

“The world only discovered him a hero after he had fallen a martyr”

# 150 years since the assassination of Abraham Lincoln

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Abraham Lincoln has been studied in the minutest detail. So much has been written about him—well over 15,000 volumes by one count—that we can reconstruct his life on a day-by-day basis, and his time as president virtually hour-by-hour. It is astonishing that, even with this intimate knowledge, his stature continues to grow. His assassination on April 14, 1865 remains intensely moving and tragic.

On that Good Friday evening, the president and First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln attended a performance of the British comedy, *Our American Cousin* at Ford’s Theater in Washington D.C. A well-known actor, John Wilkes Booth, entered Lincoln’s private box at about 10:15 p.m., at a moment of laughter in the play, and fired at point-blank range with a Derringer pistol. The bullet, slightly less than a half-inch in diameter, entered the back of Lincoln’s head near the left ear and passed upward through the brain, lodging above the right eye. British actress Laura Keane cradled Lincoln’s head in her lap as surgeons attended to him in the theater.

That night, Lincoln was moved to the nearby Petersen House, where surgeons, cabinet members, and his son Robert gathered. The abolitionist senator Charles Sumner, who himself had been nearly beaten to death on the floor of the US Senate by a Southern congressman in 1856, sobbed quietly at Lincoln’s side. Mary Todd, hysterical with grief, was kept away.

Lincoln never regained consciousness and was pronounced dead just past 7:22 a.m. on April 15, 1865. “Now he belongs to the ages,” pronounced Secretary of War Edwin Stanton.

Booth, a pro-Confederate Marylander who likely had contacts among Southern spies working out of Montreal, was the ringleader of a conspiracy. A simultaneous attack left Secretary of State William Seward and his son seriously wounded, while other attacks intended to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson and Union General Ulysses S. Grant failed. Booth was killed in a manhunt on April 26. Four other conspirators were executed by hanging on July 7, 1865.

Only five days before Lincoln was shot, on April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. Lincoln, it can then be said, was among the very last casualties of the Civil War, which took the lives of some 750,000 people in a conflict that had begun four years earlier, with the April 12, 1861 attack by South Carolina militia on Fort Sumter, outside Charleston.

Lincoln seemed to contemporaries to have personally borne much of the national tragedy that ensued, as well as his own—he lost his favorite child, Willie, age 11, in 1862. The president stood six feet four inches tall and weighed 210 pounds on entering office. At the time of his assassination he was 30 pounds underweight, stooped, drawn, and aged far beyond his years.

The day after Lee’s surrender, a joyous crowd descended on the White

House, calling for a speech. The people, “illuminated by the lights that burned in the festal array of the White House, stretch[ed] far out into the misty darkness,” recalled reporter Noah Brooks.

In the window of the north entrance “stood the tall, gaunt figure of the president.” In his remarks, Lincoln thanked Grant and the Army of the Potomac for the victory, but focused on the restoration of the Union. He suggested equality of suffrage and civil rights for blacks. Among “the vast sea of faces” before Lincoln was that of Booth, who told a friend, “That means N\_\_\_\_\_ citizenship. Now, by God, I’ll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make.”

News of Lincoln’s death was met with immense grief. Across the US, church bells pealed for hours. Patriotic bunting came down from buildings, replaced by black crape. Especially grief-stricken were freed slaves in the South and the nation’s free black population of the North.

On April 21, Lincoln’s body was placed on a seven-car train and sent on a 1,700-mile course from Washington to Baltimore, Harrisburg and Philadelphia, then to Newark and New York City, and then westward to Buffalo, Cleveland, Indianapolis and Chicago, and finally to Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield, Illinois, for interment.

Millions gathered in these cities to pay their respects. Many more, farm families and small townspeople, waited long hours to watch the train, carrying one of their own, pass by along its route—virtually the same route that had taken Lincoln from Illinois to Washington four years earlier for his inauguration and move into the Oval Office, where he had found waiting for him telegrams from Fort Sumter.

Walt Whitman, who lived in Washington for part of the war and who had on more than one occasion exchanged greetings with Lincoln in encounters on the street, captured the sense of tragedy in triumph in his poem “O Captain, My Captain,” published later that year.

O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done;  
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won;  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:  
    But O heart! heart! heart!  
    O the bleeding drops of red,  
    Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
    Fallen cold and dead.

Whitman was later to say of Lincoln that he was “the grandest figure on the crowded canvass of the drama of the nineteenth century.” Tolstoy agreed, calling Lincoln the century’s “only real giant.” There were other heroes, but none could match Lincoln “in depth of feeling and in certain

moral power,” the Russian novelist said.

In England, where the ruling class had sympathized with the Confederacy very nearly to the point of war, the Tory *Standard* declared that Lincoln “was not a hero while he lived and therefore his cruel murder does not make him a martyr.”

The plebian *Pall Mall Gazette* came closer to capturing the voice of the British working class: “He was our best friend. He never lent himself to the purposes of that wicked minority which tried to set enmity between England and America. He never said or wrote an unfriendly word about us.”

The most profound insight into Lincoln’s life and death came from Karl Marx, who had followed the American Civil War closely both as a correspondent for the German *Die Presse* and as the political leader of the International Workingmen’s Association—the First International. It was on behalf of the latter that Marx penned the following lines to Andrew Johnson, Lincoln’s far-lesser successor:

“They have now at last found out that he was a man, neither to be browbeaten by adversity, nor intoxicated by success, inflexibly pressing on to his great goal, never compromising it by blind haste, slowly maturing his steps, never retracing them, carried away by no surge of popular favour, disheartened by no slackening of the popular pulse, tempering stern acts by the gleams of a kind heart, illuminating scenes dark with passion by the smile of humour, doing his titanic work as humbly and homely as Heaven-born rulers do little things with the grandiloquence of pomp and state; in one word, one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great, without ceasing to be good. Such, indeed, was the modesty of this great and good man, that the world only discovered him a hero after he had fallen a martyr.”

Lincoln had emerged as a major political figure in opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which sanctioned the extension of slavery to new territories in the West. From that moment on, his career was inseparable from the slavery issue and the determination, as he put it in the Gettysburg Address, that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

His speeches and writings—the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, the House Divided speech of the same year, the Cooper Union Speech of 1860—articulated these positions as unwavering principles and raised Lincoln to the leadership of the Republican Party.

In office, Lincoln guided the Civil War and transformed it from a struggle for the preservation of the Union into a revolutionary war for the abolition of slavery—the largest seizure of private property in history prior to the Russian Revolution. He came to see its ultimate purpose as the realization of the Declaration of Independence’s promise of human equality.

Lincoln’s speeches chart the evolution of his thought and perspective. In his First Inaugural Address, Lincoln appealed for the preservation of the Union, declaring: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory... will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

In his Second Inaugural, Lincoln presented the Civil War as having always been a struggle against slavery—a struggle that would continue as long as necessary: “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away,” he said. “Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

These words, suffused with Biblical metaphor, not religious literalism—it is noteworthy that Lincoln never joined a church—were delivered 41 days

before his assassination.

A final element of tragedy in Lincoln’s assassination is what it leaves forever unanswered. It is tempting to believe that he might have helped ensure a more egalitarian United States after Reconstruction. Yet Lincoln, like those even to his left in the Republican Party—radicals such as Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, and even abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison—understood the problem of Reconstruction almost entirely in political terms. The debate was over the conditions for the southern states’ reentry into the Union. Who would have the right to vote? How would the Republican Party be established in the former Confederacy?

Lincoln would have been more sympathetic to the freed slaves than his reactionary vice president, Andrew Johnson. But Johnson was impeached and very nearly convicted and removed from office. Stevens and the Radical Republicans, delivered a smashing victory by voters in the 1866 elections, put in place far-reaching political reforms—the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution, as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the deployment of the Union army as an occupation force to deal with the Ku Klux Klan, which menaced the freed slaves and Republicans in the South.

Yet neither the Republicans nor the abolitionists understood the *social* problem of Reconstruction. What would happen to four million people, turned out from slavery, with nothing but their labor power to sell?

These forces seemed to believe that, by virtue of ridding the republic of slavery, the South would be remade in the image of the North of 1859, with its millions of small farms and shops and incipient industries. But what replaced slavery was not yeoman farms, but sharecropping.

Of even greater importance were the changes the Civil War brought in the North. The war had been midwife to a new industrial social order. Massive profits accrued to those who could sell goods to the Union’s armies and purchase its government bonds, which, after the Civil War, the financial elite insisted be repaid only in gold-backed dollars.

The departure of the Southern politicians from Congress in 1861 made possible new laws that established the protective tariff, the land grant universities, the transcontinental railroad, and free land for farmers who went West. In the half century that separated the Civil War from World War I, the US catapulted from being an overwhelmingly agricultural country to the world’s greatest industrial power.

Marx had understood that the Civil War would usher in a new era of class struggle. Just as “the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class,” Marx had written Lincoln in congratulation on his 1864 election, “so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes.”

Later, Marx observed that “a new life immediately arose from the death of slavery. The first fruit of the American Civil War was the eight hours’ agitation, which ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California with the seven-league boots of the locomotive.”

It was the emergence of the American working class, announced in full force with the Great Uprising of railway workers and the general strikes that swept from coast to coast in 1877—not coincidentally, the same year that Republicans brought Reconstruction to a final end in the South, having concluded a sordid deal with the Southern elite following the disputed Hayes-Tilden election of 1876. As it advanced against workers at home and on the path to imperialism abroad, the American ruling class found Lincoln’s thought something to be buried and neutered by means of ritualistic and hollow invocations of the sixteenth president’s greatness, which was now presented entirely in national-patriotic terms.

This effort has failed. In their struggles, American workers have raised Lincoln’s ideas again and again, as they have Jefferson’s immortal words “that all men are created equal.” It is to the working class that this revolutionary patrimony belongs.



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