

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

In the evening, when Michelle and the girls have gone to bed, I sometimes walk down the hall to a room Abraham Lincoln used as his office. It contains an original copy of the Gettysburg Address, written in Lincoln's own hand.

I linger on these few words that have helped define our American experiment: "a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Through the lines of weariness etched in his face, we know Lincoln grasped, perhaps more than anyone, the burdens required to give these words meaning. He knew that even a self-evident truth was not self-executing; that blood drawn by the lash was an affront to our ideals; that blood drawn by the sword was in painful service to those same ideals.

He understood as well that our humble efforts, our individual ambitions, are ultimately not what matter; rather, it is through the accumulated toil and sacrifice of ordinary men and women — those like the soldiers who consecrated that battlefield — that this country is built, and freedom preserved. This quintessentially self-made man, fierce in his beliefs in honest work and the stirring spirit at the heart of America, believed that it falls to each generation, collectively, to share in that toil and sacrifice.

Through cold war and world war, through industrial revolutions and technological transformations, through movements for civil rights and women's rights and workers' rights and gay rights, we have. At times, social and economic change have strained our union. But Lincoln's words give us confidence that whatever trials await us, this nation and the freedoms we cherish can, and shall, prevail.