

LINCOLN LORE

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BOOTH AND "THE TRAGIC ERA"

The unusual number of new books on the life of John Wilkes Booth which have recently appeared, and the widely exhibited old mummy misrepresented as his dead body have given to Booth a degree of respectability. When the results of his vile deed and murderous conspiracy are fully understood, he stands out as America's All Time Public Enemy Number One. No single act by an individual has wrought such havoc in the nation.

This man Booth by his assassination of President Lincoln largely changed a period of sympathetic and constructive adjustment, already planned by a wise and efficient executive, into a "Tragic Era". With peace achieved and hostilities at an end, with a gracious surrender by Lee and magnanimous terms submitted by Grant, the whole nation was ready for a new day of better understanding and good will.

While the north was rejoicing, naturally, that the war had come to a close after four long years of fraternal strife, while the people were in the very midst of a celebration not unlike the Armistice Day pageantry of 1918, the whole nation was shocked and bewildered by the terrible news that President Lincoln had been assassinated and that other high officials had been attacked.

The unanimous conclusion drawn by the people of the north, with hardly a dissenting voice, and verified by contemporary newspapers was that civil and military authorities of the south had planned and carried out the conspiracy to divest the north of its chief executives. Of course it was discovered later on that southern officials had no part whatsoever in the assassination plot and that most of them greatly lamented the tragedy. Public Sentiment, however, the most potent factor in a democracy, had already accepted the accusations against the south as true, and denials, as usual, had little weight in correcting the decisions already made.

The outburst of passion in the north over this vicious and murderous assault on the President and his associates was greatly accentuated by the reason of it having occurred during the Easter season. The close of the war, for which the churches had been praying, was then an accomplished fact. Never before had the churches made such elaborate plans for the celebration of Easter Sunday, and the messages that day were to have contributed mightily to the cementing of the former hostile sections of the country together again. There was to be but one theme throughout the whole nation and that was to be expressed through the joy and happiness which peace had brought.

By Saturday, April 14, the day before Easter, most of the sermons were prepared, and they were probably the most eloquent Easter discourses ever written in America. Already the decorations in the churches were being arranged. The other places of assembly and even the homes and business houses were clothed in the national colors. All was in readiness for a glorious Easter. Then the news came that Abraham Lincoln had been struck down by a foul assassin, and that the President had died without regaining consciousness that morning.

There has never been in all the history of the country such a day of weeping as that day before Easter. Down came the white streamers of the church festivals, down came the national colors, and every symbol of joy and happiness disappeared, for a nation was about to go into deep mourning. Public buildings and private dwelling places were soon shrouded in black. The Easter sermons were laid aside, and feverishly the clergymen began to write messages in which they called for adequate and swift justice, and, in most instances, pointed a guilty finger at the south.

Public sentiment was quick to express itself, and many personal assaults were made on those who failed to show

proper signs of grief over the death of the President. A new battle-cry was heard in the north and, conscious of the demands for an immediate hearing, a military court convened which assured the impatient people that justice would be meted out and satisfaction given. Just how much this much-abused military court helped to smother the growing anger in the north may never be known and fully appreciated.

The great masses of people learned that the body of the martyred President would be returned to his old home in Illinois, which necessitated the removal of the body through many of the largest cities of the nation. Immediately there was a demand from these large centers of population that they be allowed to participate in memorial exercises when the body arrived in their respective cities. These programs paved the way for the most remarkable funeral procession ever witnessed.

A million people are said to have viewed the remains of the dead Lincoln, a greater number than had ever before looked on a lifeless body. What would be the natural reaction of each individual who viewed the remains of the slain man? With public sentiment already at fever heat, thus fed and nourished with a new resentment, it is not difficult to account for the attitude of mind that brought on "The Tragic Era." The wonder of it is that the infuriated people did not perform some overt mass attack on the innocent populace of the south.

The political aspects of Booth's diabolical act likewise seems to have been given little consideration. The party in power at the time the war was consummated was the Union party, not the Republican party as is often alleged. It was a combination party of loyal Union Republicans and loyal Union Democrats who elected Lincoln and Johnson in 1864. Lincoln represented the former group and Johnson the latter. It is reasonable to expect that if Lincoln had lived, the Union party which had brought the war to a successful conclusion would have continued to function. Booth changed the entire political picture of the Reconstruction era by exterminating the one man in the nation capable of controlling the radical element of the north and subduing the ambitious carpet-bagger.

When Abraham Lincoln, who represented the majority group in the new Union party, went down, Andrew Johnson, the minorities' choice for the second place on the Union ticket, was elevated to the Presidency. This was the beginning of trouble and, regardless of all other cleavages and differences of opinion which arose, down beneath the turmoil were the old party alignments finding expression, and there emerged the contending factions which soon rallied under old party banners with the stricken southland the victim of further economic exploitation.

The far-reaching effect of Booth's unforgivable crime is summarized by four affirmative statements and a logical conclusion:

Booth murdered the man best qualified by position, executive ability, and sympathetic understanding to plan and execute a just program of Reconstruction; Booth infuriated the north and put in the hearts of the people, already willing to forget, a new hatred for their former enemies; Booth brought down upon the south the blame for a vicious conspiracy of which it was innocent; Booth broke up the political party in power by the removal of its accepted leader, which brought distrust and impeachment proceedings.

One man who could do so much evil by one vicious stroke surely must have been the nation's worst public enemy. To John Wilkes Booth more than to any other one man may be traced the deed that gave birth to the major social and political evils which contributed so much to "The Tragic Era."