Primary Source Analysis Example: The Gettysburg Address

Type of paper	Primary source analysis
Academic level	High school / college
Subject	American Civil War and Reconstruction
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PROMPT

Analyze Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863) as a primary source. Explain its historical situation, intended audience, purpose and point of view, and assess its usefulness for understanding Union war aims.

Model response

Source: Abraham Lincoln, address delivered at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, November 19, 1863.[1]

Historical situation

Lincoln spoke four and a half months after the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1–3, 1863), one of the bloodiest battles of the war, and at a ceremony to dedicate a cemetery for Union soldiers killed there. The Union victory at Gettysburg and the fall of Vicksburg the same month had improved the North's military position, but the war was far from over, casualties were enormous, and the Emancipation Proclamation, issued earlier that year, had made the war's purpose politically contested. This situation explains why the speech looks beyond the battle itself to the meaning of the war.

Intended audience

The immediate audience was the crowd at Gettysburg, including families of the dead, but Lincoln knew the speech would be printed in newspapers across the North. Because he was addressing a national audience during a divisive war, he avoided partisan arguments and specific policies, speaking instead about shared ideals and sacrifice.

Purpose

Lincoln's purpose was to honor the dead while giving their sacrifice a meaning that justified continuing the war. He opened by dating the nation from 1776, describing a nation "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," and closed by calling for "a new birth of freedom" so that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." By linking the war to the Declaration of Independence rather than only to preserving the Union, Lincoln reframed Union war aims around equality and democracy.

Point of view

As president and as the political leader of the Union war effort, Lincoln had strong reasons to present the war as a noble cause and to encourage Northerners to keep fighting. His point of view makes the speech excellent evidence of how the administration wanted the war to be understood, but weaker evidence of how ordinary soldiers, Confederates or enslaved people understood it. The address was also brief, roughly 270 words, and followed a two-hour oration by Edward Everett; its compressed, symbolic language reflects its ceremonial purpose rather than a detailed statement of policy.

Usefulness and limitations

The Gettysburg Address is highly useful for understanding how Lincoln redefined Union war aims in 1863, connecting the war to equality and self-government. However, historians should corroborate it with other sources, such as soldiers' letters, newspaper responses and Confederate speeches, before making broad claims about how Americans viewed the war. Read alongside the Emancipation Proclamation, it shows the administration's shift from a war to preserve the Union toward a war that also promised a "new birth of freedom."

Notes

1. Abraham Lincoln, "Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg," November 19, 1863, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 7 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953).

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