

Obama's snub of Gettysburg ceremony is a travesty

By William C. Kashatus
Guest Writer

When Pennsylvania's Congressional delegation invited President Barack Obama to speak at today's ceremony marking the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, most Americans assumed he would attend. So it came as a shock last month when Obama declined the invitation.

Instead, he will send little-known Interior Secretary Sally Jewell to do the job of a president. That Obama is the first African American president in our nation's history underscores his responsibility to attend the ceremony.

On Nov. 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln dedicated a National Cemetery for the 23,049 Union soldiers who died at the Battle of Gettysburg four months earlier. The Union victory marked a turning point in the Civil War not only ending the most threatening Confederate invasion of the North, but proving that the Federal army could defeat the Confederacy if it had effective military leadership.

Obama should understand the significance of both the battle and Lincoln's eloquent tribute to the Union dead. After all, he considers Lincoln a political hero and often evokes the martyred president's image. In 2008, for example, Obama announced his bid for the presidency in Springfield, Ill., where Lincoln announced his own presidential candidacy. During that year's campaign, he encouraged his staff to evoke lofty comparisons between the two men.

After he won the election, Obama re-created Lincoln's 1861 train trip to Washington as part of his own inaugural pageantry. He even took the oath of office on Lincoln's Bible; something he repeated after his re-election in 2012.

But there's more than irony involved here.

Obama's decision to forego his responsibility to attend the celebration is a travesty. As the first black president in our nation's history, he should understand the special significance of the Gettysburg Address to African Americans.

Contemporary scholars regard the 272-word speech as one of the greatest in American history

because of its eloquence, brevity and enduring impact. What gave the speech special force and meaning however, was Lincoln's contention that Emancipation was the higher purpose for which the Union dead had sacrificed their lives.

Emphasizing the principles of human equality espoused by the founding fathers "four score and seven years ago" in the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln redefined the Civil War not only as a struggle for the preservation of the Union but a "new birth of freedom" that would bring true equality to all of its citizens.

For Lincoln, the "unfinished work" of the Union soldiers who died at Gettysburg — the cause they had "thus far so nobly advanced" — was Emancipation. It was also "the great task remaining" before the American people to complete. In so doing, democracy would "not perish from the earth," but rather remain a viable form of government well into the future.

Lincoln's was a masterful stroke of oratory insisting that the American people must, in consistency with the principles of the Declaration, accept the emancipation of black slaves if the great sacrifice of "those who here gave their lives that that nation might live" was to be duly honored.

By linking the sacrifice of the Union soldiers at Gettysburg to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln gave new meaning to the proposition that "all men are created equal."

It also signaled his intention to legalize that proposition by pushing through Congress a bill that would outlaw slavery forever in the United States. That bill eventually became the Thirteenth Amendment to the federal constitution.

Obama's election to the highest office in the nation was the fullest realization of Lincoln's effort to establish equality between the white and black races. Thus, the president's absence from today's anniversary celebration at Gettysburg not only brings into question the genuineness of his bond to Lincoln, but his understanding of and duty to history as well.

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