

# Lincoln's Question At Gettysburg Is Still Relevant

By Lee H. Hamilton

Maybe it's the recession. Or the perilous state of the war in Afghanistan. Or the growing sense that other nations — China, India, Brazil — are rising at a clip we can't match. Suddenly, though, doubts are surfacing about whether our political system can handle the challenges that confront the United States.

Just before Thanksgiving, same-day op-ed pieces by two leading news commentators — The Washington Post's Fred Hiatt and The New York Times' Thomas Friedman — crystallized this concern by asking roughly the same question: Can our government still get things done, or will it allow us to be overwhelmed by the nation's predicaments? "What I increasingly fear today," Friedman wrote, "is that America is only able to produce 'suboptimal' responses to its biggest problems."

It is not very far from that observation to the question Abraham Lincoln raised at Gettysburg as he wondered whether "a nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure."

Lincoln, of course, was consumed by the Civil War and the long-unresolved conflict over slavery. In the 18th and 19th centuries, when our form of government was first laid out and then put into practice, a political leader might wrestle with just a handful of such first-tier challenges during his lifetime. Today, your average member of Congress has to confront five or six major issues before lunchtime, from the state of the economy to health-care reform to the unsustainability of our national debt to climate change and war overseas.

In this super-charged atmosphere, as crises come at us with great rapidity and complexity, you have to wonder whether we can sustain effective governance, especially the ability to think long-term and to craft policy solutions that are not enfeebled by the need to appease a thousand different interests.

There are many reasons for alarm. As Hiatt points out, the sheer scope of unfinished business is breathtaking: a health-reform bill that may not address our most pressing difficulties; immigration reform; regulation of the financial industry; economic policy; Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea and other challengers to our interests abroad... the list goes on. And as Friedman contends, no one has yet shown the political will to fix a range of developments that have paralyzed governance, from the tidal wave of money on which politicians now depend, to gerrymandered legislative districts that encourage the extremes in both parties, to the many groups lobbying for their own narrow interests as opposed to engaging policy-makers on behalf of the national interest.

Some degree of lethargy is built into our constitutional system, which was designed to cool passions and allow for reasoned debate. The rise of the 60-vote requirement in the Senate, however, has added a formidable roadblock that puts more power in the hands of those who wish to delay or block the search for a remedy.

These developments have been exacerbated by the political division of the country, not just along partisan lines, but into halves that on any given issue either believe we should tackle the problem head-on, or should leave well enough alone. Moreover, cable television and the Internet have empowered the loudest, most divisive voices, which makes consensus in Washington even harder to reach. It takes enormously skilled political leadership to overcome these obstacles, yet skilled politicians are rare — and in our current political atmosphere even those who are willing to give it a try get shouted down, as they immediately open themselves to the charge that they've betrayed their political party or their supporters.

It is hardly written in the stars that we will overcome these problems — or that, to borrow Lincoln's phrase, we will "long endure." The only thing I know for certain is that it is not up to politicians alone to make the system work; they may bear the principal responsibility, but we all share in it. The problems besetting us have lingered because we've allowed them to. We've countenanced the rise of extremism in our politics, sat by while politicians gerrymandered their districts, turned the other way as our lawmakers became

obsessed with fundraising, abetted excessive partisanship, failed to insist on consensus-building in the national interest, and demanded a wealth of public services that we don't want to pay for.

If our political system is to avoid crumbling in the face of the very real challenges we face, it will only be because citizens let their political leaders know that Americans are ready to support those who search for pragmatic solutions to our formidable challenges.

*Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.*

For a photo of Hamilton, see: [http://www.centeroncongress.org/about/lhh\\_bio.htm](http://www.centeroncongress.org/about/lhh_bio.htm)