

“A New Birth of Freedom”

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During this week a short address given at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania initially received little attention in the press, but grew into one of the most famous speeches in American history, while fighting at Knoxville and Chattanooga, Tennessee dominated the war news.

In early November 1863, President Abraham Lincoln had been invited to give “a few appropriate remarks” at the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg, marking the burial site of Union dead from the momentous battle four months earlier. Despite worries over the health of his seriously-ill son Tad, the president travelled to Gettysburg on November 18, where he made final revisions to his speech at the home of David Wills, organizer of the dedication ceremony. The following day he rode on horseback to the cemetery, where he was greeted by a crowd of approximately 15,000.

The day’s main speaker was to be noted orator Edward Everett, who would give a two-hour long speech, recounting in detail the events of the battle. Following a hymn the president was introduced. His address was just 272 words long and lasted barely two minutes, but in the words of historian Ethan Rafuse it “articulated for millions of Americans the higher ideals to which they wanted their nation and the Union cause dedicated.” The address ended with the stirring words: “[W]e 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.” Though an anti-administration newspaper the next day referred to the president’s “silly remarks” that deserved a “veil of oblivion,” Edward Everett praised the president’s speech as a masterpiece that came closer in

two minutes to the central idea of the dedication than Everett himself had in two hours. Its reputation grew over the years and the Gettysburg Address is now rightly viewed as one of the greatest speeches in American history, crystallizing for many how Union victory in the Civil War was necessary in order to fulfill the promise of a truly equal republican form of government as outlined by the Founding Fathers.

While the cemetery dedication at Gettysburg was the major news in the east, in Tennessee two battles were taking place that would result in a further weakening of Confederate fortunes in that theater of the war. In early November, General James Longstreet had been sent from Chattanooga, where the Confederates maintained a partial siege of the city, with orders to drive Union forces out of east Tennessee and capture their positions at Knoxville. Longstreet's forces crossed the Tennessee River on November 14 and advanced towards Knoxville, with Union troops under Ambrose Burnside withdrawing on a parallel course towards the city. On November 17 Burnside's men reached the crossroads of Campbell's Station, southwest of Knoxville and, after a brief engagement, were able to withdraw into the Knoxville defenses before the arrival of Longstreet. The Confederate general awaited reinforcements and maintained a partial siege of the town for the next twelve days, until determining to attack the Federal defenses at Fort Sanders.

At Chattanooga, meanwhile, the Confederate Army of Tennessee under Braxton Bragg strengthened its lines around Chattanooga. Union General Ulysses Grant, reinforced by William T. Sherman, made plans to break the siege by capturing the rebel positions on Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge. He began his operation on November 23, sending part of General George Thomas' Army of the Cumberland to attack the Confederate lines at Orchard Knob, located

about a mile in front of their main position on Missionary Ridge. The assault succeeded with relatively few casualties, and the Federals prepared to resume their attacks the next day.