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Edward Everett spoke for two hours, then Abraham Lincoln for two minutes. Who is Edward Everett?

Gettysburg's Main Oration Proved an Easy Act to Follow

By Allen C. Guelzo

If there is anything that any American is likely to know about Abraham Lincoln, it's that he delivered the Gettysburg Address. Actually, Lincoln's words at Gettysburg's Soldiers' National Cemetery on Nov. 19, 1863, were the dedication sentences for the cemetery and the 3,512 Union dead from the battle of Gettysburg who had been laid to rest there. The ceremony's full-scale feature oration, more than two hours long, was given not by Lincoln, but by Edward Everett. At which point, any American is likely to ask: Edward who?

They wouldn't have said that in 1863. Everett, 69, was probably the most acclaimed orator in America, which was saying something then, when public speaking occupied the entertainment niche we give to the movies and influencers today. His lectures, one admiring magazine declared, were "filled with those delicious cadences which thrill . . . like a strain of fine music, and cling spontaneously to the memory."

Everett was born in Massachusetts in 1794, and with some gentle boosting from relatives he slipped into Harvard at 13. He graduated as valedictorian four years later, studied for the ministry, married into a wealthy Boston family, and in 1824 ran for Congress. From there, he vaulted upward to become governor of Massachusetts, diplomatic envoy to Great Britain, President Millard Fillmore's secretary of state and then a U.S. senator.

But there were two fundamental flaws in Everett. Although he loathed slavery, his first loyalty—and by a long distance—was to the American Union. If tolerating slavery was the price for the Union's preservation, Everett would pay it. In his debut speech in Congress, Everett declared that for the sake of the Union, he would "buckle a knapsack to my back, and put a musket on my shoulder" to defend Southern slave owners from a slave uprising. For the next 35 years, the " knapsack" speech would be thrown back at Everett as proof that he lacked a moral compass on slavery.

The second flaw was a stupendously bad sense of timing. He endorsed his old friend, Daniel Webster, when Webster backed the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, then tried to retract the support; four years later, as a U.S. senator, he opposed the infamous Kansas- Nebraska Act, which would have opened the door to legalizing slavery in the Western territories, but then missed the floor vote on the bill. Worst of all, he was persuaded to run as the vice-presidential nominee of the Constitutional Union Party, a politically forlorn hope in the 1860 election—the same election that awarded the presidency to Abraham Lincoln.

But once the Civil War broke out, Everett abandoned any hope of appeasing slave owners to save the Union. Faced with "an alternative between supporting the Government and allowing the country to fall into a state of anarchy," Everett swept away "all former differences of opinion" and turned his golden eloquence to supporting Lincoln and emancipation. He lectured across the North on "The Conduct and Causes of the War" and "The Duty of Supporting the Government," consulted with Lincoln as a roving spokesman for the administration, and declared his backing for "the right to terminate slavery in the rebel states by an act of the war power."

The high point of Everett's campaign came in 1863, after the invitation "to deliver the oration" at the Gettysburg cemetery ceremonies. He would be joined in Gettysburg by Lincoln himself (who would provide "a few appropriate remarks") as well as by members of the Cabinet, governors of the Union states, a fulldress military parade and more than 15,000 spectators.

Everett's address was the summit of his oratorical art. The dead of Gettysburg had "cemented" the Union "with the blood of some of the purest patriots that ever died." By contrast, the Rebel cause was the plot of "ambitious men," an insurrection for the

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purpose of promoting "injustice and wrong." He reviewed in detail all three days of the fighting, and concluded that "down to the latest period of recorded time . . . there will be no brighter page" than the one which described the "Battles of Gettysburg."

It was, one newspaper gushed, "one of those classic, eloquent orations which have no equal in this country." Alas for Everett, in one more spurt of unfortunate timing, his address was about to be utterly overshadowed. After speaking for two hours, Everett was followed on the platform by Lincoln, who delivered the most memorable two-minute- long tribute in American history.

It wasn't just that Lincoln was brief. Everett's address was formal, classical, academic; Lincoln spoke in the middling speech of lawyers and journalists that everyone could remember. Everett's address still avoided any direct reference to slavery; Lincoln's remarks asked Americans to dedicate themselves to "the proposition that all men are created equal." Even Everett seemed to realize that he had been out-matched. "I should be glad," he wrote to Lincoln the day after, "if I . . . came as near the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes."

Everett didn't live to see the final victory of the Union. Worn out with speaking and fundraising, he came down with pneumonia a year later and died on Jan. 15, 1865. Today Everett occupies little more than a footnote to Abraham Lincoln. But for one long moment, he too delivered a Gettysburg Address.

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