lincoln. But with the backlash against the U.S.’s own racial issues becoming more prevalent, diplomats shifted, and began to see the central message of the Gettysburg Address as one of equality. It is a message that continues to this day.

## Notes

[1] Those three principles were: nationalism (government of the people), democracy (government by the people), and populism (government for the people). [2] 32,000 were translated into Vietnamese, 20,000 into Thai, 25,000 into Urdu, 5,000 into Nepalese, 8,000 into Marathi, 8,000 in Gujarati, an unknown number into Arabic, 5,000 into Tamil, and 10,000 into Singhalese, though the last two both curiously omitted the Gettysburg Address. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library has copies of all the above translations with the distribution numbers penciled on the inside front cover.

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## Author

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