

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### *Two Important Anniversaries: The Gettysburg Address and JFK's Assassination*

The month of November 2013 witnessed the anniversaries of two quite significant events in American history—Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary) and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary). Both are important for our history and both are symbolically quite powerful.

- First, the Gettysburg Address. President Lincoln delivered this speech at the dedication ceremonies of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg on 19 November 1863. Many people who have never read the speech are surprised that it is only 270 words in length. As historian Allen C. Guelzo comments, the speech is ten sentences of 270 words, of which 2/3rds are single-syllable and a half-dozen are four-syllable: "Rarely has so much been compressed into such simple and uncomplicated elements." There are five known copies of the speech in Lincoln's handwriting, each named after the person for whom the copy was made. Two were made before Lincoln gave the speech; the other three produced months later for soldier-benefit events. Two of the copies do not include the phrase "under God," which is such an important part of the last sentence of the speech. The copy Lincoln prepared (in 1864) for Alexander Bliss, stepson of the famous historian George Bancroft, is the most famous one and the one most copied. The copy for John G. Nicolay, his personal secretary, is the "first draft." Lincoln also gave a copy to John Hay, his personal assistant. Lincoln gave a copy to Edward Everett, the keynote speaker at the cemetery dedication at Gettysburg, in 1864 as a part of a benefit for Union soldiers. The final copy was made for the historian George Bancroft on 29 February 1864. The primary theme of the Address gives focus to the testing and survivability of America's democracy. Lincoln correctly observed that in 1863 there was no certainty that the American democracy would endure. The Civil War was without question the greatest test of this democracy: "whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure." The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a century that began with the French Revolution and Napoleon, a dictator who picked up the pieces in France after the excess of the Revolutionaries. Further, there were multiple revolutions throughout Europe through 1848. America's Civil War indicated, for many, the inherent instability and factionalism of any democracy. America was coming apart. So, the Union victory at Gettysburg on 1-3 July 1863 and its announcement on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July only enhanced the sense that America's democracy would not only survive, but thrive. The death of so many at Gettysburg, many of whom were buried in that cemetery, illustrated that self-sacrifice was inherent to America's democracy. Lincoln therefore called for "a new birth of freedom," a renewed dedication to democracy—one "of the people, by the people and for the people." Quite profoundly, Lincoln connected July 4<sup>th</sup> ("four score and seven years ago") and the Declaration's proposition that "all men are created equal" with Gettysburg. For Lincoln, the sacrifice, the valor and the dedication of these soldiers indicated that the Civil

War was about a renewal, almost a revival of American democracy. Its sun was not setting; it was rising! In 2013, Americans need to revisit the essence of democracy: That it involves sacrifice, valor and dedication to some bedrock principles. It is not about selfishness and self-centeredness, nor is it about what government can do for me. Each American has a stake in the success of this democracy, for in the Declaration and in Lincoln's application of that document to the Civil War, democracy is of, by, and for the people. 19 November 2013 has come and gone without much fanfare—and that is rather sad. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is indeed one of the most important addresses ever given. It defines the very heart and soul of America as a democratic-republic. May we read it; may we be renewed by it.

- Second, on 22 November 2013, we remembered the assassination of President Kennedy. What is rarely known is that on that same date fifty years ago, two other significant men died—C.S. Lewis and Aldous Huxley. Lewis was the most well-known Christian apologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Huxley was a dabbler in spiritualism, Eastern mysticism and psychedelic drugs, which he used for enlightenment. Huxley's most famous book was *Brave New World*, a fictional chronicle of an ugly dystopia, in which, as columnist Ross Douthat argues, “the goals of pleasure and stability have crowded out every other human good, burying discontent under antidepressants, genetic engineering and virtual-reality escapes.” Lewis's famous classic, *The Abolition of Man*, forecast a society in which, without any commitment to God, selfish appetite becomes the chief end for living: There is no transcendent truth, beauty or honor; only self-indulgent living. For Lewis, that was the consequence of a world without God. For Huxley, his world was the only foreseeable world because there is no God. What does all this have to do with JFK? Perhaps a great deal! For many today, JFK is a martyr, a visionary now surrounded by an aura of “what might have been.” But which of the other men who joined JFK in eternity on 22 November 1963 did he resemble? Huxley or Lewis?

He was an egregiously unfaithful man, a rabid adulterer, who persistently cheated on his wife Jackie. Douthat: “What exhausts skeptics of the Kennedy cult, both its elegiac and paranoid forms, is the way it makes a saint out of a reckless adulterer, a Camelot out of a sordid political operation, a world-historical figure out of a president whose fate was tragic but whose record was not terribly impressive.” America has perhaps deified him prematurely and naively. JFK represented a man whose personal life manifested the ultimate purposelessness of self-indulgence. And that affected his character, his lifestyle and most probably his presidency. Three men entered eternity on that fateful November day in 1963. One man saw the futility and self-destructive nature of living a life without God (Lewis), while another saw quite graphically where the world would end up if there is no transcendent Being whose values, morals and ethical standards matter (Huxley). The final man tipped his hat, so to speak, to the transcendent, but lived his personal life as if Huxley's vision was the correct one. Only one man died that day with life-changing hope.

See Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (24 November 2013); Allen C. Guelzo in the *New York Times* (18 November 2013) and in an interview with Albert Mohler in [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (19 November 2013).