Each semester, Hillsdale in D.C. brings the WHIP students to the battlefield of Gettysburg to learn about our nation's history and college's legacy left behind there. Below is a transcript of an interview between the Collegian's new Editor-in-Chief and spring 2024 WHIP student, Jillian Parks, and distinguished military historian Dr. Allen Guelzo. Dr. Guelzo explains the significance of the battle of Gettysburg and its political and historical impact on the future of America.

JP: Dr. Guelzo is a Thomas W. Smith Distinguished Research Scholar and Director of the Initiative on Politics and Statesmanship in the James Madison Program at Princeton University. Dr. Guelzo, we are so excited to have you on the Hillsdale Radio Station today. For listeners who may not be familiar with your work, could you give us a more robust rundown on who you are and your particular areas of study and interest?

AG: Well, I think in the simplest sense, I can tell people that I am a historian, especially historian of Americans, and within that record downsville, further to especially the American Civil War era, and within that, Abraham Lincoln.

JP: How did you discover that those were things that you were really passionate about?

AG: Well, I suppose I've had those things as my mind for a very long time. I can remember that my first forum for reading about it really came when I was in second grade. I pestered my grandma to buy me a comic book biography. And you might say that was my exposure to the study of Abraham Lincoln. And ironically, I actually still have that particular comic book (I don't consult it for footnotes. Don't worry about that.) But still, it made sufficient impression on me that I've been doing a lot with Lincoln over the years ever since then.

JP: So as you mentioned, you've written books on Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Gettysburg. This may seem like a silly question. But for those who really only know about the Civil War from their history classes, how do you write an entire book on Gettysburg? What makes it so interesting and important to American culture?

AG: Two things really. First of all, it takes place almost literally in the middle of the war, July of 1863. It pits the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, under Robert E. Lee, against the federal army of the Potomac, under the command of George Gordon Mead. And it is a tremendous three-day showdown. That inflicts the largest number of casualties that you will find in any Civil War battlefield over those three days.

But even more than that, Gettysburg bulks large in the historical imagination, because there are so many people involved. I mean, one army involved some 85,000 men and the other 95,000

men. That means there are a lot of people who, in the years after the battle, will be writing memoirs and letters and recording accounts and submitting after-action reports. The available literature just from the participants on Gettysburg is enormous.

So when you blend the importance of the battle itself, together with a tremendous amount of material that gets written by its participants, believe me, you have more than enough to write a big book, just about the Battle of Gettysburg. In fact, in some senses, when you look at the way people write about the Battle of Gettysburg, today, there's so much material, that you could almost say the number of books about Gettysburg would probably work out to giving you a history of every 10-minute segment of the battle over those three days. So there is a lot and a lot to be worked with, and a lot that's important about Gettysburg. Put those all together, and you get--well, you get me writing a book about Gettysburg--but you get many other people writing very important things about Gettysburg, as well.

JP: And then can you talk a little bit more about what makes Abraham Lincoln such an interesting statesman to you?

AG: Well, Lincoln, I think interests me and interests many Americans even today 150 years after his death, because for one thing his is the hand that steers the ship of state through the crisis of the Civil War. And as much as the Civil War seems to have drifted very far into our past from today's vantage point, what is true is that civil wars are always the most destructive kinds of wars that can afflict the nation. Sometimes it seems as though civil wars never have an end. They don't have peace conference, or they don't have conferences of any sort, frankly, and there are many nations which have been scarred by civil war and are still fighting out the issues of it centuries later. So civil wars give us long-term consequences, the kinds of consequences you find, for instance, in the Balkans, the kind of consequences you can find even today in Ireland and Spain, in other nations afflicted by civil war.

So when we look at the risks that were run the dangers that we encountered as a nation, when we see that Abraham Lincoln is the person who gives us the guidance that brings the war, at least to the conclusion of its violent phase, then that makes us ask questions. What was it about this man, Lincoln, that was so remarkable that he could be the man at the helm, so to speak. And we hope, as we encounter crises as Americans today, that there is a lesson or two that we can learn from Lincoln. So we looked at Lincoln that way, simply because of his position.

But we also, I think, look to Lincoln, because he gave the country a very particular kind of leadership. It was not just shrewd political leadership--which it was--but it was also a sense of moral leadership. He often said that if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. And slavery is at the end of the day, the fundamental issue that the war is being fought about, or at least it's one of the principal causes of the Civil War. And Lincoln understood that this was not just a political

question, it was a moral question. It was a moral question that threw doubt over the moral standing of our Declaration of Independence. Because how could we profess to believe that all men are created equal, when some men in America, were owning other men the way they might own pigs and geese? There was a moral disconnect there that Lincoln believed had to be remedied. And he addresses that in the war, too.

So the sense of moral compass that Lincoln brings to the War brings to politics is another aspect of the man that interests us because Americans don't regard their politics merely as a matter of pragmatic porcelain. Americans look to the fact that we are founded on a moral principle, the laws of nature and nature's God, and we want our politics to conform itself to that pattern. When we can find a leader of the dimensions of an Abraham Lincoln, who understands that, that is someone who we want to know more about. It's someone who piques our curiosity, and makes us want to ask questions, even at the remove of more than a century and a half.

JP: So you've done a really good job of explaining why Abraham Lincoln is still relevant today. I would love to pivot back to Gettysburg and talk a little bit about why a battle like that is still relevant and worth talking about today. Maybe outside of even just the importance of studying history, but why that particular battle is important to Americans.

AG: Well, one reason it's important to Lincoln is that up until July of 1863 so much about the Civil War had gone wrong. There had been campaigns and battles and sometimes it turned out very well for the cause that Lincoln is the head of: the Union, the cause of the United States. But much of the Civil War up to that point had been spotted with failure and failures of serious dimensions. Military embarrassments like battles at Fredericksburg, at Chancellorsville, at Shiloh.

The victory that was won by Union forces in Gettysburg came almost like a shaft of sunlight through the clouds for Lincoln. And in fact, it comes almost at exactly the same time as another significant victory. And this is on the Mississippi River when the Confederate citadel of Vicksburg surrenders to Ulysses S. Grant. Putting those two together, and having it happen right around the Fourth of July, for Lincoln was almost a symbolic, almost a providential moment. That, as he put it, in a speech he delivers in an informal way, on July 7, the opponents of the principle of the Declaration of Independence, were compelled, as he put it, to turn tail and run.

Several months later, he'll refine those observations when he comes to deliver the dedication remarks at a national cemetery, which is laid out here at Gettysburg, for the Union dead of the battle, some 3900 of them. He speaks the words that today are familiar, I think, to almost all Americans, what we call the Gettysburg Address. And in those words, what he lays out, is really the past, the present, and the future of American democracy. The past is what was established four score and seven years ago. The present is the great Civil War that's being fought to test

whether the American republic, as it was founded in 1776, really has the staying power to survive something like the internal crisis of a civil war. Then he points us to the future. The future is, we must dedicate ourselves to the same principle that those who fought at Gettysburg had dedicated themselves. Dedicated, in fact, to the extent that some 3900 of them, were willing to lay down their lives for the Republic, there at the Battle of Gettysburg.

He could look out at that cemetery that day, in November of 1863, when the ceremonies took place, he could look at that and see here were ordinary people, not professional soldiers, ordinary volunteers, people who, unlike the armies of Europe, did not have to be whipped into compliance. They had willingly surrendered even their lives to protect this idea of a republic, which is governed by the people, which is of the people and which exists for the people. He distills that whole principle down into just 272 words, and he captures the importance of the Battle of Gettysburg, and even of the whole Civil War right at that moment.

So when we look back to Gettysburg, we can see it, yes, in military terms, it is almost the Waterloo of the Civil War. But even more than that, the Battle of Gettysburg symbolizes the fact that a democratic republic, like the United States, isn't going to simply go to pieces the first time there is some kind of serious dissension that people are willing to fight for the life and the integrity of that democratic republic. That gives Lincoln encouragement as an encouragement that he in turn, transmits through the words that he utters at Gettysburg. And the challenge that he leaves people with Gettysburg: the challenge of dedicating ourselves to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion. That's really a challenge that speaks to not just the generation that heard Lincoln say that, but it speaks to every generation of Americans since and speaks to our own generation now.

JP: In your opinion, is the Gettysburg Address Lincoln's best speech?

AG: Well, it's difficult to put a finger on the best speech of Abraham Lincoln. It certainly is the best known of all of Lincoln's public utterances. And that's probably helped along by the fact that it is short, it is easy to memorize. And he deliberately casts it in very simple terms. Of the 272 words of the Gettysburg Address, 190 of them are single syllables. He was, in a way, obeying an advance Winston Churchill’s dictum that in a speech of greater importance that keeping things short is best. And within that, short words are better still. Lincoln certainly gives that principle its best exhibition at Gettysburg. So we remember the Gettysburg address for those reasons and for the way he is able to capture the idea of what the Civil War is really about.

Now, is it his best utterance? I might--depending on who's asking me and asking me when--I might also point people to several other speeches of Lincoln's that are worth paying attention to. One of them is the great speech he gives on October 16, 1854 in Peoria, Illinois. It’s a much, much longer speech than the Gettysburg Address. But it is a speech which lays out beautifully

Lincoln's own sense of what the American democratic experiment is about. I'd also point people to a speech Lincoln gives at the beginning of the great series of debates that he holds with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, a speech he gives in July of 1858, in Chicago. There, once again, he is able to capture in extraordinary ways and with tremendous eloquence what the purpose of this American experiment has always been about. I'm giving you some alternatives. I'm not sure, Jillian, if I want to rank them, that would almost be like asking me which is my favorite child in my family. But I would say the Gettysburg Address, the Peoria speech of 1854, the Chicago speech of 1858. These are all great moments of American political rhetoric from Abraham Lincoln.

JP: I'll have to check them out. Thanks so much for the recommendations. Each semester, a group of students from the Washington-Hillsdale Internship Program goes to Gettysburg to talk to you and take a tour of the site. Why is it important to go to the site of historical events, rather than just reading about it or seeing it online?

AG: Well, I think there are two tickets that accrue to visiting historical sites. One is you understand so much more what went on at these places, then just by reading in the book. Now I write books. So I'm not going to critique books. I don't want anyone to avoid books simply because I'm saying you should go to battlefields. Yes, by all means, read the books. But at the same time, as you read the books, and even as you regard the maps, you're getting what you might call the two-dimensional approach. I think it's important to add to that a third dimension, third dimension of actually visiting the place and seeing and perhaps understanding for the first time, why people at a particular place or in a particular position, made decisions that they made.

At Gettysburg, as an example of this, you have to wonder: Well, why didn't General So-and-So see this happening and do this and that, but one answer that often shows up is the fact that General So-and-So at this, in that position, couldn't see what was going on at a different point on the battlefield, because of the undulations of the terrain. That's something you can only really discover by actually going there yourself. And then you have an aha moment, then you understand. That's why General So-and-So did or didn't do what they did at that moment. So there's a great deal of practical instruction you get just from visiting places like Gettysburg.

There's a second element and that is a feature of inspiration. Actually, to be at the place where greatness happened reminds us that there is an encouragement to be had from being in the same place that 100 years or 500 years or 1000 years before, people did great things. I remember that the great Dr. Samuel Johnson said that it would be a very sorry man, indeed, whose patriotism was not improved by viewing the field of Marathon in the great wars between Greece and Persia, or whose faith was not deepened by viewing the ruins of Iona, one of the famous monasteries of the British Isles. And I think that there is something very important in what Dr. Johnson tried to capture in that comment. And that also leads me to encourage people visit these places, visit

places that especially in the case of Gettysburg, even Lincoln himself called ground that has been hallowed, consecrated, dedicated.

JP: How many times have you been to Gettysburg?

AG: Jillian, let me think. The very first time I visited Gettysburg was as an undergrad, spring of 1975. I had read about the battle. But actually being on the ground was a remarkable moment. And I can remember so clearly walking out on the overlook of the old visitor center on the rear of Cemetery Hill. And looking, as I could see so much of the battlefield and saying, Oh, yes, I know what that that's Little Roundtop in the distance. Oh, that's the angle. It was as though what had been in my mind only as a black and white photograph, now suddenly leaped up in color. And I couldn't grasp and imagine the whole thing. Since then, I think I have been at Gettysburg…oh, so many times as a visitor. I have taught here taught at Gettysburg College, for instance, for 15 years, and still have a residence, a very small place in Gettysburg. In fact, I'm speaking to you from Gettysburg right at the moment. I have become something of Gettysburgian. That, I think, probably is never going to get subtracted.

JP: Oh, wow. Yeah, you are the most qualified to speak about this. That's so awesome that you're speaking to me from Gettysburg right now.

We're nearing the end of our interview. And so my final question for you is, in your opinion, how does the current culture treat history? And how do you think in an ideal society people would interact with and talk about history?

AG: I would like to think people grasp their history because their history tells them who they are. And that, I think, is particularly important for Americans. Other nations, other cultures, can identify themselves by ethnicity, by language, by religion, by race. And all of those are factors that go into the making of what we sometimes call nations or cultures. But Americans aren't like that. Americans identify themselves by, what Lincoln called, a proposition. And that is the proposition that's contained in the Declaration of Independence. That's how we identify themselves ourselves. We don't identify ourselves by where we came from, or who our great grandparents were. We might have a remote genealogical interest in that kind of thing, but that's not really what identifies us. You can become an American by grasping those basic truths, those basic propositions that Jefferson described in the Declaration in 1776.

But that means that there is a certain sense in which we almost can become too abstract. It seems to me that understanding our history is what helps bring us to ground, especially when we're able to visit the places that were instrumental in the making of that history. That's the point at which our sense of who we are as Americans, takes on real and vital substance. So my encouragement for people is to always look at that history. The history is going to tell you great things, it's going

to tell you where we have been, where we are, and we're where we are tending to go, and has, in that respect, for Americans. And maybe an importance that it has over-and-above the importance that it has for any other nation.

JP: Thank you so much, Dr. Guelzo, for joining us today. Our guest has been Dr. Allen Guelzo: Thomas W. Smith Distinguished Research Scholar and Director of the Initiative on Politics and Statesmanship in the James Madison Program at Princeton University. And I'm Jillian Parks on Radio Free Hillsdale, 101.7 FM.