The MEANING OF “All MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL”: AN ANALYSIS OF
THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

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January 2010

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This thesis, by Huang Yi-Ling, is accepted in its present form by the Department of Applied English of Yuanpei University.

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January 2010
This paper shows the history of the Civil War and how Lincoln used the phrase, “all men are created equal” in the Gettysburg Address. The Northern States and Southern States were different political factions. The Southern States relied on farming, and, due to that, they had developed a reliance on slaves. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected as President. He was a part of stopping the spread of slavery and the South felt he would further try to abolish it. The Southern States left the union, built up their own nation, and the Civil War was begun. The Civil War lasted from 1861 until 1865. In 1863, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, a document guaranteeing the freedom of slaves. After one particular battle of Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln issued his now famous Gettysburg Address. In his speech, he borrowed a phrase of the Founding Fathers of the United States in saying, “the United States was conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” It is apparent Lincoln emphasized, “all men are created equal.” What did he mean about “all men”? This research will discuss how Lincoln used the phrase, “all men are created equal.”
INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the Gettysburg Address in the context of war and slavery. Particularly it examines how Lincoln used the phrase, “all men are created equal.” The Gettysburg Address was issued during the American Civil War, after the terrible battle at Gettysburg. The American Civil War began as the result of a dispute between Southern States and Northern States regarding slavery and the right of state-level self-determination. In this speech, he said that “all men are created equal.” What did he mean in saying that all men are equal? Was he using the meaning affected by the Founding Fathers of the United States, in that white land owners had the right to vote? Or was he offering a new interpretation that all men (perhaps not women yet) of any social or racial disposition are created equal? I agree with the latter view, though it appears that Lincoln did not necessarily feel all races had equal capacities. But regarding the right to make one’s own way in the world, it should not matter what your race is. It is apparent Lincoln meant all races are equal, but exactly how did he use the Founding Father’s famous phrase in the Gettysburg Address? This research will argue how Lincoln used the phrase, “all men are created equal.” It is divided into 3 parts: this introduction, the presentation of historical evidence of the Gettysburg Address with his use of “all men are created equal,” and finally, a discussion and conclusion.
History Leading to the Civil War

The Northern States and Southern States were important political factions of the United States in the early days of the country. The Northern States did not want slavery but the Southern States did. The reason for this was because the South had better land for farming and a long tradition of slaves doing the heavy work. Without slaves, their economy and even the economy of the North would be seriously hurt. The main crops that they grew were tobacco and cotton. Some political acts, including the Fugitive Slave Act, strengthened the rights of slave owners. Such acts, especially the afore mentioned, were very unpopular with abolitionists and even moderates from the North (Martin, 2001). Abraham Lincoln was from the Northern States and he was very opposed to slavery. The Southern States were angry. During the election campaign, they strongly opposed Lincoln for President. The South said that if Lincoln won, they would leave the Union. It was a turbulent time between the North and South. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected as President. Lincoln started to carry out his program. He tried to maintain the Union while stopping the spread of slavery; but he claimed he was not an abolitionist and did not take steps to permanently end slavery. In the same timeframe, the Southern States left the union (Jones, 1999). They formed their own nation. Lincoln challenged their claimed right to secede from the United States, and the Civil War had begun.
**A Brief History of the Civil War**

Abraham Lincoln was elected as president in 1860. The Southern States seceded from the Union and built up an independent government—the Confederate States of America, formed by eleven Southern States that had declared their secession from the Union. In the same time, “there was huge antislavery sentiment in the North, but such sentiment was also strongly anti-Black. White Northern States did not want slavery” (Pillai, 2008). This began the American Civil War. The Civil War lasted from 1861 until 1865. In this war, Lincoln had full power in leading the military. During this time, “over 600,000 soldiers representing both sides were killed either by battle deaths or disease” (Martin, 2001). The Civil War was a watershed event in the United States. “Lincoln was able to use his influence as the president of the United States to build the Republican Party into a national political force” (Long, 2009). “In 1863, Lincoln became known as the Emancipator after signing the Emancipation Proclamation, a document that guaranteed the freedom of the slaves in the Southern United States” (Long, 2009). No matter the questions concerning secession or whether slaves were free or not, the war was on, slaves were officially free, soldiers were dying on both sides and Lincoln showed in the Emancipation Proclamation and the Gettysburg address just what he understood “all men are created equal” to mean.

**Background of Gettysburg**
As stated above, over 600,000 soldiers representing both sides were killed during four years of war (Martin, 2001). One of the fiercest battles was at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. “The two armies suffered between 46,000 and 51,000 casualties. Union casualties were 23,055, while Confederate casualties are more difficult to estimate” (wikipedia.org, 2009). “American soldiers clashed in the Battle of Gettysburg, in what would prove to be a turning point of the Civil War” (wikipedia.org, 2009). After the battle, Abraham Lincoln gave his famous Gettysburg Address. In his speech, he said that “the United States was conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Also, Lincoln said the war would bring about “a new birth of freedom” (Abraham Lincoln as cited in Basler, 2009). No matter what the color of your skin, everyone should be free and equal, according to Lincoln. He became known as the Great Emancipator after signing the Emancipation Proclamation, thus abolishing slavery.

Looking Carefully at the Gettysburg Address

Fourscore 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.

In his speech, Lincoln used the Founding Father’s phrase “all men are created equal”. What did Lincoln mean about all men? There were so many different people
in the world: black, white, poor, slave. Lincoln didn’t say specifically what he meant by “all”, but we can understand from context what he likely meant.

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 that nation might live.

The battle was because of equality and freedom. Could we keep that conviction forever? Lincoln didn’t specify that slavery was the particular issue here; he did, however, imply that the war was being fought, in part, because freedom had been denied to some of America’s residents. Though he originally tried to preserve the Union by not freeing the slaves, by now he recognized that freedom of all men, including the slaves, was in danger of being lost in the war.

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 poor power to add or to 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.

Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation earlier in 1863. He freed the slaves. In reality, the proclamation still did not make some people really equal and free. I feel, in Lincoln’s speech, he didn’t clearly state his meaning about “all men”. However, people had become officially, though at first, not practically, free and also equal. A new nation was created by these people. In the national rebirth after the war Lincoln’s use of “all men” at least set the stage for “all men” becoming equally free. However, his meaning probably did not mean “all men” as it is used today; rather simply that no one should be another’s slave.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented how Lincoln used the phrase, “all men are created equal” in the Gettysburg Address and in the context of war and slavery. The American Civil
War was begun as the result of the Northern States and Southern States differing political opinions regarding states rights and the slave problem in farming. During the war, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. He wanted the slaves to be free in the Southern States. Prior to the Proclamation, Lincoln had not freed the slaves because he hoped compromise could bring the two sides back together. However, most Southerners felt he would free the slaves anyway. Due partly to that, the Southern States left the Union and decided to fight. Many people died in the terrible battle at Gettysburg. After the battle, in 1863, Lincoln gave his now famous Gettysburg Address. In his speech, he used the phrase by the Founding Fathers of the United States saying, “all men are created equal.” What did he mean in saying “all men”? I agree with “all men are created equal”, but my sense of equal relates to equality today. Everyone should be equal even though we are different races. In my opinion, Lincoln did not mean equal in the same way we mean it today. It is rather displayed in his pretended non-abolitionist stance, where he didn’t free the slaves until late in the war, and his contradictory hatred of slavery. It is displayed in his debates where he stated men are free to make a living, but perhaps not equal in ability, leadership and moral precept. And it is displayed in his Gettysburg Address where he reiterates the right to liberty and choice in the United States. True freedom did not come immediately to the freed slaves, and this also hints at the understanding of
“equal” in Lincoln’s time. There are so many different races in the world, even rich or powerful, and nobody should absolutely control someone’s agency. However, that is today’s meaning. What did Lincoln mean? His meaning was at some point midway between the Founding Father’s and today’s meaning. “Equality” still had a lot of evolution to go.
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