

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 836

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

April 16, 1945

THE CASE FOR THE U.S.A.

Four score years ago on April 14, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was murdered. Any student who is familiar with the voluminous writings of the past few years, featuring some phase of the nation's greatest tragedy, must have observed the general tendency to make a quasi-hero out of the assassin, and innocent, or greatly wronged, individuals out of those who were implicated in the preliminaries or aftermath of the crime.

One of these books containing 272 pages came out in 1943 under the title, *The Case for Mrs. Surratt*. It seems as if the time is ripe for someone to come to the defense of Uncle Sam and argue *The Case for the U.S.A.* Just now the world is deeply concerned about justice being meted out to those who are known to have been arch criminals against society. Discussion of the subject of retribution has created a proper atmosphere for considering the general reaction of the people in 1865 toward the conspirators, who contemplated a mass murder of the heads of our Democratic government, and actually were successful in assassinating the President and seriously wounding the Secretary of State. Only a series of coincidents repulsed still more disastrous results.

It is horrifying to contemplate what might have happened if the people had taken justice into their own hands after the assassination of the President. Only with the assurance that recompense for the tragedy would be swift and adequate was there an apparent willingness to allow the law to take its course. The military courts seemed to have proper jurisdiction in a case where the Commander in Chief of the Army was the victim, which at least gave the people the assurance that with military supervision there would be no political barriers standing in the way of immediate punishment. It is to be regretted that one woman was caught in the mesh of the law's net.

As might be expected, sympathizers with the assassin have claimed some other man than Booth was shot in Garrett's barn in Virginia. Regardless of what may be done with any Hitler that may pay the price of the dictator's madness, German devotees of the Feuhrer will never admit the real Hitler has been apprehended.

It is doubtful if any dead murderer, examined before the days of finger prints, ever was more positively identified by evidence which he carried on his very corpse than the body of John Wilkes Booth. He was branded on his left hand with the tattooed initials of J.W.B. He carried a recognized mark of a surgeon's scalpel where Dr. May had removed a fibroid tumor. Fillings in his teeth were identified by the assassin's dentist. A fractured leg, injured by the leap to the stage from the theatre box, presented additional evidence, which supplemented with an impressive collection of personal belongings found on the body, proved beyond any question of a doubt, as one author puts it, "This was he."

There is no phase of the whole aftermath of the proceedings featured by book, periodical, and the press which is more ridiculous than the attempt to convince the American people that the Booth autopsy, directed by Surgeon General Barnes, miscarried, and John Wilkes Booth was never apprehended, but escaped punishment for his crime. It would be a sad reflection on the military court, indeed, if they allowed the arch criminal to go "scott free" and centered their energies on the conviction of the secondary parties in the conspiracy.

When one realizes that almost to a man the people of the North believed that the assassination of Lincoln was due to a southern conspiracy in which Booth was but a

hired henchman, it will be observed how necessary it was to guide the infuriated mobs into channels of more sane and deliberate counsels. That no southern statesmen were given to the gallows by angry mobs for a crime in which apparently they had no direct part has been a most commendable fact to remember.

The editor of the *New York Independent*, after having viewed the remains of the President ten days after his death, although much more conservative than many of his contemporaries, gives us a fairly accurate interpretation of the minds of the people with respect to the assassination in these words:

"What Shall Be The Retribution?"

"This day, the dead body of the murdered President passed through our city to a grave in the prairies. Perhaps the sorrow of a great nation is the sublimest spectacle possible on earth. The pilgrimage of these sacred ashes through the land is the most pathetic incident of American history. The bier of Washington was not wet with so many tears.

"Walking mutely past this coffin, and gazing at the face of the martyred dead, half-a-million citizens demand that this murder remain not unavenged. Seeking not to inflame but to calm the public mind, we re-echo this demand with all the solemnity due to the majestic occasion. Although Abraham Lincoln bore the most forgiving of human tempers; although, were he now dictating terms to the rebellion, he would prove himself the most clement of conquerors; although, could his frozen lips speak, he would say, Deal mercifully with my assassin; yet, if this black deed be not punished to the full measure of Christian retribution, the murdered man's sepulcher—be it locked, and barred, and monumented—will not be able to confine his troubled ghost from wandering through the unquiet land and moaning at his wrongs unredressed.

"But what measure of vengeance can equal the stupendous crime? Though the assassin were sawn asunder, yet would not the offense be atoned, nor justice be appeased. The vial of retributive wrath is too large and full to be squandered upon the single head of a trembling wretch who now skulks from the eye of the world. Let the great punishment fall upon the first, the chief, the arch criminal in this crime of crimes. The murderer of the President is SLAVERY....

"Let the American people, when they shall have buried the corpse which now they watch, arise from their sackcloth and ashes to forget amnesty and to execute judgment. Speaking without passion, without malice, without enmity against the guiltiest traitor of all the great conspiracy, without eagerness to spill a drop of any man's blood—nevertheless, for the sake of Law, of Liberty, of the Republic, we declare that if treason be a crime, and if crime deserve punishment, then Jefferson Davis and his Cabinet and Congress should be tried with a just trial, and abide a just doom."

While every American citizen should be thankful that retribution for the incomparable crime was limited to the small group directly associated with the arch assassin, we are not yet quite ready to prepare post-mortem decorations for the criminals or create memorials to their memory. It would be refreshing, indeed, to have some competent writer who really feels that the preservation of the Union was a commendable achievement to present, *The Case for the U.S.A.*