



## The Significance of Gettysburg.

Gettysburg holds significance for many reasons:

- It was a turning point in the war, ensuring the preservation of the nation.
- Four months later, it was the site of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, where he described his vision for a "new birth of freedom" for America. It was what many consider the best summation in our nation's history of the meaning and price of freedom.
- In the decades following the battle, it became a symbol of reconciliation, as soldiers from the Union and the Confederacy returned to the battlefield to shake hands across the fence lines.

Regrettably, many of Gettysburg's visitors, indeed, many Americans, have forgotten -- if they ever knew -- that the Civil War was the defining moment in American history: That it defined who we are as a nation, and what beliefs we hold to be "self-evident."

Today, both adults and children can easily repeat phrases like "one nation" and "with liberty and justice for all," and yet not really understand the sacrifices that were required to achieve Lincoln's dream of a "new birth of freedom."

There's another aspect of the Civil War that warrants our consideration, especially as we face the ongoing challenge of defending freedom in a changing world. That is, the level of involvement, the depth of commitment, and the scope of sacrifice that Americans in the 1860s were willing to endure in pursuit of their beliefs. Consider that:

- In 1860, the total population of the United States was 31.4 million
- 3.8 million men -- 12.4 percent of the total population -- were enrolled in military service
- 620,000 -- 2 percent -- lost their lives.

If we look at those statistics in the context of today's population of just over 300 million:

- More than 37.2 million people would be enrolled in military service
- More than 6 million would die.

Never before -- or since -- have the American people been so thoroughly engaged in such a monumental struggle. For each of the 3.8 million men enrolled in military service in the 1860s, there was a home affected by his absence. For the homes of the 620,000 who died, the impact was both permanent and tragic. The Civil War touched the lives of every American and impacted every aspect of American life. Gettysburg is the very place where the fate of that war was sealed.