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Book reveals range of reaction to Lincoln's assassination

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BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth on Good Friday, April 15, 1865, a few days after General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Confederate forces at Appomattox Court House, about a hundred miles west of Richmond, Va.

When Lincoln died, at 7:22 a.m. the next day, at a boardinghouse across the street from Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., Secretary of War Edwin Stanton reportedly said, "Now he belongs to the ages."

News of Lincoln's death spread across telegraph wires, with dispatches and newspaper headlines often read aloud to bystanders. Many mourners comforted themselves with the belief their grief was shared by all their fellow citizens.

It wasn't. Drawing on the diaries, letters and other writings of more than 1,000 "ordinary" Americans during the spring and summer of 1865, Martha Hodes, a professor of history at New York University, reveals the wide range of real-time reactions to Lincoln's assassination.

Beneath the surface of the solemn public ceremonies, Hodes reminds us, African-Americans, abolitionists, members of the Republican Party, former Confederates, and northern "Copperheads," expressed feelings of sadness, uncertainty, anger, gratitude and glee that reflected different understandings of the Civil War and what should come next.

'Part of everyday life'

Although her book contains few surprises, Hodes does capture the depth of feeling stimulated by the assassination. The news, she points out, competed with more mundane concerns. And, given high child mortality rates, low life expectancy and frequent epidemics, it came at a time when death "was part of everyday life."

For some, Hodes writes, the death of an intimate "eclipsed" the murder of Lincoln and the victory of the Union.

Nonetheless, Americans arrayed across the political spectrum sensed the assassination affected the nation's future. Rodney Dorman, a Confederate lawyer from Jacksonville, was defiant. For the Emancipation Proclamation alone, he fumed, Lincoln deserved a public execution. Dorman was by no means certain that Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor, would be able to control the fractured country he had inherited.

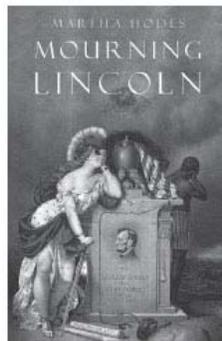
Return to slavery feared

Black Americans, of course, had the most at stake. Laying claim "to a special place in the outpouring of sorrow," many of them wondered whether the death of "The Great Emancipator" would bring a return of slavery.

"In what skin will the old snake come forth?" Frederick Douglass, the Black abolitionist, asked.

Southerners, he feared, would re-impose bondage and call it "some other name."

Americans who wanted what Douglass called "an abolition peace" (government guarantees of land, education



REVIEW

Mourning Lincoln. By Martha Hodes. Yale University Press. 396 pp. \$30.

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and voting rights for African-Americans), Hodes points out, suggested that the assassination was God's way of removing Lincoln, who would have treated the South with "malice toward none and charity for all."

It would rouse people to vigilance, ensuring the impotence of Confederates and the political power of the agents of reconstruction. Paradoxically, when Lincoln was gone, mourners could again cast their martyred leader as an advocate of freedom and equality.

Unfinished work

In the end, Hodes concludes, "revenge and its fruits came more readily, not to Lincoln's mourners, but to his enemies." To be sure, Congress did pass – and the states did ratify – the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

President Johnson, however, pardoned Confederates and vetoed legislation aimed at "an abolition peace." Ku Klux Klan riders became an intimidating presence in the South.

Following the election of 1876, the Confederacy was "redeemed" from Yankee rule – and White supremacy was restored. Had Lincoln lived, Frederick Douglass now claimed, with a prediction born of despair, "The negro of the South would have more than a hope of enfranchisement."

George Conrad, an African-American from Oklahoma City, said simply – and accurately – "I don't think his work was finished."

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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