The evening before Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous address at Gettysburg, some of his top aides went “loafing around” the small Pennsylvania town. They noticed that a crowd of people had gathered outside the home of local attorney David Wills. Inside the residence, which was situated just off the main square, President Lincoln was eating supper with Wills, the man who had organized the development of the new military cemetery. Hearing the restless crowd, Lincoln soon appeared at the door, “said a half a dozen words meaning nothing & went in,” according to the diary of John Hay, a 25-year-old presidential assistant.

Equally unimpressed as Hay, the group continued to make its way up and down the streets of Gettysburg, requesting speeches from other visiting dignitaries, a custom known as “serenading.” Eventually, they stopped outside a building where several of the president’s advisors had gathered, encouraging them to come out as well. One of the men, a Pennsylvania-born newspaper editor and political figure named John W. Forney, angrily confronted the group.

“My friends,” Forney began, “these are the first hearty cheers I have heard tonight. You gave no such cheers to your President down the street. Do you know what you owe to that Great man? You owe your country — you owe your name as American citizens.” Forney continued to rant for several minutes, before the other political advisors finally cut him off.

There was nothing about John Forney’s outburst on Wednesday, November 18, 1863, that deserves to overshadow the dignity of what Abraham Lincoln said the next day in honor of the war dead of the great battle. But this brief, very human scene recorded in John Hay’s diary reveals a great deal about the politics of the Civil War era.

While he was alive, Lincoln was not the titanic figure he is today. He was as vilified as any president in American history. His legitimacy in office was challenged, his personal habits ridiculed, and his life threatened and eventually taken.

Looking backward, it is easy to glorify the Civil War and the men and women from both sides who made such noble sacrifices for their beliefs. Yet despite all of the courage and tragedy of the wartime period, there was also confusion, uncertainty and despair. The whirlwind of troubles overwhelmed many lesser leaders, like Lincoln’s predecessor, and Pennsylvania native, James Buchanan. Their failures help explain why politics mattered so much, and why Abraham Lincoln remains so revered. He was the finest political leader during the nation’s worst political crisis.

Lincoln’s path to greatness went through Pennsylvania. His political success was a product of the new Republican Party that first organized nationally in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia during the mid-1850s. As the second most populous state, Pennsylvania’s
twenty-seven electoral votes also held the key to his election as president. Without Pennsylvania in 1860, the Republicans could not win the White House.

More importantly, the Keystone State proved pivotal in winning the Civil War. Both of Lincoln’s secretaries of war, and several of his leading generals, hailed from Pennsylvania. The state contributed over 360,000 men to the Union war effort, more than any other northern state except New York. Confederate forces frightened the commonwealth’s residents with invasion or attack at least a half a dozen times, but the state continued to produce solid, if not always enthusiastic, support for the President and his policies.

Out of respect for the state’s influence, Lincoln carefully cultivated friends in Pennsylvania: powerful politicians like editor John Forney and Governor Andrew Curtin. It is also partly why he came to Gettysburg in 1863 to deliver his eloquent statement about the meaning of the conflict. He knew that if he could rally the war-weary population of southeastern Pennsylvania, he might reasonably expect to keep holding the Union coalition together.

John Forney’s outburst reminds us that victory did not always seem inevitable to those helping to achieve it, and that political leadership was an indispensable element of the Union’s success.