

Lewis Lehrman: The April death of two presidents

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At Hyde Park, New York, on April 15, 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was laid to rest at his beloved family home. On the very same day 80 years earlier in 1865, President Abraham Lincoln breathed his last in a rooming house across the street from Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C.

President Lincoln, worn down the previous night after a long cabinet meeting, had kept his promise to go to Ford's Theater with his wife Mary Todd to watch "An American Cousin." Often he went to the theater to get away from the rush of visitors and the pressure of military questions. Only 10 days earlier, the intrepid Lincoln had walked without incident through the streets of Richmond, only hours after Union troops had invested the Confederate capital. President Lincoln admitted to a friend that "anyone could have shot me from a second-story window."

Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, much more than Lincoln himself, always worried about presidential security. Stanton continued to fret once Lincoln returned from Richmond to Washington. Later that week, the security conscious Stanton tried to block Lincoln from attending the theater. He ordered one military officer in the telegraph office not to accompany him. "Very well," responded Lincoln then said, "I shall take Major (Henry) Rathbone along, because Stanton insists upon having some one to protect me."

One onlooker at Ford's Theater recalled that references to the president from the stage were greeted by "deafening responses" from the audience "while Mr. Lincoln laughed heartily and bowed frequently to the grateful people." About 10:30 p.m., on Good Friday, John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln behind his left ear with a .44 caliber derringer.

After Booth made his escape across the theater stage and onto a waiting horse, Lincoln's body was carried across the street to a boarding house, attended by doctors who had been in the theater audience. "His breathing was for a long time loud," recalled one onlooker, "ending in deep-drawn sighs . . . Except his breathing, and the sobbing of his wife, son, and devoted servant, not a sound was to be heard in that chamber for hours."

The president's breathing grew more labored in the morning. "At last, at just twenty-two minutes past seven o'clock, without a struggle, without a convulsive movement, without a tremor, he ceased breathing -- and was no more," recalled another witness. After a prayer by the pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Secretary of War Stanton pronounced his own benediction: "Now he belongs to the Ages." The next day was Easter

Sunday. "This has been a gloomy day in Washington," wrote a Lincoln aide, "and it has been remarked that the churches were never as full as on this day."

President Roosevelt's death on April 12, 1945 came more quickly. FDR had collapsed before lunch at his polio rehabilitation center in Warm Springs. He had gone there to escape the strain of work and recover his failing health. Two female cousins had accompanied him on the train to Georgia, where they were joined by FDR's mistress, Lucy Rutherford, and an artist working on an FDR portrait.

While the artist painted, Roosevelt thumbed through some papers. Suddenly, shortly after 1 p.m., he slumped forward. "I have a terrific pain in the back of my head," the president said. Two aides and the cousins carried Roosevelt to his bed where he rolled his head a few times before he fell unconscious. One aide recalled FDR's "awful breathing" as he struggled for life. Doctors arrived; injections were given; but two hours later Roosevelt was dead.

Roosevelt, a victim of polio, could stand with only the most painstaking effort. Physically, therefore, he was an unlikely president -- as was the robust Lincoln, who lacked the educational advantages of FDR's Groton-Harvard education, FDR's association with his famous cousin, Teddy Roosevelt, not to mention FDR's wealth and social position. "President Roosevelt's physical affliction lay heavily upon him," British Prime Minister Winston Churchill recalled in his tribute of FDR. "It was a marvel that he bore up against it through all the many years of tumult-and storm. Not one man in ten millions, stricken and crippled as he was, would have attempted to plunge into a life of physical and mental exertion and of hard, ceaseless political controversy." Nor could one man in more than 10 millions complete Lincoln's pilgrimage from frontier poverty to world scale hero.

To lead the American Union to victory was, for Roosevelt and Lincoln, an act of extraordinary political will -- ultimately an act of enormous personal sacrifice.

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