

Toward that national union, around July 4, 1863, a couple of extraordinary events converge at a battlefield not far from here in Gettysburg and in Vicksburg in the South. Tens of thousands of Americans, both North and South, have lost their lives. And yet Abraham Lincoln understood that while some States were in the union because they believed in union, other States remained border States but believed in union and fundamentally believed that the southern States, our countrymen, did not have the right to secede from the union, he offered a redemptive tone to redefine our national existence. Look at what Abraham Lincoln says on November 19, 1863, in a eulogy in a battlefield not far from here, with the dead still unburied, with thousands of men still unburied and with the stench having been smelled for miles from that battlefield and that battle on July 4. He says:

“Four score and seven years ago--at that eulogy--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 battlefield 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 the nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our 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 we are highly resolved 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 and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg eulogy, better known as the Gettysburg Address, in 3 1/2 minutes. He redefined July 4. Watch this, Mr. Speaker. On July 4, 1776, African Americans found themselves in a position of chattel slavery. And women could not vote.

On July 4, 1854, I believe it was, Frederick Douglass delivered an oration talking about how hypocritical the nation's independence celebration was given that African Americans found themselves in a position of chattel slavery.

By July 4, 1863, Abraham Lincoln is saying that the men who died in this battlefield have paid a price higher than any of us can ever add or detract, but the future belongs to us.

By July 4, 2007, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were locked in an unprecedented campaign for President of the United States, a beneficiary of the events on July 4, 1863.

By July 4, 2008, Barack Obama would be the presumptive Democratic nominee of the Democratic Party, the very party that was responsible for States rights and localism and denying people of color their basic freedoms, including the right to vote.

And by July 4, 2009, he's the 44th President of the United States.

Here's what Abraham Lincoln saw. He saw all the other July 4ths, all those Americans who were stuck in time and could not move on. That's part of what Lincoln saw. And so in the Gettysburg Address, he decided to give all of us a brand new July 4.

And so July 4, 2007, we saw Hillary and Barack running.

And July 4, 2008, we saw President Barack Obama, the Democratic nominee.

And by July 4, 2009, he's the 44th President of the United States.

And by July 4, some date in the future, your child will be President or could be President of the United States.

And by July 4, some distant future date, all Americans could have health care.

And by July 4, some distant future date, all Americans could have decent, safe and affordable housing.

And by July 4, we're not just known by our States, but we will be known as Americans.

That's what makes Abraham Lincoln the greatest American. That's why we commemorate his 200th birthday, because the gift that Abraham Lincoln gave us, he keeps giving us. It just never goes away. That the America that we once were is not the America that we are. And it's certainly not the America that we will be. Oh, yes, there are some efforts at regression. As President Obama says, some of the old, tired arguments that we've heard over and over and over again. Some of the old adherents to dogma. Some of us don't even know why we're Republicans. Some of us don't even know why we're Democrats. We're just out of habit up here speaking and doing things. Some of us. Others of us are clear on the history and clear on the ideologies--in both parties. And yet there is a part of us, Mr. Speaker, that wants to build a more perfect union for all Americans, to move beyond the past, to forge a new future, where we turn to each other and not on each other, and bring about change for everybody. That somehow we rise together and we fall together, that who cares what color the hand is that reaches into the hole to pull you out of the hole that you find yourself in, as long as someone extends a hand.

This, I believe, Mr. Speaker, is the spirit of our 16th President. It makes him the greatest American, as he sits at one end of the national mall recessed into a temple, forever enshrined in the Nation's memory, as someone who loved his country so much that he would carefully use the power of the Commander in Chief, the great powers of his office, to bring wayward States back into the union and at the conclusion of the war to treat his countrymen as countrymen again. Sure, from the perspective of African Americans and as an African American, I have a lot of misgivings about how national reconciliation during that period was handled. If the northerners fought the war to save the union, they never had to acknowledge the underlying moral cause of the war--slavery. So it's not about freeing African Americans. And many northerners fought the war to save the union, not to free the slaves. Southerners, many of them argue they weren't fighting to preserve the institution of slavery, they were protecting their way of life down here, that big government doesn't have a right to come down here and tell us what to do, a very different principle.

And so at the end of the war, the northerners can forgive the southerners because, well, we've settled it on a battlefield. Except the central issue for which the war is fought, the issue of slavery from a northern perspective and the issue of slavery from the southern perspective, the people for whom the war is being fought over are never brought into the reconciliation: When are we going to get the right to vote? When are we going to get housing? When are we going to get equality? When are we going to help the nation live up to the true meaning of its creed? And that process would begin immediately after the Civil War during reconstruction--I wish the House of Representatives would let me line up the rest of my charts--through reconstruction and then through Jim Crow and the struggle by the NAACP which the House of Representatives passed legislation commemorating the 100 years of their existence because many of the promises of reconstruction had never come to fruition for all Americans and women were still struggling for equality in our country beyond the war. But it was Abraham Lincoln who ordained the human rights movements that would allow us to come to Washington, Mr. Speaker, and begin to argue our case that this nation must live up to the truest and the highest means by which it was founded.

And so there sits Abraham Lincoln, and just a few steps down from Abraham Lincoln would stand Martin Luther King in August of 1963.

"Today we stand in the shadow of a man who, 100 years ago, set the slaves free," that 100 years later, Martin Luther King, Jr., would say, 100 years later, that is 1963, we would still find ourselves trapped in segregation with Governors using words like "interposition" and "nullification," that if Congress passes a law to extend people's civil rights or if the Supreme Court would render a decision that might expand people's human rights in 1963, it is hard to imagine that we still had Governors using words like "interposition" and "nullification" meaning that their State had the right to ignore a decision of Congress or a decision of the Supreme Court of the United States. Because in 1963, some of our leadership was showing more adherence to their State than they were to that Union, to that Flag, to that one country for which those men in a battlefield in Gettysburg had already paid the price for us not to have to revisit again. We already paid the price that we are going to be one Nation, not multiple nations, not 50 different States, all separate and all unequal.

Oh, the problems for President Obama are even more complex today. Because our system is still separate and unequal. Yes, we have a Federal system. And yes, we have respect for our State system. Some States are in surplus. Some are in deficit spending. Most are in deficit spending. And in deficit spending, it is very difficult to provide a high quality education for every single child in every single county. Even before the economy was in the condition that it was in, we had problems. And the problems now are only more exacerbated by the fact, any adherence to dogma that doesn't allow the Federal Government and the States to work cooperatively to bring relief to the American people should be seen as problematic by any side of the aisle. Why are we adhering to old dogma about what the States can do and about what the Federal Government isn't supposed to do? The American people at this hour are asking of us to do something for them. But the fact that President Barack Obama can even say that our problems today are small by comparison to the problems that Mr. Lincoln confronted is a statement about the magnitude of the problems that Abraham Lincoln, our 16th President, confronted.

And so, Mr. Speaker, even as we come to the floor and I stand here as the 91st African American to ever have the privilege of serving in a Congress where more than 12,000 people have served, and I'm just

the 91st, I owe my service in the Congress to the unsung heroes, to the men and women, the sheroes and the heroes, who fought to advance the idea that all men are created equal, to Medgar Evers and Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney, two Jews and a black, to Viola Liuzzo, to those martyrs, to those champions of equality and equal rights. But all of us owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the 16th President who allowed our generation and those succeeding generations to fight for what is right, to have the right to agree to agree and agree to disagree in the context of our magnificent Republic. And so, Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, on the 200th anniversary of the greatest American who ever lived, and on behalf of the American people, we say thank you. And we say happy birthday.