Thank you, and deepest thanks to Gettysburg College and to Mr. Richard Gilder and Mr. Lew Lehrman.

Abraham Lincoln will always stand as an image of hope and achievement, and one of his greatest accomplishments lay in his ability to inspire Americans to work together to build the more perfect union envisioned by the Founders.

As we gather in this magnificent Union League Club, itself a monument to the great task that Lincoln pursued his entire life, we, too, perpetuate and participate in the work of the Founders and of Lincoln in preserving and enlarging the heritage of our past.

I was asked to read a page or two of my book, and I have chosen this passage from the conclusion:

Lincoln’s speech was, necessarily and rightfully, a statement of political purposes that cannot be distinguished from what opponents called partisanship, for the “new birth of freedom” stood for everything most Democrats (and all secessionists) stood against, including limited (at first) voting rights for freedmen, equal protection of all citizens, a renewed emphasis upon extending the emancipation policy even into Union slave states, and the first steps toward an anti-slavery amendment which Lincoln will insist upon as part of his re-election platform. This was “great task” that inspired Lincoln to repeat six times his dedication and ours to assuring the survival of democratic government embracing freedom and equal rights for all: the new birth of freedom.

“All honor to Jefferson,” Lincoln once wrote in praise of the man who “had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.” Yes, and all honor to Lincoln, who placed at the heart of our Civil War, the searing crisis of our maturation, a statement of ideals that renewed that promise and extended it to horizons not encompassed by the Founders. And here is where we come most clearly to the importance of knowing which document Lincoln wrote in Washington, and which manuscript Lincoln took to the speaker’s stand.
The literal meaning of the words in Lincoln’s several handwritten texts differs very little, but only the Battlefield Draft encodes Lincoln’s thought and experience in ways found in no other text. The Battlefield Draft alone reveals that in Lincoln’s first known writing, in Washington, he was building upon the Founding and the cues provided by his first rough sketch of July 7, 1863, and only the Battlefield Draft provides in the penciled editing and the single, grand sentence on that second page in pencil the evidence that, at Gettysburg, Lincoln was moved in ways he did not initially envision to bring a new sensibility and emphasis to his thought. And it was while speaking from the Battlefield Draft when standing before the living and the dead that Abraham Lincoln created the words and image of an enduring and authentic myth that across successive generations has been vital for elevating our vision and clarifying our purposes. Lincoln wrote his dedicatory remarks, but it took an entire nation to write “The Gettysburg Address.” His journey to the new birth of freedom at Gettysburg is our nation’s odyssey from the principles of the Founding to the agony and grandeur of the Civil War, and in part because of Lincoln’s journey, and the larger passage toward an eternal ideal he traced, we continue to make it a journey with the promise of hope.

The Lincoln Prize was conceived by men of vision to honor a man of vision, and I am both humbled and proud to accept this award. Thank you.