

# ISSA Proceedings 2014 ~ Argumentation In Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

*Abstract:* Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address normally is understood as epideictic, intended only to dedicate a national cemetery. In fact, however, an important argument is subtly and implicitly developed in this brief text: that nationalism is necessary for democracy to flourish. This argument will be identified and its layout described. Moreover, Lincoln employs all three dimensions of strategic maneuvering (topical potential, audience demand, and presentational choices) to enhance this argument. Its placement within an epideictic address is strategically useful and illustrates the ways in which epideictic can have argument content.

*Keywords:* argument structure, burden of proof, coordinative argument, deliberative, epideictic, eulogy, Gettysburg, Lincoln, strategic maneuvering.

## 1. *Introduction*

Probably no figure in United States history is better known worldwide than Abraham Lincoln, who is taken as representative of the upward mobility Americans value and of the ideals the nation espouses. No speech delivered by Lincoln is better known around the world than the Gettysburg Address. Seemingly a model of simplicity, the Address actually is quite complex/ Seemingly a purely ceremonial address, it actually also presents and develops an argument whose contents are mostly implicit. Seemingly a recitation of communal values, it actually upholds values that are highly controversial. And seemingly transparent in its message, it actually relies on silence, ambiguity, and assertion as means of strategic maneuvering.

This essay is written in honor of the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address in 2013. In what follows, a brief sketch of the context will be followed by an analysis that seeks to unpack the paradoxes noted above.

## 2. *The battle and the speech*

The battle of Gettysburg, a small town in southeastern Pennsylvania, was fought on 1-3 July 1863. Although not fully evident at the time, it was a turning point of

the war. It stopped the bold attempt by Robert E. Lee's Confederate army to invade the North through Maryland and to threaten the capital, Washington. It thereby meant that the South could not win the war through invasion (although a later attempt at a raid was made) but would need to rely on attrition and war-weariness on the part of the North. But the Northern failure to capture Lee's army after the battle, allowing it instead to escape to Virginia, meant that the war would not end decisively, certainly not soon.

For the most part, the thousands who died in battle were left where they fell on the ground. Hoping to give the Union soldiers a dignified burial and also to control the stench and disease caused by rotting corpses, a group of private citizens undertook to establish a military cemetery on part of the battlefield. Their efforts, though not complete, progressed far enough for the cemetery to be dedicated on November 19, about five months after the battle.

The principal speaker for the occasion was Edward Everett, former governor, representative, and senator from Massachusetts, former president of Harvard University, former secretary of state, and 1860 vice-presidential candidate of the Constitutional Union Party, one of the four major parties that year. Everett spoke for over two hours and, although he has been ridiculed for its length, his speech was an excellent example of its kind. (The text is readily available as an appendix in Wills 1992.) He verbally recreated the battle from start to finish and celebrated the Union victory. His detailed rhetorical depiction enabled audience members to feel as though they were present for all three days of the historic battle. Everett's speech was followed by a musical interlude and then Lincoln rose for brief remarks formally dedicating the cemetery - the role he was invited to play. Popular myth has it that Lincoln wrote the speech on the back of an envelope while riding on the train to Gettysburg. This myth was created during the 1880s and has no basis in fact (Johnson 2013). In fact he wrote a draft before leaving Washington and then did final editing in Gettysburg the night before delivering the speech (Boritt 2006).

At only 272 words, the text (Basler 1953, 7:23) is easily accessible; a copy is included in the Appendix. Briefly, Lincoln positions the present moment as part of a war testing the commitment of the American founders to nationalism premised on liberty and equality. It is appropriate, he says, for us to hallow the ground on which the soldiers defending this commitment fell, but in a larger sense we cannot, since the battlefield already has been dedicated through their bravery and

sacrifice. What we should do, therefore, is to rededicate ourselves to their ideals and to finish the work on their project.

### 3. *The argumentative character of the speech*

The speech can be characterized as a eulogy, a genre of epideictic discourse whose functions are to offer praise for the dead and advice for the living. While fulfilling these functions, however, it also implicitly contains a significant argument about what the audience should do. The major standpoint (1) is the claim, “We should strengthen our commitment to the nation and its founding principles.” This claim is derived from Lincoln’s statement that “it is for us the living . . . to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced,” and the earlier statement that the Civil War is testing whether any nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to equality can endure.

Supporting this standpoint is a three-point coordinative argument structure, featuring the claims that (1.1a) the founders created the nation in liberty and committed it to equality, (1.1b) war tests the endurance of the national commitments, and (1.1c) our role is to rededicate ourselves to the task. The parts of this argument together support the major standpoint and prevent its being circular. The claim about the founders stands on its own, seemingly unchallenged. The claim that the war is a test brings with it the subsidiary claim that Gettysburg is “a great battle field of that war.” *A fortiori*, if the larger war is a kind of test, then its specific instantiation at Gettysburg is part of that test.

The claim that our role is to rededicate ourselves to the founding principles is supported by a more elaborate subsidiary structure of multiple coordinative arguments. First is the pair (1.1c.1a) “we are here to dedicate a cemetery,” and (1.1c.1b) that, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate a cemetery. The combination of these two statements creates a paradox that is resolved through the claim in (1.1c) that we have a less obvious purpose, namely to rededicate ourselves to the commitment of the founders. The second pair of subsidiary statements is also a coordinative argument, though independent of the first: (1.1c.2a) what we say here will not be long remembered, and (1.1c.2b) we must assure that the dead did not die in vain. If our statements at the cemetery will not by themselves be enough to assure that the deaths were not in vain, then we must do something else to assure that result: we must rededicate ourselves to the task to which they presumably were committed.

Laying out the argument in this fashion helps to make clear what Lincoln accomplishes in this speech. First, he not only consoles the living but directs them in a particular way: toward reaffirming what he claims are the nation's founding ideals. Second, he portrays this action as a duty by showing that it is the natural progression in a sequence that begins with "our fathers" who proclaimed these ideals and the "great civil war" which is testing them. Third, the steps in this progression are asserted briefly rather than developed in any depth. This may be appropriate in a eulogy, where one does not expect the structural presentation of claims and reasons, but it has the effect of making contestable claims appear as if they are self-evident. Lincoln is taking advantage of the generic expectations of a eulogy in order to reduce his burden in advancing a deliberative claim about what we should do. Fourth, Lincoln adds force to the claim that "it is for us the living, rather, to rededicate ourselves" to the founding ideals by implying that doing so resolves the paradoxes. It is a way out of the predicament that it is appropriate for us to dedicate the ground and yet "in a larger sense" we cannot do so, by offering something we can do that will be at least as good as dedicating the ground. And it offers a way out of the tension between wishing to assure that the dead not die in vain and yet believing that "what we say here" will be "little note[d] nor long remember[ed]"; that is, that our words will not rescue the dead from oblivion. The act of rededicating ourselves to the founding national ideals is thus doubly attractive.

#### *4. Strategic maneuvering*

Not only does the Gettysburg Address contain the implicit structure of an argument, but it also clearly reflects strategic maneuvering to present Lincoln's position in the most favorable light. The speech reflects all three of the categories of strategic maneuvering discussed by van Eemeren (2010).

##### *4.1 Topical potential*

Lincoln's choices regarding topical potential can be made clear by observing what he elects not to discuss. First, unlike Everett, he makes no mention of the battle of Gettysburg itself – *not* its progression, not even its outcome. Second, there is no discussion of slavery – unless that is how one chooses to read "all men are created equal," which probably was not the intended context – and none of emancipation, even though the proclamation had been issued on 1 January and emancipation was recognized as an aim of the war. Third, there is no self-reference to Lincoln himself or to his office.

What all of these silences enabled Lincoln to do was to focus his remarks less on the past than on the future, less on the dead than on the living. Everett's focus was on the events of 1-3 July; Lincoln's was on how those attending the dedication could give those events a larger and more transcendent meaning. For Everett, listeners could use the battle by vicariously participating in it and basking in the glory of a Union victory. These were purely consummatory ends. For Lincoln, however, they could use the battle as a stimulus to their own acts of rededication.

The absence of references to slavery and emancipation may be harder to explain, because they are what we perceive the war ultimately to have been about. But Lincoln saw it somewhat differently. Despite his own strong antislavery beliefs, freeing the slaves was not his cardinal purpose in prosecuting the war. That was a means – granted, a necessary means, as he came to see – toward the goal of preserving democratic self-government and majority rule, which had been undermined by the act of Southern secession, especially when that act had no basis other than that slavery's advocates had lost a lawful and fairly conducted popular election. Lincoln had said in his First Inaugural Address (Basler 1953, 4:262-271) that the essence of secession was anarchy. That was the end to be prevented by victory in the “great civil war,” toward which both emancipation of slaves and the victory at Gettysburg were essential means.

#### *4.2 Audience demand*

Lincoln also adapted his presentation to audience demand, as is evident in his use of strategic ambiguity. Terms and phrases are used that admit of multiple readings, with quite different implications. For instance, just who are “these honored dead”? Gettysburg was a Union cemetery; no Confederate dead were buried there. Lincoln says as much when he refers to “those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.” But in the next paragraph he refers to “the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here” and “they who fought here.” These phrases are broader in scope and could be taken to refer to both Union and Confederate soldiers. Contemporary audiences often read the speech this way, as a universal tribute to all the fallen, although that reading is not completely faithful to text or context. This ambiguity allows Lincoln to speak to multiple audiences across time. Audiences in 1863 might have been more likely to celebrate the fallen Northerners, whereas after the wounds of war have healed, the speech can be understood by later audiences – say, those of 2013 – as national consecration in memory of all the Gettysburg dead. Since it is constrained within

the moment of the battle, Everett's speech cannot achieve such transcendence.

A similar ambiguity is found in the pronoun "we." It may refer to all people, both North and South: "we are engaged in a great civil war." Or it may refer to his immediate audience: "we are met on a great battlefield of that war." Universal and particular views of "we" interweave throughout the speech. In such a gifted writer as Lincoln, such shifts probably are not accidental. It seems more likely that Lincoln responds to audience demand by regarding his immediate audience both in its own right and as a synecdoche for the entire nation, North and South (those who are only metaphorically "here" at Gettysburg) and also for those not yet even born, who will be "here" when they are in the act of reading or memorizing the speech. In this way, Lincoln raises the audience onto a different and more abstract plane, on which partisan or sectional conflict is out of place and national reaffirmation is appropriate. The fact that he moves back and forth between the particular and the general suggests that the speech should be intended as simultaneously embracing both.

The most obvious example of an ambiguous term is "dedicate." It is used in the phrase "dedicated to the proposition," meaning "committed" or "pledged." But when the president says, "we have come to dedicate a portion of that field," it means "to designate" or "to set aside." In the next paragraph he means something different still, as he signals by his comment that he is referring to "a larger sense." Here he supplies his own synonyms, "consecrate" and "hallow," suggesting a meaning such as "to distinguish sacred from profane." The final uses, referring to "us the living," return to the original sense of "dedicate" as "to pledge or commit." What is more, Lincoln's use of the word "rather" contrasts this sense of "dedicate" with "to set aside" or "to hallow," which he used earlier.

These shifts in the term's meaning satisfy audience demand by providing a constructive outlet for audience energy despite the fact that listeners cannot rise to the act of consecration because the soldiers already have done that. If the audience cannot do what they came to do, Lincoln does not send them away with nothing. What they can do, and should do, is to commit themselves to give the nation "a new birth of freedom," so that it once again is committed to the proposition that all are created equal. By using the same term, "dedicate," Lincoln implies that his audience's action is equivalent, at least in value, to what the soldiers did who consecrated the Gettysburg battlefield with their lives.

The last example of strategic ambiguity to adapt to audience demand is the phrase, “the great task remaining before us.” Lincoln does not say exactly what the task is. To be sure, he offers clues in the final phrases of the speech. But is each synonymous with “the great task remaining before us” or is each an element of that task? And how might each of these phrases translate into practical action? To take just one example, it is reasonable to assume that to “take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion” means that the Union must fight on until it wins the war. But to make that meaning explicit would be to stipulate that the war must be ended by military victory, and Lincoln probably would not want to exclude the possibility that the South might simply tire of the struggle. Nor did he want to confirm the perception that he was stubborn and inflexible. This view was held by Northern critics who were themselves tired of the war and were calling for reconciliation with the South without the abolition of slavery. Besides, to call explicitly for Northern victory, even if that is what Lincoln really meant, would make it impossible for the speech to be read then or later as a conciliatory message addressed to North and South alike. The same could be said about what one would do to “highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain,” depending on whether “these dead” refers to the Union soldiers who were buried at Gettysburg or to all who died on either side of the battle. By leaving the matter ambiguous, Lincoln is able to enlarge and unify his audience, thereby fulfilling the epideictic function of the speech.

#### *4.3 Presentational choices*

The final category of strategic maneuvering is presentational choice – decisions about arrangement and language that advance the purpose of the speech. Several examples can be cited from the Gettysburg Address. To begin with, Lincoln chooses to present some of his key claims as assertions, claims put forward as if they are self-evident rather than standpoints to be justified by argument. A nominally epideictic address such as a dedication speech may be the perfect vehicle for doing so, since a structure of claims and proofs is not normally expected. Instead the speaker typically states and celebrates shared knowledge. Lincoln follows this pattern except that his values and knowledge claims, though stated as if unquestioned, in fact were highly controversial.

For example, Lincoln says that the country was “brought forth” by “our fathers” in the year 1776, “four score and seven years ago.” That was, of course, the year

of the American Declaration of Independence, when “our fathers” declared their commitment that all men are created equal. That is one of several possible dates that might have been selected for the national origin, but it was not the only one available to Lincoln. Others included 1765, when the Stamp Act Congress (the first intercolonial body) met; 1775, when the military rebellion began; 1778, when aid from France made the revolution viable; 1781, when the Articles of Confederation were ratified; 1787, when the Constitution was drafted; 1788, when the ninth state ratified it; or 1790, when Rhode Island made it unanimous. To have selected any of those dates would have implied a very different origin story. By selecting 1776 and presenting it as if there were no question, Lincoln locates the country’s beginning in the expression of ideals – and not just any ideals, but those of liberty and equality, the very values to which Lincoln would have his audience reaffirm their commitment.

Furthermore, Lincoln characterizes the ideal of equality as a proposition. In context, a proposition was a hypothesis that would be tested and proved through the life of the country. It was like a geometric asymptote, something that would be continually approached even though never actually reached. It would serve as a goal toward which the nation always would strive. This was the same view of equality that Lincoln had expressed during his pre-presidential years, when he had attributed it to the founders and used it to resolve the paradox of how slavery could have been condemned by those who themselves owned slaves. The other obvious way out of that paradox was to say that the founders did not regard blacks as men within the scope of the Declaration. This was the view taken, for example, by Lincoln’s perennial political opponent, Stephen A. Douglas. How to choose between these interpretations? Fortunately, one doesn’t have to. By making the presentational choice to state as fact what is a highly contestable assertion, Lincoln is able to define away the controversy and leave listeners with the simple “truth” of what “our fathers” had in mind.

Moreover, what was it to which “our fathers” gave birth in 1776? Lincoln states as fact that they “brought forth, on this continent, a new nation.” But it is questionable whether they did any such thing. The Declaration says that the former colonies “are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states.” The emphasis is on states, plural, and there is no reference to a single nation. Eleven years later, the Preamble to the Constitution announces its aim to “form a more perfect union,” not a more perfect nation. By 1863, it was clear that movement



was in the direction of nationalism, of seeing “the people” as a single entity and the nation as its embodiment. But rather than acknowledge that this is a new development or a gradual evolution, Lincoln read backwards and claimed it to be the view of the founders themselves. It was the view of some founders, but Lincoln swept away the whole historical controversy. What the country needed to be in 1863, he said it actually had been all along. This is what Robert L. Scott (1973) called “the conservative voice in radical rhetoric.” It enabled Lincoln to claim that the very same nation had survived for 87 years and was now being tested. To succeed at that test not only would meet the needs of the moment but also would vindicate the vision of the founders. This simple statement that the founders created “a new nation” enacts a theory of history and politics. Stated as a bold assertion, the claim no longer requires any argument.

A final example of assertion as a presentational choice was the statement that the function of the Civil War was “testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” That is, the war will determine whether democratic self-government, in the United States or anywhere else, is sustainable beyond the 87 years it already has survived. To abandon the war would be to forfeit the test, permitting those who had lost a fair election to overturn the results by military action until they got their way. Doing that would negate the legitimacy of popular elections, and without them there would be no democratic self-rule. If such a thing could happen in the United States, with its tradition and over 80 years of experience, then it could happen anywhere; so if democracy fails here, it fails everywhere. Lincoln puts forward this theory as fact, not needing to argue for it. In the process he obscures other possible accounts for the war, such as the view of many Southerners that military action *now* was necessary to interrupt the arc of history which, since Lincoln’s election, was tending toward slavery’s demise. Lincoln’s strategic maneuver redirects attention from slavery to the even higher principle of democracy and self-rule, which he pronounces to be the ultimate object of the struggle.

The speech reveals several other presentational choices. The opening line, “Four score and seven years ago,” evokes the Biblical claim, in Proverbs, that “the days of a man’s life are threescore years and ten, or if by reason of strength, fourscore years.” The Union already has exceeded that boundary, so it is on course to “long endure,” provided that there is no successful revolt by dissatisfied Southerners. The persuasiveness of Lincoln’s argumentative claim for a commitment to

nationalism is enhanced by its Biblical resonance.

Another presentational choice is the use of negation as an indirect means of providing support. After saying that his audience was present to dedicate a cemetery, Lincoln states that they cannot do so because it already has been done by “the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here.” We therefore must do something else, and Lincoln presents what is a far greater and more important task than setting aside a piece of ground. But rather than saying directly that our task is more significant than theirs, he seems to do the opposite, maintaining that “the world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” The first clause in the sentence was clearly false, but the second clause is true in the sense that *doing* trumps *saying*. Since our talk is less significant than their action, we ought to do something else in order to even the exchange and assure that the dead will not have died in vain. Talk plus personal dedication is at least equal to action. But had Lincoln said this explicitly, he would be rightfully accused of hubris. So he made his point by using the presentational choice of negation.

A final example of strategic maneuvering through presentational choice involves the closing prepositions “of,” “by,” and “for,” each of which relates to the noun, “the people.” The point of this closing statement is not the differentiation of the prepositions but the repetition of the noun. “The people” by 1863 was a term of nearly universal veneration, especially when it stood in opposition to terms such as “special interests.” “The people” could be dominated by elites just as they could be ruled by monarchs. The genius of the United States, and its uniqueness in the world, was that the people ruled. Government acted upon them, but also was created and composed by them, and it operated for their benefit. “The great task remaining before us” was to assure the survival of this form of government. That was what was at stake in the war, and that was what required a new commitment to American nationhood, keeping the people free from the elites that Lincoln thought had hijacked the Southern state governments and led them into the abyss of secession. The case of the United States would prove the viability of popular rule.

## 5. Conclusion

Within the pragma-dialectical framework (van Eemeren 2010), strategic maneuvering offers advocates the chance to increase their rhetorical effectiveness while also meeting their dialectical obligations. On first glance, it

may seem that the Gettysburg Address does the opposite: maximizing rhetorical success while evading one's dialectical obligations. After all, Lincoln never substantiates that the United States is one nation, or that it was founded in 1776, or that its goal is the achievement of equality under popular rule. Even less does he answer objections that could be set out against any of these standpoints. What gives them force is that they are embedded within an epideictic framework that celebrates the dead while urging the living to dedicate themselves to a larger task. It is perhaps in this sense that Wills (1992) wrote that listeners to the speech "had their intellectual pocket picked," leaving the battlefield on 19 November with a different sense of the United States from what they had when they arrived. It has become commonplace to observe that the Gettysburg Address epitomizes the war-induced shift from regarding the United States as a plural noun ("The United States are.. .") to a singular noun ("The United States is . . .").

But this may be taking too limited a view of the matter. The defense of American nationalism did not issue forth from Lincoln at Gettysburg for the first time. He had been striking these themes for some years, at least since the "Peoria speech" of 1854 (Basler 1953). Often he had fully-developed arguments that anticipated or replied to critics, even if he did not reprise them at Gettysburg. In the Lincoln-Douglas debates he argued why the Union was older than the Constitution and perhaps older than the states (Zarefsky 1990). In the First Inaugural Address he had developed the case against secession and explained why the essence of the Civil War was a struggle for popular rule (Zarefsky 2012).

What an epideictic address might do is to evoke the more fully developed argument through allusion to it and restatement of its conclusion. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958/1969) are right in observing that epideictic has an argumentative character, but it typically achieves that result by indirection rather than explicitly. Analysis of a masterpiece such as the Gettysburg Address helps us to see how. If argumentative structure and rhetorical functions are discernible in such an iconic text as this, then *a fortiori* they should be even easier to discern implicitly in more quotidian examples of epideictic discourse.

## APPENDIX

Lincoln's Gettysburg address, 19 November 1863

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 battle-field 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 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 – 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.

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