

160 years since the assassination of Abraham Lincoln

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The spring of 1865 in Washington had been unusually mild. Temperatures on April 14 climbed to 71 degrees, according to the reading by the US Naval Observatory that day. The capital's lilacs, azaleas, dogwoods and native cherries bloomed, lending to the joyous mood over Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox five days earlier, which had seemed to promise an end to four years of Civil War. The warm spring evening brought crowds to the streets. That night, President Abraham Lincoln and First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln attended a performance of the British comedy, *Our American Cousin*, at Ford's Theater.

At about 10:15 p.m., John Wilkes Booth, a well-known actor, entered Lincoln's private box, and, at a moment of laughter in the play, fired his pistol at the president from two feet away. 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. Amid confusion in the theater, Booth fled, and English actress Laura Keane, who had played the lead role in the performance that night, ascended to the president's private box. There she cradled Lincoln's bleeding head in her lap.

Later 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 pro-slavery congressman in 1856, sobbed quietly at Lincoln's side. Mary Todd Lincoln, 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," Secretary of War Edwin Stanton said.

Across the US on April 15 church bells pealed. Patriotic bunting was pulled down from buildings, replaced by black crepe. That Lincoln's assassination had taken place on Good Friday charged the event with themes of martyrdom and redemption among a population whose religiosity still hewed toward conceptions of divine providence. (Lincoln knew this of his countrymen, and so could suffuse his speeches with Biblical metaphor, though he himself never joined a church and was believed by his close friend and law partner William Herndon to have been an "infidel" and a deist, in the manner of Jefferson or Paine).

"He was crucified for us!" an elderly African American from York, Pennsylvania, told a newspaper that Easter weekend.

The old man was right. Booth, the assassin, was a white supremacist who murdered Lincoln in vengeance for the freeing of the slaves. On April 10, 1865, the day after Lee's surrender at Appomattox and four days before the assassination, a joyous crowd had descended on the White House lawn, 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."

Brooks' testimony suggests the toll the war had taken on Lincoln. The president had stood six feet four inches tall and weighed 180 pounds on

entering office. At the time of his assassination, he was 30 pounds underweight, stooped, drawn, and aged far beyond his 56 years. He seemed to have personally borne much of the great national tragedy of civil war, as well as his own—having lost his favorite child, Willie, age 11, in 1862, to typhoid fever likely contracted from the White House's polluted water supply, which was drawn from a nearby canal.

In his impromptu remarks on the evening of April 10, 1865, Lincoln had taken care to thank General Ulysses S. Grant and the Army of the Potomac for the victory, but had focused on the restoration of the Union, suggesting even 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."

Booth was the ringleader of a conspiracy that aimed to decapitate the Union leadership in a desperate bid to revive the Confederacy's sinking fortunes. A simultaneous attack on April 14 left Secretary of State William Seward and his son seriously wounded, while other abortive attacks were intended to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson and Grant—the latter was supposed to have attended Ford's Theater with Lincoln that night but had changed plans earlier in the day.

Booth was killed in a manhunt on April 26. Four other conspirators were executed by hanging on July 7, 1865.

Booth alone did the deed, but by that time Lincoln had won many enemies at home as well as in Europe, where the Second American Revolution had sent shivers down spines in the continent's courts and palaces, with memories of the upheaval of 1848 still fresh. In England, whose 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 articulating 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 Vienna-based *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, addressed to Andrew Johnson, who would very soon reveal himself to be a counter-revolutionary and an inveterate enemy of the freed slaves. The world, wrote Marx, has

now at last found out that [Lincoln] 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.

More than 7 million people—over one-third of the population of the northern states—observed Lincoln’s funeral train along its 1,654-mile rail journey from Washington D.C. to Springfield, Illinois, which lasted from April 21 to May 3. Men, women and children, people who knew the suffering and loss of America’s bloodiest war, lined the track, often waiting for hours to watch the train pass by.

Walt Whitman depicted the cortege’s symbolism in his “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”—the funeral train, unnaturally intruding on pastoral settings, and carrying aboard it Lincoln, the victim of an unnatural death:

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities, Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep’d from the ground, spotting the gray debris, Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass, Passing the yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,

Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards, Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave, Night and day journeys a coffin.

In poetic fashion, the train retraced backward the route Lincoln had taken in February 1861, when he had left Illinois for his March 4 inauguration in Washington D.C. Seven of the 11 southern states that would form the Confederacy had by then already seceded to form a slave republic. Indeed, it was uncertain that Lincoln could even make it to the White House in 1861. To enter Washington, he first had to traverse the slave state of Maryland, whose loyalty to the union was uncertain. He slipped through Baltimore in disguise on February 22, making it to the capital the next day, where he found waiting for him in the Oval Office telegrams from the commanding officer of the federal garrison at a base in South Carolina called Fort Sumter, which was under siege by rebel forces.

Now, after four years of constant war, on Lincoln’s return through Baltimore, thousands paid their respects, scenes repeated with even larger crowds in Philadelphia, New York, Buffalo, Cleveland, and several other cities.

Chicago was the funeral train’s last stop before Lincoln’s entombment at Springfield. The *Chicago Tribune* estimated that four-fifths of the city’s population turned out, among them “native and foreign born, white and black, old and young, male and female.” The *New York Times* thought that so many had come to Chicago from “neighboring cities and towns, swelling the masses which everywhere throng the streets” including “large delegations from Waukegan, Kenosha, Milwaukee and other towns in Wisconsin,” that there must have been 250,000 present that day to say goodbye. But Lincoln had already bid farewell to his home state four years earlier when, on February 11, 1861, he had departed Springfield:

My friends, no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.

Lincoln, “the western fallen star” of Illinois, had first risen 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.

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, besting formidable opponents such as Senator Seward of New York and Senator Salmon Chase of Ohio.

Lincoln’s personal opposition to slavery was well known. He was viewed by friend and enemy alike as an anti-slavery politician—though not an abolitionist. “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy,” Lincoln had stated. Or, as he put in debate with his great rival, Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas:

It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity, and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, “You toil and work and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.” No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.

Yet the Republican Party had won the 1860 election on a platform that promised slavery would not be abolished where it already existed; it would be banned only from new territories. Notwithstanding the Southern elite’s violent rejection of this position in the form of secession and war, the Lincoln administration waged the Civil War in 1861-1862 as a struggle to return to the *status quo ante*.

Lincoln’s slow embrace of wartime emancipation had been largely predicated on winning unionist support in the South and on holding the border slave-states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware. Thus, 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.”

Lincoln’s wartime speeches chart the evolution of his thought and perspective. The course of the war proved to Lincoln that, as he later put it, “we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued.”

In August 1863, he issued an open letter that challenged the racism of voters who opposed putting black men under arms, which had been sanctioned by the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln asked the letter to be read aloud, “very slowly” at a public event in Springfield, Illinois:

To be plain, you are dissatisfied with me about the negroes. Quite likely there is a difference of opinion between you and myself upon that subject. I certainly wish that all men could be free, while I suppose you do not... You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but, no matter. Fight you, then, exclusively to save the Union. I issued the proclamation on purpose to aid you in saving the Union... Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon, and come to stay; and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time. It will then have been proved that, among free men, there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and that they who take such appeal are sure to lose their case, and pay the cost. And then, there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it.

Jon Meacham. *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle* (p. 428). Kindle Edition.

By then, Lincoln had come to support Frederick Douglass' conclusion that "war for the destruction of liberty must be met with war for the destruction of slavery," transforming the Civil War from a struggle for Union into a revolutionary war for the abolition of slavery—the largest seizure of private property in history prior to the Russian Revolution. Indeed, Lincoln's view of the struggle came to have a universal quality that went beyond American events. Its ultimate purpose was the realization of the Declaration of Independence's promise of human equality and to ensure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth," as he put in the Gettysburg Address of November 1863.

In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln presented the Civil War as the inevitable punishment for the crime of slavery, a form of historical retribution visited on the whole people, South and North: "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 premonitory words, summoning the cadence and fatalism of the King James version of the Bible—whose passages Lincoln could recite by heart—were delivered 41 days before his own death.

Coming just five days after Lee had surrendered the remnants of his Confederate armies to Grant at Appomattox, and exactly four years and three days after the attack on Fort Sumter that had opened the Civil War, Lincoln's killing was, symbolically, the last act in the carnage that had taken the lives of some 700,000 Americans, made 4 million slaves "henceforth and forever free," and secured for the United States "a new birth of freedom."

These events secured Lincoln's greatness. Whitman could later say that Lincoln 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. Victor Hugo called Lincoln's assassination "a catastrophe for the human race... He was the conscience of America incarnate."

Consideration of Lincoln's assassination must grapple with a question that can be posed of few other "great" historical figures: What is it about

an event that took place 160 years ago that still, to this day, rouses a sense of loss?

A partial answer may be suggested by what Lincoln's assassination leaves forever unanswered. It is tempting to believe that Lincoln might have helped ensure a more egalitarian country during and after Reconstruction, the name given to the period after the Civil War.

Yet the democratic revolution had reached its apex with the destruction of slavery in the Civil War, while Lincoln still lived, and in the immediate aftermath of his assassination. Under the leadership of Thaddeus Stevens, the Radical Republicans impeached the treacherous Andrew Johnson—coming within a hair's breadth of convicting him and removing him from office—ushered through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and imposed a military occupation of the South under Grant to dispose of the Ku Klux Klan.

Far-reaching as these actions were, they could not address the fundamental social question posed by the Civil War: What would become of 4 million people turned out from slavery with no property of their own, with nothing but their own labor power to sell? Calls for the reddivision of the lands of the southern oligarchy, championed by Stevens, raised a question mark over the sanctity of private property and were dismissed by the majority of Lincoln's Republican Party, which had accomplished its central historical mission of preserving the union and destroying slavery. There were "leveling" tendencies among the Republicans, but it was not a socialist party, nor could it have been.

The commonly held conception that, if only slavery were destroyed, then the South would eventually be remade in the image of antebellum "free labor" North, with its vast population of small farmers, shopkeepers and artisans, could never be realized. Cash-crop farming of cotton, sugar and tobacco continued, but lack of money in the South ensured the development of a crop lien system known as sharecropping, which came to swallow up not only the freed slaves, but the South's poor whites as well. Jim Crow segregation was slowly erected by the southern ruling class, operating through the Democratic Party, to prevent a revolutionary threat from below. "[R]acial segregation as a way of life did not come about as a natural result of hatred between the races," Martin Luther King Jr. later observed, "[but] was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land."

To understand this outcome the focus of the lens must be widened from the South. The Civil War did more than abolish slavery. It had been midwife to a new industrial social order in the North, as well. In the half century that separated the Civil War from World War I, the US catapulted from an overwhelmingly agricultural country to the world's greatest industrial power.

The war dropped the curtain over the first act of American history, in which slavery had been protagonist. It raised the curtain on a new cast of characters—robber baron capitalists and industrial workers. This Marx had predicted. 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 re-election, "so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes." The emergence of the American working class was 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, this was the same year the Republicans brought Reconstruction to a final end in the South, having concluded a sordid deal with the Southern elite following the disputed Hayes-Tilden presidential election of 1876.

As it advanced against workers at home and on the imperialist warpath abroad, the American ruling class found Lincoln's thought something to be neutered by means of ritualistic and hollow invocations that sought to turn him into a harmless icon of patriotism and capitalist self-improvement. Curiously, those most taken in by this legend have long

been America's cynical and embittered middle-class radicals and black nationalists.

It is notable that five years ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* was compelled to defend Lincoln—alongside Jefferson the greatest apostle of American democracy—against efforts by the *New York Times* and its flagship 1619 Project to portray him as a garden variety racist indifferent to slavery and hostile to black people. Predictably, the *Times* found plenty of support among phony “left” academics and self-styled socialists. This, even in the face of the existential threat clearly posed by the emergence of fascism around Donald Trump!

But such efforts to smear Lincoln have never gained much ground in breaking his hold on the sentiments of the working class—black, white, and immigrant—nor in washing away the memory of his leadership of America's second revolution.

This points to the deeper nature of the tragedy of April 14, 1865—not what might have been, but what could no longer be. Lincoln was a product of his time, a “sui generis figure in the annals of history,” as Marx put it.

Donald Trump is also a product of his time. He personifies American capitalism in its terminal decline, in all his gangsterism, rank greed, brazen hatred of democracy and out-and-out stupidity. The son of privilege, a product of the New York real estate-mafia underworld, Trump's “political program” can be summed up in one word: theft—from workers in the US and the world over, to be achieved by imperialist war abroad and by undoing the achievements of the first two American revolutions.

Lincoln, on the other hand, both gave expression to, and himself embodied, much that was “great and good” about the young American republic, and above all else the idea of equality raised up by those two revolutions just “four score and seven years” apart. Only in America, it seemed, could a boy raised in frontier poverty—with one year of formal schooling and the son of a semi-literate farmer—only there could he rise to command a revolutionary war for the destruction of slavery.

As Marx put it in his 1864 letter to Lincoln, the workers of the world

consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.

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