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Lincoln serves as a reminder of national unity

The keynote speaker that November day was Edward Everett, the president of Harvard University. Everyone there understood that the dedication of a place like this required a person of his stature, a former governor of Massachusetts, a man with the mental ability to describe for the audience why the country suffered so, why it paid so much, why all the death and destruction was worth it.

There was scant time for the man from Illinois, a person who so many considered a dolt, an awkward hick, an unwanted man. And to be sure, Everett was no easy act to follow. This was especially true after he spent 2½ hours giving his oration.

The speech of the man from Illinois was about 200 words; it took him only two minutes to deliver. But when it was over, the orator from Harvard couldn't help but remark, "I should be glad if I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

The place was Gettysburg, Pa. The year was 1863. The man from Illinois was President Abraham Lincoln. The occasion was the dedication of a soldier's cemetery at a place where some four months prior, about 50,000 men, Union and Confederate alike, lost their lives during one of the Civil War's bloodiest battles.

In summing up the war that day, Lincoln set forth the great task that lay before the country: "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."

I thought about those men at Gettysburg while looking through the newspaper recently and wondered, have we lived up to the vision set forth by President Lincoln? Or have we allowed his



Law & Politics

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message to get away from us?

These questions are crucial because our country sits in peril as the European debt crisis and our current deficit threaten the continued existence of our union as we know it. Unfortunately, one need look no further than the upcoming presidential election to see how splintered we are and more to the point, how quickly politicians are willing to sacrifice any higher calling and turn on one another — unity be damned — when there's an election on the line.

Let's start with the Republican primaries. Really, what we have seen is unprecedented, at least in my lifetime. All the candidates have had their day in the sun, Mitt Romney first, followed by the others and then back to Romney again.

The last gasp for the Romney challengers is Newt Gingrich. For the Republicans to have any hope of beating Barack Obama in November, Gingrich has to give it a rest. He finally broke away from the pack after coming across as a statesman in the early debates, like one of the nation's elders who returned home to put the house in order. Add to this that his knowledge of the issues seemed to be deeper than everyone else's, he scored a big victory in South Carolina.

But after that victory and a close race in Florida, Gingrich did what his de-

tractors said he would do: He went dark. Faced with an onslaught of negative ads, he was no longer talking of Ronald Reagan's rules of civility but swinging for the fences, calling Romney a liar and the like. And so he lost big.

As a footnote, Ron Paul should be commended. As I see it, he has done more than any other candidate to set an issues-based agenda for discussion. He's the most mature person in the room, one quick to point out the dire financial situation of this country (see the Simpson-Bowles report) and avoid ad hominem. What I like best about him is that he doesn't slam the hackneyed talking points like the rest of them seem to do.

Which leads us to the general election. With Obama's poll numbers low, he will have a very difficult time beating Romney in battleground states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida. So the race will be a close one, a very close one. This will lead to it being one of the hardest fought and most vituperative contests to date.

Considering all that is at stake, coupled with the effect of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision — endless advertisements paid for by "super-PACs" and the influx of corporate money into the process — it will be unlike anything we have ever seen. The election will turn into a TV station's dream come true: The commercials will be endless, the commercials will be savage and advertising outlets will make more money than ever. Really, people will have to turn off their televisions to keep any hope alive of being able to coexist with those with differing political views.

So with all this in our near future, it might not be a bad idea for everyone to reread the Gettysburg Address and put things into a little context. Indeed, the next nine months will do nothing to foster national unity. But the candidates and citizens alike would do well to remember what that Illinois lawyer said on that November day in 1863, because today, like then, our nation is at stake.