



Can we come together under the banner of freedom and democracy that Lincoln envisioned?

By: Brittany Wheeler, NJBankers VP/Director of Government Affairs



I began writing this article on November 19, knowing that by the time it reaches readers, the 161st anniversary of the Gettysburg Address will have passed. Yet, Lincoln's message remains as relevant today as it was in 1863, especially following Veterans Day and a divisive national election. As we honor those who have served, we are reminded that the strength of our nation lies not in political victories, but in the unity of its people. In an era of polarization, we must remember that a nation "conceived in Liberty" must endure, for the United States remains the last best hope on Earth.

On November 19, 1863, President Lincoln delivered his now-iconic address at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, following one of the Civil War's bloodiest battles. In just 272 words, Lincoln reaffirmed the American experiment: that this nation, "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," must endure.

The Gettysburg Address was not only a tribute to those who fell at Gettysburg; it was a call to preserve the Union as a unified people, committed to a common cause. Lincoln's famous words—"that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth"—were not merely a hope for the end of war, but a profound affirmation of democracy, liberty, and equality.

In today's America, it's impossible not to see the relevance of Lincoln's words. We live in a time of intense political and social divisions. We must ask ourselves: can we truly say we are "one nation, indivisible"? Can we come together under the banner of freedom and democracy that Lincoln envisioned?

As we reflect on the Gettysburg Address, it's clear that our unity is once again at risk. The recent presidential election, which exposed deep divisions in our society, is a stark reminder of how far we have drifted from the ideals of mutual respect and collective purpose. Issues like economic inequality, social norms, national borders, and even the state of our democracy echo the divisions of Lincoln's time.

Though we are not in a civil war, the rhetoric of our political leaders and the growing ideological divides in our communities create an environment where compromise is seen as weakness and consensus an afterthought. In this context, we must remember Lincoln's warning that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Our nation's survival depends on our ability to rise above party lines and work together for the common good.

It's fitting that we recently observed Veterans Day, honoring those who have sacrificed so much for this country. Veterans, whether from the Civil War or the present day, embody the spirit of sacrifice that has always been at the heart of America's strength. Their service reminds us that the survival of this nation—and the ideals it represents—has always required a commitment to something greater than individual interests or political ideologies.

This spirit of sacrifice is also evident in the work done by everyday Americans in our local communities. From local businesses to volunteers, first responders, and educators, the strength of America lies in the collective efforts of ordinary people working together. At NJBankers, we see this daily in the work our member banks do to support local economies, provide financial education, and build stronger communities.

Looking ahead, the lessons of the Gettysburg Address are more urgent than ever. In the face of continued polarization, we must commit ourselves to the hard work of rebuilding trust, fostering dialogue, and finding common ground. This isn't just the responsibility of politicians or leaders; it's the responsibility of every citizen.

The outcome of the recent election reflects our democratic process, but it also highlights the need for healing and reconciliation. We must remember that our nation's survival depends not on the success of one party or another, but on our ability to work together toward a better future. Just as Lincoln sought to bring the nation together after the Civil War, we too must bridge our divisions and rebuild our shared purpose.

In the end, the enduring strength of the United States will not be measured by political victories, but by the resilience of its people. It will be measured by our ability to come together, work toward a common cause, and ensure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people" remains a living reality.

As we reflect on the 161st anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, let us embrace Lincoln's message of unity, sacrifice, and perseverance.