I feel a certain awkwardness standing here, as I do for the third time, and especially when sharing the Lincoln Prize with a book on the Gettysburg Address as superb as Martin Johnson’s. As someone else said when confronting a very different situation, I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.

Still less do I have room for self-compliment when I am here in the presence of so many of my peers and friends:

- Tom Klingenstein and James Piereson, who have done so much to support the Civil War Era Studies program and The Gettysburg Semester at Gettysburg College
- Michael Burlingame (the chief of the modern Lincoln fraternity), Lucas Morel, Barbara Gannon, James Oakes, Judith Geisberg, Michele Rubin, Andrew Miller, and my own junior colleague, Brian Jordan
- The leadership of Gettysburg College, and especially Janet Riggs, Chris Zappe (whose bout with pneumonia has prevented his attending this evening), and Jack Ryan, and Tim Shannon the chair of the History department
- And above all, my patient, loyal, loving wife of thirty-three years, Debra.

I am as much a surprise to myself tonight, as the Lincoln Prize is to me. I was not born to the academic estate, or even on the better side of the tracks. I went to a public high school, and to a small and undistinguished college. My grandfather was a paperhanger; my father left us when I was ten, and I did not see him again for thirty years. As that same ‘someone else’ said, I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relatives or friends to recommend me.

But I have looked for one thing in American life, and that has been the thing which has been America’s chief gift to the world -- the same thing which too many today have spent privileged lives despising -- and that is, to elevate the condition of men---to lift artificial weights from all shoulders---to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all---to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.

It is this for which Lincoln, and all those men whose names are inscribed in half-circle rows in the Soldiers National Cemetery at Gettysburg, died. Let this Prize honor, not me, but them, so that the story of their deeds, will rise continuously in our republic into a new birth of freedom.
“It was not merely that Gettysburg finally delivered a victory, or that it administered a bloody reverse to Southern fortunes at the point and in the place where they might otherwise have scored their greatest triumph, or that it had come at such a stupendous cost in lives. It was that the monumental scale of that sacrifice was its own refutation to both the old lie as well as the new one -- that democracy must descend inevitably in a carnival of defeat, that democracy enervates the virtue of its people to the point where they are unwilling to do more than blinkingly look around for their next meal. That the news of Gettysburg came in conjunction with the fall of Vicksburg, and came together on the anniversary of the Declaration he held so dear, seemed like a sign written in the clouds [to Abraham Lincoln].... The cemetery added the final stone in the arch of his thinking, because the cemetery was the city of the battle’s dead, and the size of that city was its own mute testimony that the citizens of a democracy were not merely a population of bovine shopkeepers and blank-stare farmers, but citizens who had seen something transcendental after all in the rainbow-promise of democracy, something worth dying to protect, something worth communicating to the living.

... The Europeans thought that the Civil War would become positive proof that democracy was a self-destructive illusion, and would “provide a support for the monarchial-aristocratic principle in the Southern states.” Gettysburg suggested something entirely different, that democracy had not in fact enervated and debased the American people, but had instead made them stronger and more determined to resist any Romantic backsliding from the integrity of the proposition to which they had been dedicated in 1776. ...For all the planning, foresight and expenditure which had gone into the creation of the Gettysburg cemetery, the real focus of attention would always be, and deserved to be, on the soldiers who had fought and won the greatest battle, not so much of a war, as of the age-old struggle of commoners and kings.”