



Study Questions for the 2008 New Student Reading Program

Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America by Garry Wills

1. "All modern political prose descends from the Gettysburg address," Wills claims, in what he says is only a mild exaggeration (p.148). What features of Lincoln's address make it "modern," in Wills's view, and what does Wills understand by that term?
2. Wills reminds us that some of Lincoln's critics continue to attack him for "subverting the Constitution" at Gettysburg (p.39). Do these critics make valid points? How, if at all, might Lincoln defend the view of the Constitution informing the Gettysburg Address?
3. In Chapter Three of *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, Wills discusses Lincoln's many "clever evasions and key silences" on the matter of slavery and the racial prejudices of the 19th Century (p.91). Why do you think Wills refrains from using labels such as "racist" or "prejudiced" to describe Lincoln's beliefs and character?
4. Wills argues that in the 19th Century, the cemetery came to be viewed as "a school for the living" (p.65) and a means for training the "sensibilities" (p.70). What does he mean by this, and might this view of the function of graveyards be relevant to understanding the Gettysburg Address?
5. Lincoln believed that the Jeffersonian ideals in the Declaration of Independence amounted to "a pledge" to "all people of all colors everywhere" that America would uphold the equality of their inalienable rights (pp.105, 107). Yet we know that Jefferson owned slaves, and that his periodic assertions of the immorality of slavery conflicted with his nearly life-long practice. Given the reality of Jefferson's stance on slavery, and the nature of Lincoln's reading of the Declaration, what would Lincoln say to the idea that we interpret a text by looking for the author's "original intent"?
6. The first sentence of the "final text" of the Gettysburg Address (quoted in full on p. 263), asserts that America is "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Wills's comments on this claim at several points in *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (e.g. pp. 37, 54, 120), observing in one passage that Americans have "no pedigree except that of the idea" of equality (p.86). What might he mean by this, and why might it be important?
7. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. is notable for many things, not least the names of over 58,000 Americans who died or went missing in action during the Vietnam War. This stands in striking contrast to the abstract, generalizing, even "idealizing" character of the Gettysburg Address (pp. 54-55; 87-88). Do Wills's views help explain the differences between these two ways of commemorating the deaths and loss of war?
8. In his discussion of Lincoln's "Revolution in Style", Wills explores the development of the "spare quality" of Lincoln's mature prose. That quality seems to have been, in part, a matter of making effective use of what Twain called "crash words" that should be put in "emphatic places" (161), and what Blair called "capital words" that should stand "clear and disentangled from any other words that would clog them" (p.289, note 15). As you read the Gettysburg Address, what "crash" or "capital" words stand out as most striking and central, and why?
9. In describing Lincoln's "Revolution in Thought," Wills notes that in Lincoln's time (and even to this day) some critics (in the North and the South) worried that Lincoln had no rational arguments for, but only a "mystical attachment" to, the importance of protecting the Union (p. 125). Does Wills' discussion do anything to demystify Lincoln's views, especially his conviction, in the 1850's, that one could be genuinely opposed to slavery and yet make concessions that would convince Southern states not to secede from the Union? Explain.
10. Choose a topic of political importance, either national or international, about which reasonable people can disagree. Then write a speech of 272 words or less that conforms as closely as possible to the main ideas about rhetoric and style discussed in Chapter 5 of *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. Consider making a DVD of yourself or someone else delivering the speech, and submitting the DVD with your speech. (If the videos are properly labeled they can eventually be returned to you via campus mail.) With or without a DVD, the best submissions will be accompanied by a few sentences explaining how your speech measures up to the example set by Lincoln.