

# Then: Presidential Speeches

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about presidential speeches. Early on in American history, presidents could make speeches to a few hundred people and had to hope that newspapers would cover their speech to share it with others. This was how presidents spread their messages until the advent of the radio. Perhaps the most famous presidential speech before the radio, and perhaps since, was Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Presidential Speeches
2. The Gettysburg Address



## BEFORE YOU START

How have U.S. presidents used speeches to communicate with their constituents?

## 1. Presidential Speeches

Today we are used to seeing presidential speeches on television or online, but the foundation for this tradition began long before those kinds of communication technologies existed. From the country's creation to today, presidential speeches have been and continue to be a powerful tool for communication.

Speeches are a way for presidents to communicate ideas and plans, whether they're in office or campaigning. There is even an annual presidential speech embedded into our political tradition: the State of the Union address. This national update is such a central part of our political culture that it's actually required in the Constitution (Cunningham, 2018). Although the president is only required to address Congress, the State of the Union has become a highly anticipated annual speech from the president to the American people.

Some presidential speeches, especially ones given in times of crisis, hold an important place in U.S. history and culture. Perhaps the most famous is a speech that President Abraham Lincoln gave in the thick of the Civil War.

## 2. The Gettysburg Address

Abraham Lincoln was an outstanding communicator. Even on the presidential debate stage before he was elected, his communication skill shone through. Throughout his political career, Lincoln was known for

eloquent, convincing speeches—he was able to excite his audiences and convey his messages to them in a compelling way.

The U.S. Civil War began in 1861, when Southern states seceded from the Union over the issue of slavery. Battles like the one in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in July of 1863 caused huge losses of life, in part because military technology had outpaced medical technology—doctors lacked the tools to heal wounds caused by more advanced weapons. At the end of the Battle of Gettysburg, a total of over 165,000 troops had fought, and over 50,000 had died. Although the North won the battle, it lost nearly as many troops as the South (American Battlefield Trust, n.d.).

That November, Lincoln gave a memorial speech at the Gettysburg battlefield. It lasted about three minutes, and it was only 272 words long (Willis, 2012).

#### Primary Source Excerpt

**Type:** Speech

**Author:** Abraham Lincoln

**Year:** 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.*



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Take a moment to consider what you've just read. Then read it again, remembering your close reading and critical thinking tools—consider the author, the context, and what the speech is trying to accomplish.

The Gettysburg Address, reprinted and memorized by generations of American schoolchildren, had a wide reach and influence even without broadcast technology. In the next lesson, we'll look at how new technology helped 20th-century presidential communication reach its own wide audience.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **presidential speeches**, such as the State of the Union Address, are one way for presidents to communicate with the American people. You also read and analyzed a particularly famous speech in U.S. history: **The Gettysburg Address**.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

## REFERENCES

Cunningham, Sean. (2018, June 14). *A Short History of Presidential Communication* InsideHook. [www.insidehook.com/article/history/short-history-presidential-communication](http://www.insidehook.com/article/history/short-history-presidential-communication)

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