

## Kansans forged vision of peace in midst of war

When the idea for Emporia State was conceived by the Kansas Legislature in 1863, the country was, as Abraham Lincoln would put it later that same year, "engaged in a great civil war." The war was a test, as Lincoln said, of whether any nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal could long endure.

We know the ending, of course. Lincoln would be assassinated by a slogan-shouting extremist, but America would pass the test and those who died at Gettysburg and at all of the other grim fields of war would not die in vain. The union was saved, slavery was abolished.

And we went on to become, of all the nations of the earth, a beacon of hope, a "shining city on a hill" — a biblically inspired phrase that has been used by politicians as diverse as John Winthrop, Walter F. Mondale and Ronald Reagan.

I, too, believe in the capacity for America's greatness.

But I am also aware of the sacrifices of those who have made our opportunity possible. My office is in a building named for one of those who sacrificed much for what he believed in. Since 1917, Plumb Hall has stood guard over the northern terminus of Commercial Street, and is named for Preston B. Plumb, an Ohio native. After hearing a street-corner appeal for the anti-slavery movement in Kansas Territory, Plumb came west. He soon became one of the founders of Emporia, and was a state legislator and soldier during the Civil War. Later, he served three terms as a U.S. Senator and died in office in 1891, according to his biographer, from overwork.

The Memorial Union at ESU, which was opened in 1925 as a memorial to those who gave the ultimate sacrifice in both the Spanish-American War and the Great War, is a testament to unflinching sacrifice. Sadly, there followed other wars in which our students have served and to whom the Memorial Union has been rededicated.

As the shadows lengthen and the leaves fall and Veterans Day draws near, I am reminded not only of the sacrifices of our men and women in uniform, but also the extraordinary vision of our public servants. Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address on Nov. 19, 1863, on the field where the tide of war had begun to turn just four months earlier — and where nearly 8,000 soldiers on both sides had died for what they believed in. Speaking at a ceremony to

rebury the Union dead in a national cemetery, Lincoln delivered a powerfully short, two-minute speech that has become ingrained in the American soul. Schoolchildren were once required to memorize the speech — are they still? — and I can recite it by heart.

Memorizing the words is the easy part. Embracing the meaning takes a bit longer to soak in. What is stunning is that in the midst of conflict, Lincoln is looking ahead — and placing the burden on us, the living, to not waste the opportunity that has been afforded us by the sacrifice of others. Just listen to what he had to say:

"It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

Lincoln still speaks to us these 150 years later. His words are a calm reminder of the unfinished business that is the task of the living to complete.

Thinking of the Gettysburg Address, I can't help but recall the Kansas legislators who, in the midst of war, had the vision to authorize a system of higher education — a plan built for peace. It is my unshakeable belief that the greatest tool for peace and prosperity in the history of the world is education, and I shall be forever indebted to those early Kansas lawmakers for their founding wisdom.

We all have unfinished business to attend to, whether we are university presidents or lawmakers, faculty members or students, business leaders or private citizens. We must take up this business with all seriousness, but with good will and optimism and using reason and vision as our guides.

Today we are a country divided by politics, severely tested by economic and cultural challenges and fighting a war overseas that has lasted more than twice as long as the Civil War. It is easy to become discouraged, but let's keep the lessons of 1863 alive: remember the past, but plan for the future. And let us not waste the opportunity now before us, to come a bit closer to that shining city on a hill.

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