



FIG. 1 — THE ROOM THAT SURVIVES. THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE WORDS IT NEVER HEARD.

The speeches never **given**

Twelve leaders killed at the hinge of their own work

History Unwritten

Free preview: chapter one of twelve

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Every chapter begins with what the record shows and says plainly where the record ends. The documented parts are documented. The alternative histories are reasoned, not claimed. Nobody, including this book, knows what would really have happened. This free preview contains the first chapter. The complete ebook is available at historyunwritten.page-shelf.com

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CHAPTER 1

Abraham Lincoln, 1865: The Chair Outside the Box



Abraham Lincoln, 1865 · AI-generated illustration

On the night of 14 April 1865, a Good Friday, Abraham Lincoln sat in the state box at Ford's Theatre in Washington, watching a comedy called *Our American Cousin*. Beside him were his wife, Mary, and a young engaged couple, Major Henry Rathbone and

Clara Harris, who had joined the party after several other invited guests, including General and Mrs. Grant, had declined. It was five days since General Robert E. Lee had surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House. Washington had spent those five days lit up with bonfires and illuminated windows, bands playing in the streets, crowds gathering outside the White House to call for the president until he came to a window and spoke to them. The war that had killed some three quarters of a million Americans was, in every practical sense, over. Lincoln had told his cabinet that morning, at the last meeting he would ever hold, that he took a recent dream of his, one he associated with news of great events, as a sign that word would soon come from Sherman's army in North Carolina. He seemed, to several people who saw him that day, more at ease than he had been in years.

The president's guard that evening was a Washington Metropolitan Police officer named John Frederick Parker. His post was a chair in the narrow passage outside the door to the state box. At some point during the performance he left it. Where he went afterward is not settled by the surviving record. The most repeated account has him drifting next door to the Star Saloon for a drink, or angling for a better view of the stage himself from the dress circle. What is not in dispute is that the chair was empty, and that the passage to the box stood unguarded, when John Wilkes Booth walked up the stairs of the theater a little after ten o'clock, a place he knew well since he had performed there and received his mail there, and where the staff recognized him and let him pass without a thought.

Booth had spent part of that afternoon at Ford's, boring a small hole in the door of the box, apparently to be able to see inside before entering, and preparing a length of wood, cut from a music stand backstage, that he would use to jam the outer door shut behind him from the inside once he passed through. He knew the play well enough to wait for a line, delivered by the actor Harry Hawk alone on stage, that reliably drew the loudest laugh of the evening, so that the sound of his single shot would be swallowed by the audience. He fired a single shot from a .44 caliber derringer into the back of Lincoln's head at a range of a few feet. Rathbone lunged at him and was cut badly along the arm with a knife Booth carried for exactly this contingency; Booth then vaulted the rail of the box to the stage, a drop of some eleven or twelve feet, breaking a bone in his left leg on landing, and according to several people in the audience that night shouted a Latin phrase, "Sic semper tyrannis," a state motto of Virginia meaning thus always to tyrants, before he limped off through the wings, past a stagehand he shoved aside, and out to a horse held ready for him in the alley behind the theater.

Doctors reached the box within minutes. A twenty three year old army surgeon named Charles Leale, seated in the audience that night, was the first physician to reach the president. He found no pulse at the wrist, cleared the box of onlookers, and located the wound by running his fingers through Lincoln's hair until he found the clotted entry point behind the left ear. He worked a finger into the wound to relieve pressure and is credited with restoring a weak pulse and breathing where there had been none. Two more physicians in the audience, Charles Sabin Taft and Albert King, joined him within minutes, and all three agreed the wound was

mortal; there was no surgery that could reach a bullet lodged deep in the brain. Lincoln was carried out of the theater and across Tenth Street to a boarding house owned by a tailor named William Petersen, because the crowd judged he would not survive a carriage ride to the White House over cobblestones. He was laid on a bed in a back bedroom, diagonally, because he was too tall for it to hold him straight, his head propped on pillows soaked through within the hour.

Through the night, members of his cabinet came and went in the front rooms of that house. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton effectively ran the government from a sitting room there for several hours, taking testimony from witnesses, dispatching telegrams to Union commanders, and issuing orders for Booth's capture, work that within days produced the identification of the assassin and the organization of the manhunt that ended on 26 April 1865 at a farm near Port Royal, Virginia, where Booth was cornered in a tobacco barn and shot by a Union sergeant against orders to take him alive. Surgeon General Joseph Barnes arrived to take charge of Lincoln's medical care, though there was little to be done beyond monitoring the failing pulse and breathing through the night. Mary Lincoln was in and out of the bedroom, at one point crying out loudly enough at the sight of her husband's labored breathing that Stanton reportedly asked that she be kept elsewhere so the room could be managed. Their eldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln, a captain recently returned from Grant's staff at Appomattox, stood near the bed for much of the night, weeping, while their youngest surviving son, Tad, was kept at the White House and told only that his father was very sick. A minister, Phineas Gurley of the New York Avenue Presbyterian

Church, prayed with those present toward the end. Lincoln's breathing grew shallow and irregular after six in the morning, and the small group in the room, cabinet secretaries, generals, and doctors among them, stood largely in silence. He never regained consciousness. He died at 7:22 in the morning on 15 April 1865. Stanton is widely reported to have said something at the moment of death about Lincoln now belonging to the ages; the exact wording, ages or, in at least one competing account, angels, is disputed by historians who have examined the sources, and no contemporary shorthand transcript of the room survives to settle it.

Three days before the shooting, on the evening of 11 April, Lincoln had given what turned out to be his last public speech, delivered from a White House window to a crowd celebrating the fall of the Confederacy. It was not a victory speech. It was a careful, technical address on the difficult mechanics of restoring Louisiana to the Union, and in it Lincoln said aloud, for the first time in public, that he would prefer to see the elective franchise extended to some Black men, specifically those who were, in his words as recorded, "very intelligent" and those who had served as soldiers in the Union cause. It was a narrow position by later standards, but it was the first time a sitting American president had said such a thing in public. John Wilkes Booth is reported by more than one person close to the conspiracy to have been in the crowd that night, standing near the gate with a companion, and to have said afterward that this meant Black citizenship, and that it would be the last speech Lincoln would ever make. Three days after that, it was.

Lincoln's terms for the peace he expected to build were already on the record, delivered six weeks earlier at his second inauguration on

4 March 1865, a day that began in rain and mud and cleared, by tradition among those present, just as he rose to speak. He had told the country, with the war still killing men in Virginia, that it should proceed "with malice toward none, with charity for all," to bind up the nation's wounds and care for the widow and the orphan of both sides, and to achieve "a just and lasting peace among ourselves." He did not live to define what that peace would actually require of the states that had seceded, or of the four million people just freed from slavery within them. That work fell to his vice president, Andrew Johnson, a Tennessee Democrat and former slaveholder Lincoln had put on the ticket in 1864 to broaden its appeal beyond the Republican Party, a man with almost none of Lincoln's standing among the Republicans who controlled Congress. Johnson vetoed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which Congress then passed over his veto, vetoed the extension of the Freedmen's Bureau as well, and by 1868 the House of Representatives had impeached him over his handling of the Tenure of Office Act; the Senate acquitted him by a single vote.



The man shot that night had started a very long way from the White House. He was born on 12 February 1809 in a one room log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky, to a farmer named Thomas Lincoln and his wife Nancy, who died of what was likely milk sickness when Abraham was nine. His younger sister Sarah, older than him by two years, would herself die in childbirth when he was nineteen, and an infant brother had died before Abraham could remember him. The family moved to Indiana and then, when he was twenty

one, to Illinois, following the pattern of a great many poor frontier families of the period, clearing new land as the old wore out. He had, by his own later account, less than a year of formal schooling all told. He taught himself the rest: borrowed law books, grammar texts, whatever print came within reach, reading by firelight after a day of physical labor his stepmother later said he never much cared for. He split rails, worked as a store clerk in New Salem, Illinois, served briefly as a militia captain during the Black Hawk War without seeing combat, ran a failed store that left him with debts he spent years repaying, worked as a local postmaster and a deputy surveyor, and studied law by reading it rather than attending any school of it. He was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1836 and built a substantial legal practice in Springfield, riding the circuit courts of central Illinois for years, arguing cases from patent disputes to murder trials, and forming a law partnership with William Herndon that lasted the rest of his life and never formally dissolved even after he became president. He married Mary Todd, of a prominent Kentucky family, in 1842, after a courtship broken off once and resumed; the marriage was by most contemporary accounts difficult in its private moments and enduring in its loyalty. Of their four sons, only Robert lived to adulthood: Edward died in Springfield in 1850 before his fourth birthday, and Willie, as noted below, died in the White House.

Politics came alongside the law. He served four terms in the Illinois state legislature as a Whig in the 1830s and 1840s, and one term in the United States House of Representatives from 1847 to 1849, where he opposed the Mexican War as an unjust war of aggression, a position that cost him support at home and helped end his time in

Congress after a single term. He returned to his law practice and largely left electoral politics for most of the 1850s. What drew him back was the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854, which opened the possibility of slavery's expansion into territory that had been closed to it, and which Lincoln came to see as a moral and political crisis for the country. He helped build the new Republican Party in Illinois around opposition to that expansion, and in 1858 he ran for the United States Senate against the incumbent, Stephen A. Douglas, in a campaign remembered chiefly for seven public debates held across the state on the question of slavery's future. Lincoln lost that Senate race, decided at the time by the state legislature rather than popular vote. The debates, printed and read nationally, made him a national figure anyway.

In February 1860 he spoke at Cooper Union in New York, laying out in careful legal argument why the founders had not intended to protect slavery's expansion, and the speech is generally credited with helping secure him the Republican nomination for president later that year at a convention in Chicago where he was not the front runner going in. He won the presidency in November 1860 with under forty percent of the popular vote in a four way race, entirely on the strength of the North; before he was even inaugurated, seven states of the Deep South had voted to secede rather than accept a Republican administration, and he traveled to Washington for his first inauguration under threat of assassination serious enough that his advisers had him pass through Baltimore secretly, at night, a decision that drew ridicule in the press at the time. Fort Sumter was fired on in April 1861, a month after he took office, and the war that followed occupied essentially the entirety of his presidency, a war

he oversaw through a shifting sequence of generals, McDowell, McClellan, Burnside, Hooker, Meade, and finally Grant, before it turned decisively in the Union's favor.

It cost him in ways that show plainly in the record. His third son, Willie, died of what was likely typhoid fever in the White House in February 1862, at age eleven; both Lincoln and Mary were reported by people close to them to have been devastated, Mary for years afterward, unable at first to attend the funeral. Lincoln himself had suffered from spells of what contemporaries called melancholy since young adulthood, and the war years deepened it visibly; photographs taken across his four years in office, compared side by side by later historians, show a face that ages far beyond four calendar years, deep lines cut into it by 1865 that are absent in 1861. He issued the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863, declaring enslaved people in Confederate held territory free, a measure grounded in his war powers rather than in a claim to abolish slavery everywhere by presidential order alone; that broader abolition would come only with the Thirteenth Amendment, which Congress passed in January 1865 and which was still moving through state ratification at the time of his death. He delivered the Gettysburg Address in November 1863, a speech of a few hundred words at the dedication of a military cemetery, following a two hour oration by Edward Everett that was, at the time, considered the day's principal address. He was reelected in 1864 against his former general George McClellan, an election he had at points during that year privately expected to lose, and for which he had his cabinet sign, sight unseen, a memorandum pledging to cooperate with the president elect to save the Union even if Lincoln himself were

defeated. By early 1865, with Sherman's armies through Georgia and the Carolinas and Grant grinding down Lee's lines around Petersburg and Richmond, the war's end was in sight, and Lincoln began speaking, in the second inaugural and in private conversation reported by cabinet members and visitors, about the shape of the peace to come. He wanted it lenient. He had said so as early as his 1863 amnesty proclamation, offering pardons to most former Confederates who would take a loyalty oath, and as late as his final cabinet meeting on the morning of 14 April 1865, hours before he was shot, where several of those present later recalled him speaking against harsh treatment of Confederate leaders and in favor of a quick, generous restoration of the Southern states to the Union.



The single physical fact on which this chapter turns is the empty chair outside the state box. Parker's post that night was not a general assignment to the theater; it was specifically to sit in that passage and control access to the box door, a post the Metropolitan Police had assigned to protect the president precisely because the White House had no dedicated protective service of its own at the time and relied on borrowed police officers for such duty. Had he stayed there, Booth could not have reached that door and barred it from the inside unopposed. Booth's entire plan depended on exactly that: an unguarded approach, a few seconds alone with a door he could jam shut behind him before anyone in the box realized what was happening. An armed officer sitting in a lit passage a few feet from that door is a substantially different problem for a lone assassin than an empty chair. Booth might have been stopped at the door. He

might have been recognized and challenged, losing the element of surprise that let him fire from a distance of a few feet at the base of the skull. He might, knowing Parker was there, never have attempted the box at all that night, and instead fallen back on some other plan or none.

This is not a claim that Parker's presence would certainly have saved Lincoln. A determined attacker in a public theater, in an era before metal detectors or close protective details, could have found other ways to try. But of every point of failure in the events of that night, Parker's absence is the one most directly documented and most narrowly physical: a single man, assigned to a single chair, for reasons never fully established in the surviving record, not in it. No court martial or disciplinary record settled what happened to him afterward with any clarity; he was reportedly reprimanded but continued for a time on the police force, and was dismissed years later for an unrelated matter. If there is one inch in this story that could plausibly have been different, without requiring a different war, a different election, or a different Booth, it is that chair being occupied at ten o'clock on the night of 14 April 1865.

Set that inch right, and the man who walked out of Ford's Theatre that night was still president. He had a term that ran to March 1869. He was the one who would have to turn "with malice toward none" from a phrase in an inaugural address into actual instructions to actual generals administering actual Southern states, actual orders about the Freedmen's Bureau, an actual answer to the question of what the newly free population of four million people was entitled to, in land, in courts, in votes, and actual dealings with a Congress that, on the matter of Reconstruction's severity, was considerably

less patient with the defeated South than Lincoln had shown himself to be.



What would have followed is, past this point, reasoned extrapolation rather than record, and historians who have written on the question do not agree with one another.

Through the later 1860s, a surviving Lincoln would have had to manage the same Congress that historically clashed with Andrew Johnson to the point of impeachment. Lincoln had advantages Johnson never had: he was the leader of the Republican Party rather than a Southern Democrat awkwardly attached to its ticket, and he had, across four years of war, built working relationships with the Radical Republicans in Congress even where he disagreed with them, men like Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner who wanted harsher terms for the former Confederate states and firmer guarantees for freedpeople than Lincoln had publicly endorsed. Most historians who address the question agree Lincoln would very likely have avoided the flat, personal breach with Congress that produced Johnson's impeachment; his political skill and his standing in his own party make that specific collision improbable. Beyond that, agreement thins out. Some historians argue Lincoln's practical bent and his demonstrated willingness to move, as he had on emancipation and then on limited Black suffrage, would have carried him toward accepting stronger federal guarantees for freedpeople than the narrow position of his 11 April speech, perhaps something closer to what Congress eventually imposed on the South by law after 1867. Others argue the opposite: that his stated

preference for a fast, lenient restoration of the Southern states, and his caution about Black suffrage even at the end of his life, favoring the "very intelligent" and Black veterans rather than the broad grant of the vote that the Fifteenth Amendment would establish in 1870, suggest he would have resisted the more thoroughgoing Reconstruction that Congress wrote into law over Johnson's objections. There is no way to adjudicate this from the documented record, because Lincoln did not live to make the choices that would have settled it.

Some consequences are more traceable than others. The Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery, was already through Congress and moving through the states at the time of the shooting, and its ratification by December 1865 does not depend on Lincoln's survival. The Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing citizenship and equal protection, and the Fifteenth, barring denial of the vote on grounds of race, were both products of the Reconstruction Congress of 1866 to 1870, and a Lincoln still in office through those years would have been party to their drafting and ratification politics in ways Johnson, hostile to Congress by 1866, was not. Whether Lincoln signs a Civil Rights Act in 1866 rather than vetoing one, whether a Freedmen's Bureau under his direction receives steadier federal backing than it did under Johnson's open hostility to it, whether the outright political warfare between the executive and legislative branches that defined 1866 to 1868 happens at all: these are the places where a surviving Lincoln plausibly changes the decade, because they depend on a presidency actively engaged with Congress rather than one at open war with it.

Carry the same reasoning one decade further, into the 1870s and 1880s, and the documented anchor points start to thin, but they do not disappear entirely. What actually happened, under Grant and his successors, is well established: federal troops were used through the early 1870s to suppress Klan violence and protect Black voters under the Enforcement Acts, with real if uneven effect, before Northern political will for that project weakened over the course of the decade. The Compromise of 1877, in which federal troops were withdrawn from the last occupied Southern states in exchange for a disputed presidential election being settled in the Republicans' favor, effectively ended Reconstruction and opened the path to the systematic disenfranchisement that followed: Mississippi's 1890 constitutional convention wrote literacy tests and poll taxes into law specifically to remove Black voters from the rolls while appearing race neutral on paper, and most other Southern states copied that model within the next fifteen years, so that by the time the Supreme Court decided *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, endorsing racial segregation under the doctrine of separate but equal, the political capacity of Black Southerners to contest that ruling at the ballot box had already been largely dismantled. Whether a Reconstruction that began under Lincoln rather than Johnson, built on eight more years of a president Congress trusted rather than four years of one it impeached, produces a Republican coalition durable enough by 1876 to avoid that particular bargain, or produces federal enforcement machinery robust enough to survive the retreat of Northern political will that undid it historically regardless of who occupied the White House in 1865, is a question no historian can answer with the documentary record that exists. The white Southern resistance to Reconstruction, including the founding of the Ku Klux

Klan in Tennessee in 1865 and 1866, arose under Johnson's presidency but reflected forces, land, labor, and racial order in the defeated South, that a different president in Washington would not simply have dissolved by decree. It is reasonable to say a Lincoln led Reconstruction likely looks different in its first four years, with a Freedmen's Bureau better funded and a Civil Rights Act enforced rather than vetoed. It is not reasonable to say with any confidence what the South, or the country, looks like by 1877, by 1890, or by 1900.

What can be said with more confidence is what does not happen: there is no Andrew Johnson presidency, and so no veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 for Congress to override, and no impeachment trial in 1868 that ends in a one vote acquittal and leaves the presidency itself weakened for a generation afterward. The Republican Party does not spend 1866 through 1868 in open warfare with its own vice president turned president. Whatever Reconstruction Lincoln built, it was built by a president Congress had reason to trust, working in a system not first put through a constitutional crisis over the fitness of the man occupying the office.



What is documented, without dispute, is the sequence of that night and the following morning: the empty chair, the barred door, the shot, the surgeon's fingers finding the wound in the dark, the diagonal bed in the Petersen house, the hour of death, the men in the room. What is documented from the days just before is the second inaugural's language of malice toward none, and the 11 April

speech's endorsement of limited Black suffrage, with Booth reportedly among the listeners. What follows from Andrew Johnson's presidency, his veto, and his impeachment is likewise a matter of record, not conjecture, as is the retreat from Reconstruction that hardened into law across the South by the 1890s. The claim that an occupied chair outside that box could plausibly have stopped Booth, or at least changed how the attempt unfolded, is a reasoned inference from the layout of the theater and the mechanics of the assassination, not a certainty; other paths to the same or a different outcome were possible. And what a surviving Lincoln's Reconstruction would actually have produced by 1870, by 1877, by 1900, is not knowable from anything he left behind. He told the country what he wanted the peace to feel like. He did not live long enough to tell it what the peace would actually require, and neither, in the end, can anyone else.