

Black Friday: Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth

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"Now, by God, I'll put him through," actor John Wilkes Booth told a companion on the night of April 11, 1865. "That is the last speech he will ever make."

President Abraham Lincoln had just given the final speech of his life. Two days earlier, Robert E. Lee had surrendered the Confederate Army at Appomattox. But in Lincoln's speech, from the second floor window of the White House, the president did not dwell on victory. Rather, in his carefully prepared remarks, Lincoln concentrated on the reconstruction of the Union. What infuriated Booth -- and drove him to murder -- was Lincoln's support of voting rights for black Americans.

Booth himself was a committed secessionist and an ardent racist who once threatened to kill a black who did not take off his hat in Booth's presence. Like other members of his family, Booth had sought fame on the stage of America's theaters. Now he sought to win fame on the stage of American politics. "What a glorious opportunity there is for a man to immortalize himself by killing Lincoln!" Booth had proclaimed the previous year.

For months, Booth had worked on plans to kidnap the president and deliver him to Richmond. Now Booth decided to commit the nation's first presidential assassination.

Five weeks earlier, as President Lincoln walked out of the U.S. Capitol for his inauguration, Booth had jumped out of the crowd.

A government official, Benjamin Brown French, physically blocked the intruder's path. A policeman quickly grabbed Booth, who struggled to break away. The young actor was so determined in his rights to be present that French ordered the policeman to release him. Booth in fact did have an official inaugural ticket given him by one of his girlfriends, the daughter of a recently defeated senator from New Hampshire. Booth later claimed that day he was close enough "to kill the President, if I had wished."

At the time of the inauguration, Booth was intent on kidnapping, not killing, the president. He and his accomplices tried to capture the nation's chief executive on March 17, when Booth learned that Lincoln would attend a play at a soldiers' hospital in Washington. Lincoln himself had not been feeling well in the days after his second inaugural.

But instead of watching the play, the president addressed a regiment of Indiana soldiers from the balcony of the National Hotel. "I have always thought that all men should be free; but if any should be slaves it should be first those who desire it for themselves, and

secondly those who desire it for others," concluded Lincoln. "Whenever (I) hear anyone arguing for slavery I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally." Booth himself stayed at the National Hotel while in Washington.

A few days later, the ailing Lincoln accepted an invitation by General Ulysses S. Grant to visit the Union army besieging Richmond. On March 23, the Lincolns left Washington by boat. They spent much of the next two weeks in Virginia, so there was no opportunity for another kidnapping attempt by Booth, who was infuriated when President Lincoln visited the captured Confederate capital in Richmond on April 4.

On Good Friday, April 14, the Lincolns were in a good mood. Their eldest son, Capt. Robert Lincoln, was back home at the White House. The president, who had suffered a severe headache the night before, presided over a Cabinet meeting on reconstruction in the morning, then went on a carriage ride with his wife in the afternoon. The Lincolns wanted to stay home that night but decided to go to Ford's Theater because their attendance had been announced in the afternoon newspapers.

Meanwhile, John Wilkes Booth, always a heavy drinker, imbibed frequently during the day and plotted Lincoln's assassination. Lincoln's love of the theater was well-known.

As an actor, Booth was known at Ford's Theater in downtown Washington. Shortly after 10 p.m., Booth entered the presidential box with his derringer to shoot the president just behind his left ear. Nine hours later, Lincoln died in a rooming house across the street.

President Lincoln's dreams for his nation would not die. Lincoln's burial sermon was pronounced in Springfield, Ill., on May 4. "Standing, as, we do to-day, by his coffin and his sepulcher, let us resolve to carry forward the policy which he so nobly began," Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson said. "Let us do right to all men. Let us vow, in the sight of Heaven, to eradicate every vestige of human slavery; to give every human being his true position before God and man; to crush every form of rebellion; and to stand by the flag which God has given us."

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