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ACADEMY

God, Democracy, and the Civil War: Lincoln's Speeches

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Wednesday, Aug. 11 at 7:00 PM EDT

Course Description:

Abraham Lincoln was one of the greatest statesmen in American history, and his speeches and spirit have since defined the soul of our nation. How did a man with no religious training or church membership give such profoundly religious interpretations of American history? How did he make sense of American democracy amid a bloody and terrible Civil War, when everyone from theologians to ordinary churchgoers struggled to understand the meaning of their lives and America's destiny? In this seminar, we will explore Lincoln's understanding of religion, America, and the meaning of our history, through his "Gettysburg Address" and "Meditation on the Divine Will." Strikingly original in their time, and still relevant today, we will examine Lincoln's ideas about God and democracy.

"Meditation on the Divine Will"

Abraham Lincoln

2 September 1862

This fragment was found and preserved by John Hay, one of President Lincoln's White House secretaries.

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party -- and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true -- that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere great power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds

“The Gettysburg Address”

Abraham Lincoln

19 November 1863

Four score 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.

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 battle-field 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. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor 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 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.