“A Death-shock to Chivalry, and a Mortal Wound to Caste”: The Story of Tad and Abraham Lincoln in Richmond

RICHARD WIGHTMAN FOX

On Tuesday, April 4, 1865, his twelfth birthday, Tad Lincoln woke up in his cabin on the USS Malvern as it lay moored on the James River at City Point, Virginia, the headquarters of General Grant. On this day of celebration, with his mother home in Washington and his twenty-one-year-old brother Captain Robert Lincoln busily engaged on Grant’s staff, Tad could look forward to getting his father more or less to himself. For a boy captivated by the war, by soldiers, by the entire adult male world of work—he had already befriended the military band members at City Point and the mechanics in the engine room of the ship—this birthday bonanza far surpassed any he could have imagined. On April 3, Union forces had finally captured Richmond, the Confederate capital, and this morning the president was taking him upriver for a victory tour of the city.

Tad knew some of what to expect, since the day before, as federal troops marched into Richmond, he and Robert had witnessed the ecstatic reception their father received from African Americans and Union soldiers in newly occupied Petersburg, fifteen miles southwest of City Point (and thirty miles south of Richmond). Admiral David Dixon Porter, who had traveled there by train with the president, later recalled the streets of Petersburg being “alive with negroes, who were crazy to see their savior, as they called the President.” Regiment after regiment of soldiers offered “three cheers for Uncle Abe,” along with hearty cries on the order of “we’ll get ’em, Abe, where the ‘boy had the hen,’” and “you go home and sleep sound tonight; we boys will put you through!” In Richmond too the president would be welcomed with yells, songs, and prayers of thanksgiving. Once again black Virginians would hail him as savior or messiah, and everyone—soldiers as well as (de facto) freedmen and women—would honor him as
Father Abraham. Tad would be singled out and hurrahed ("huzza-hed") as the flesh-and-blood son of the nation’s father.1

Reaching the age of twelve meant that Tad Lincoln had outlived his next older brother Willie, who had died at age eleven in 1862, leaving his family desolate. For Tad, this warm spring day shared with his father offered a memory to cherish during the rest of his own short life. At age eighteen, in 1871, he succumbed to an infection, as Willie had nine years earlier. As a teenager, Tad could summon up the scene on the James River and in Richmond on April 4, just ten days before his father’s assassination. On this birthday, in a single, majestic public event, he had celebrated his nation’s military breakthrough and the bond he had woven with his father since Willie’s death.

The president had become his inseparable playmate, as they silently mourned the loss of the ebullient, quick-witted Willie. The slower Tad, afflicted with speech and learning difficulties, endeared himself to his father (whom he called “Papa-day,” for “papa dear”) with tenderhearted affection and with wily stratagems for getting close to him in spite of his time-consuming duties. District of Columbia policeman William Crook, who took a special liking to Tad after coming to the White House as a presidential bodyguard in early 1865, remembered that Lincoln “would make a child of himself to play with the boy.” He would “romp up and down the corridors with Tad, playing horse, turn and turn about, or blind-man’s buff [sic].” If Lincoln’s work interfered, “Tad would play quietly, near as he could get, making a man of himself to be company to his father.” John S. Barnes, commander of the U. S. Navy’s Bat, a former Confederate blockade-runner assigned to protect the president’s chartered steamer, the River Queen, stopped by Lincoln’s office on the ship and noticed Tad clinging to Papa-day as usual, “hanging or half sitting on his father’s knees.”

For Tad, touring Richmond amounted to an exciting wartime adventure, but Lincoln may have paused to ponder the wisdom of bringing his son along. Robert E. Lee’s forces had withdrawn from their capital during the night of April 2–3, leaving in their wake what Judge John Campbell of the Confederate War Department, who chose to remain behind, described as a scene of “conflagration, plunder, explosions

of arsenals, magazines, gunboats, and terror and confusion” for the twenty thousand inhabitants, half of them African Americans. Failing to anticipate the danger of air-borne embers, rebel authorities had ordered the torching of tobacco stashes and railroad bridges, and the flames had driven north from the river until twenty blocks and perhaps one thousand structures were burned, including 90 percent of the main commercial district.3

In the bedlam of that fiery night, a northern journalist wrote, “the poor people and negroes” had helped themselves to whatever remained in the commissary stores and in other shops. Women carried “bags of flour in their arms, baskets of salt and pails of molasses, or sides of bacon.” One man balanced “three Dutch ovens on his head, piled one above another, a stew pan in one hand and a skillet in another.” Army Captain Charles B. Penrose, assigned to see to the Lincoln family’s desires during their Virginia visit, said that as he marched through Richmond with the president and his son on April 4, “the streets of the city were filled with drunken rebels, both officers and men, and all was confusion. . . . A large portion of the city was still on fire.” Admiral Porter, also along on the trek through Richmond, remembered that swirling smoke from near the Tredegar [Iron] Works “almost choked us.”4

Lincoln either didn’t know the unstable situation on the ground in Richmond before setting off from City Point or didn’t consider it unduly worrying, either for himself or his son. Since 1860 he had become so inured even to explicit threats of violence against him that he could not have been bothered by the vaguely unsettled conditions in the Confederate capital. Perhaps he felt he needed Tad’s company. Taking his small boy along might signal both the return of peace and the conciliatory tone toward the South that he hoped his entire Virginia sojourn would announce. Father and son enjoying a virtual family outing could communicate to southerners a new era of trust and reciprocity, and to northerners the need to welcome rebellious states back into the fold. Tad’s participation could also convey the president’s confidence


that white residents of Richmond would greet him peacefully, if not warmly, on April 4.

Soon after leaving City Point the Lincolns found out, if they didn’t already know it, that their excursion carried real risks. The thirty-mile river trip proved surprisingly suspenseful in its own right, as the travelers dodged submerged boats and live “torpedoes” (mines). For the last leg of the journey, Admiral Porter, a renowned veteran of the Civil War Union navy, ended up piloting a narrow barge towed by a tug (so the tug would absorb any explosive hits). But after the tug ran aground, the little group continued in the exposed barge, rowed upstream by twelve sailors. Porter later said he had approved the voyage only after “the channel was reported clear of torpedoes.” He soon found out the report was mistaken. On the way back to City Point the next day he observed all the torpedoes removed from the river after the presidential party had passed by: “the gun-boat people . . . had laid them all out on the banks, where they looked like so many queer fish basking in the sun, of all sizes and shapes.”

In keeping with his usual nonchalance or obliviousness about threats to his own safety, Lincoln voiced no concern about the physical danger, quipping only (in Porter’s later reconstruction of his words) that the sequence of craft—first Porter’s flagship, then the towed barge, finally the rowed barge—reminded him of “a fellow who once came to me to ask for an appointment as minister abroad. Finding he could not get that, he came down to some more modest position. Finally he asked to be made a tide-waiter. When he saw he could not get that, he asked me for an old pair of trousers. But it is well to be humble.”

We can bet that Tad found the torpedo threat exhilarating and that his father would have laughed it off, whatever his true feelings, to reassure his son.5

Lincoln’s wish to dramatize a generous posture toward the South may help account for his decision to go to City Point in the first place. He never stated exactly why he spent the last week of March and the first week of April at Grant’s headquarters, with assorted recreational jaunts up and down the James in the Admiral’s towed barge, “the luxury of locomotion,” as Porter called it. Observers at the time said he was getting away from the horde of office-seekers who had descended upon Washington following his March 4 inauguration. Having fallen ill and taken to his bed in mid-March, he allegedly took the advice of many, including the New York Tribune editorial page, which publicly urged a restorative escape from the District of Columbia. The paper

5. Porter, Incidents and Anecdotes, 294–95, 309.
warned that Lincoln might crumble completely if the pressures on him did not abate. “If the President is to outlive the term in which he has just entered, a radical retrenchment must be promptly effected in the current exactions on his time and energies. . . . All who knew him in 1860 must have observed his air of fatigue, exhaustion and languor—so different from his old hearty, careless, jovial manner. . . . [H]is death or a permanent disability now would be a calamity.”

The idyll in Virginia, according to this viewpoint, amounted to an emergency, life-saving respite.6

Political and military calculations also may have encouraged Lincoln to head for City Point in late March and to stay into early April. As it became apparent that Petersburg and Richmond would soon fall, the president may have hoped that conversations with highly placed Confederates would help get Virginia completely out of the war and into the Union. Judge Campbell, for one, appears to have stayed in Richmond in hopes of consulting with Lincoln, who did meet with both Campbell (a former U.S. Supreme Court justice from Alabama) and Richmond lawyer G. A. Myers. Lincoln signaled an apparent willingness to reconvene the rebel legislature of Virginia if that body would act promptly to take its troops off the battlefield. Campbell assured him it would. But with Lee’s final surrender on April 9, this outline of a plan, already criticized by Stanton and other members of the cabinet in Washington for offering even momentary legitimacy to a rebel political body, became meaningless in any case.7

Lincoln’s most basic aim in fleeing the White House for a fortnight

6. Ibid., 292; “The President’s Health,” New York Tribune, March 17, 1865, 4. Porter remembered Lincoln telling him that his two weeks in Virginia were “the real holiday of his administration. He seemed almost to forget that he had any public cares” (292). The notion that the press of office-seekers might kill a president by wearing him down had such currency in 1865 that the New York Herald correspondent at City Point could claim they had caused the deaths of the only two presidents to die in office: William Henry Harrison in 1841 and Zachary Taylor in 1850: “Anybody at all familiar with Washington politics knows the terrible pressure brought to bear upon a President at the commencement of his term by office seekers. That this pressure has been so severe as to kill two Presidents in the history of our country is sufficient to characterize it as a dangerous pressure, and one in which an executive is justified in seeking to escape. Here [in City Point] Mr. Lincoln is free from the unceasing clamor of [the] outs and the piteous appeals of the ins.” Thomas M. Cook, April 2, 1865, dispatch, “The President’s Movements,” New York Herald, April 4, 1.

7. “I decided to abide the fate of Richmond,” wrote Judge Campbell. “I told the secretary of war I should remain, and should take an opportunity to see Mr. Lincoln, if possible.” Campbell to Curtis, July 20, 1865, in Cozzens, Battles and Leaders, 495. Richard N. Current gives a full analysis of Lincoln’s dealings with Campbell in his scintillating The Lincoln Nobody Knows (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 251–60.
may have coincided with the one that led his son Robert to join the army in February 1865 and made his son Tad leap out of bed on the morning of April 4. As the president wrote to Grant in requesting a safe military post for Robert, he “wishes to see something of the war before it ends.” Lincoln too wanted to witness something of the war before the final truce. At the end of March and beginning of April, he got to sit in the telegraph office at City Point relaying word of Union advances from Grant in the field to Stanton at the War Department. In rapid succession his cables pulsed out from Washington to Major General Dix in New York, who handed them over to the Associated Press for national distribution, making Lincoln the publicly named herald of the good news from Grant’s army.8

“The battle now rages furiously,” he telegraphed at 8:30 A.M. on April 2. “All now looks highly favorable.” He repeated that prognosis at 11:00 o’clock, and three hours later, he added, “we are now closing around the works of the line immediately enveloping Petersburg. All looks remarkably well.” Again at 8:30 P.M. he cabled, “all seems well with us and everything is quiet just now.” Twelve hours later Lincoln cabled the news of victory: “This morning Lieutenant General Grant reports Petersburg evacuated, and he is confident that Richmond also is. He is pushing forward to cut off, if possible, the retreating rebel army.” Newsboys hawked these presidential dispatches in northern cities on the afternoon of April 3 and morning of April 4, while church bells rang, bands blared out national airs, flags rippled from windows, and crowds pumped up by ardent spirits squeezed into meeting halls for celebratory speeches.9

Across the North, afternoon papers on April 3 also announced that the president would soon be heading for Richmond. A Chicago Tribune correspondent had already reported from Washington on April 2 that Lincoln was “to enter Richmond, as General Grant has promised that he shall, within the next forty-eight hours.” General Godfrey Weitzel’s forces took Richmond at 8:30 A.M. on April 3, and five hours later a New York Herald reporter sent word from the captured capital that

9. “News By Telegraph,” Chicago Tribune, April 3, 1865, 1; “Grant. Richmond Ours,” New York Herald, April 4, 1865, 1. Lincoln was proud of his telegraphic service in Virginia. He began his last public speech—his April 11 address on Reconstruction delivered from the White House balcony—by reminding the audience (including John Wilkes Booth), “I myself, was near the front, and had the high pleasure of transmitting much of the good news to you.” Collected Works, 8:400.
“Lincoln designed going himself to Richmond, and may have done so before now.” In fact he spent the entire day of April 3 visiting Grant in Petersburg, fully aware that Richmond would likely be ready to receive him the next day. Before riding the fifteen miles by train and horseback to Petersburg, he had sent his cable to Washington conveying Grant’s confidence that Richmond, like Petersburg, had been "evacuated."  

Though Lincoln never explained in writing or in a public statement why he went to Richmond, Admiral Porter reported twenty years later that the president had jumped at the chance to tour the Confederate capital. “Thank God that I have lived to see this!” Porter has Lincoln exclaiming. “It seems to me that I have been dreaming a horrid dream for four years, and now the nightmare is gone. I want to see Richmond.” William Crook disagreed with Porter’s account, published two decades after the event, but twenty-five years before his own. “At first the president did not want to go,” Crook asserted. “He knew it was foolhardy, ... realizing that he had no right to risk his life unnecessarily.” Porter prevailed on him to make the trip, said Crook, arguing “that the president ought to be in Richmond as soon as possible after the surrender.” Lincoln allegedly “saw the wisdom of this position and went forward, calmly accepting the possibility of death.”

The president’s only direct testimony on his decision to visit Richmond lends support to Porter’s recollection (Lincoln wanted to go to Richmond all along) but also to Crook’s (Lincoln knew the city posed some safety risk). After returning to City Point from Petersburg on

11. Porter, Incidents and Anecdotes, 294; Gerry, Through Five Administrations, 50. We can assume Lincoln did not speak the exact words attributed to him by Porter two decades after the trip to Richmond. We already have a lot to take on faith in Porter’s account without giving credence to his frequent reconstructions of the president’s actual speech: Porter’s whole book was roundly denounced as fiction (indeed, as partially plagiarized fiction) by General M. M. Trumbull in “Lincoln at Richmond: Admiral Porter’s Mistakes,” Belford’s Magazine (Chicago), February 1891, 321–38. We have even less reason to trust Crook’s recollections than we do Porter’s. At least we can be sure that Porter made the trip to Richmond with Lincoln. Crook claimed to have come along from City Point, but there is serious doubt about that since no other participant mentioned him when listing those who accompanied the president on his jaunt up the James River. Even if Crook were present, we would have to be very skeptical about his memories. They have been shown to be inaccurate, if not willfully fraudulent, in another part of his book. See Edward Steers Jr., Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 102–4.
April 3, he replied to a fretful cable from Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who had pleaded with him to cancel the Petersburg excursion. Stanton feared the trip might trigger a “disaster to yourself” as an individual and also a devastating blow to the nation’s “political head.” Stanton knew from experience that his only hope for getting through to Lincoln on this subject of protecting himself was to appeal not to his fears but to his “republican” convictions—in this case, to the distinction between private person and public office. Lincoln could freely manage his private self, on this logic, but as a public figure he belonged to the body politic.

In his nearly fifteen-hundred-day presidency, Lincoln had done all he could to accentuate his posture as simple Old Abe from Illinois, who scorned official niceties and formalities (including “monarchical” layers of security between himself and the people), but Stanton was reminding him he had acquired a public body and given up the right to do with it as he pleased. On other occasions Lincoln had endorsed this principle of the president’s two bodies—most famously when after much soul-searching, during his pre-inaugural train ride to Washington in February 1861, he agreed to sneak through Baltimore on account of a likely assassination plot. Choosing secrecy and disguise made sense to him then only because all his advisers were adamant about his traveling covertly through Baltimore, and because he knew he was putting safety first out of public duty, not personal anxiety. In his cheerily dismissive response to Stanton in 1865, Lincoln ignored this private-public distinction, perhaps because neither Porter nor Grant had echoed Stanton’s worry. Lincoln told Stanton he wanted to make the trip and knew about the widely perceived danger. “Thanks for your caution, but I have already been to Petersburg. . . . It is certain now that Richmond is in our hands, and I think I will go there tomorrow. I will take care of myself.”

Surely Stanton fumed when he found out how Lincoln had taken care of himself after disembarking at the downtown Richmond dock: by diving into a crowd. Immediately he found himself accosted by

an exuberant group of African Americans who couldn’t contain their joy at the sight of their emancipator. Admiral Porter said they knew Lincoln by sight because their “leader” had glimpsed a photograph of him four years earlier and had cherished it mentally ever since. “Bress de Lord,” Porter has him exclaiming in shocked surprise and gratitude. “Dere is de great messiah!” Within minutes “the colored race . . . seemed to spring from the earth. They came, tumbling and shouting, from over the hills and from the water-side.”

The northern white journalists and memoirists who gleefully recorded this encounter between president and freedpeople placed the African Americans’ speech in the formulaic folk idiom that northern readers expected in reports of black speech (Harriett Beecher Stowe’s runaway best-seller *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had made the allegedly pidgin English of southern slaves known to millions of northerners since 1852). And they emphasized the strange “whoops,” “contortions,” “somer-saults,” and “prayerful ejaculations of thanks” that revealed blacks, in their estimation, as culturally intriguing but comically primitive.

Apparently only the dispatches of Thomas Morris Chester, the African American correspondent for the *Philadelphia Press*, put black speech into the same standard written English used to record white speech, even white speech uttered with a marked southern accent. “I know that I am free,” he has “one enthusiastic old negro woman” exclaiming once Lincoln reached downtown Richmond, “for I have

13. Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes*, 295, 297. Historians have long believed that Lincoln disembarked at the Rockets, a dock area almost two miles downriver from Richmond center. That is indeed where Lincoln was expected to disembark. But as Nicolay and Hay rightly asserted in volume 10, page 281 of their *Abraham Lincoln: A History*—silently dropping the mistaken Rockets account given in a December 1889 article they had published in *The Century*—Lincoln’s party actually landed downtown, much closer than Rockets to their destination: “They passed the suburb of Rockett’s [sic] and proceeded to the neighborhood of the Manchester Bridge, effecting a landing one square above Libby Prison.” My thanks to Mike Gorman of the National Park Service in Richmond who had already, based on other evidence, substantially dismantled the Rockets story, long a staple of the Lincoln-in-Richmond tale. Historians were misled by the *Century* article of Nicolay and Hay and by several northern journalists covering the story in Richmond on April 4. Knowing Lincoln was supposed to arrive at Rockets, they simply asserted that he had, without bothering to check. They had better things to do in a still smoldering Richmond on the afternoon of April 4 than wait indefinitely at Rocketts for the delayed president’s arrival. African American reporter Thomas Morris Chester of the *Philadelphia Press*, for example, was checking out the jails and slave pens. Charles Coffin, meanwhile, luckily found himself at the right place to witness Lincoln disembarking; he correctly identified it as “the bank of the river . . . three-quarters of a mile” from Lincoln’s destination. “Scenes in Richmond,” April 4, 1865, dispatch, *Boston Journal*, April 10, 1865, 4.
seen Father Abraham and felt him.” Since Chester did not observe the initial gathering at the dock, the printed accounts of Lincoln’s arrival all depict the African American crowd as both worshipful and crazed (“half” of them, wrote Porter, “acted as though demented”). In the white reporters’ accounts, as in Porter’s reminiscence, Lincoln comes off as tolerant and respectful, but distant and even judgmental, a patient yet critical observer of the frenzied, uncivilized blacks.14

Upon first spotting Lincoln, one “old man sixty years of age,” the African Americans’ “patriarch,” as Porter called him, raised his hands to his eyes and exclaimed, “He’s bin in my heart fo’ long yeahs, an’ he’s cum at las’ to free his chillun from deir bondage! Glory, Hallelujah.” He then “fell upon his knees before the President and kissed his feet,” after which “a dozen more” tried “to reach him to kiss the hem of his garments!” Porter then has Lincoln lecturing “the poor creatures at his feet,” telling them “don’t kneel to me. . . . That is not right. You must kneel to God only.”

This entire scene seems a bit too perfectly staged to have happened quite this way, especially since Lincoln had just stepped off the boat. It seems unlikely that president and patriarch could have spoken such carefully wrought remarks in the midst of the clamorous excitement. Porter may have borrowed and amplified informal remarks made by Lincoln later that afternoon at Capitol Square, when he told an assembly of African Americans, according to the report of a white southern listener, that “they were free, and had no master now but God.”15

But the rest of the scene rings true, as a euphoric group of freedmen and women, always quick to pair Lincoln and Jesus as their liberators from slavery to man (Lincoln) and slavery to sin (Jesus), rush for Lincoln’s feet and garments, just as Galilean admirers of Jesus did in the first century. Lincoln would have picked up on the obvious biblical precedent and, embarrassed by the over-the-top adulation, he might well have countered it with a double injunction, theologi-


cal and republican: Don’t compare me, or any man, to your Lord and Savior, and don’t bow down to your president. In a republic, no citizen genuflects to the chief magistrate as if he were a king; everyone stands on an equal footing under God.

Porter recollected trying to break up the “touching” scene, since “we could not stay there all day,” but president and patriarch were locked in a ritual moment that had to play itself out, at least in Porter’s own dramatic reconstruction. The old man apologized for holding up the procession. “Scuse us, sir; we means no disrepec’ to Mass’ Lincoln; we means all love and gratitude.” If Lincoln actually got to hear the poetic and resounding biblical words that Porter next put into the mouth of the patriarch—or anything close to them—the president did not mind waiting: “Yes, Massa, but after bein’ so many years in de desert widout water, it’s mighty pleasant to be lookin’ at las’ on our spring of life.” Lincoln stayed put until the freedmen, “joining hands in a ring,” finished singing an old Methodist hymn, “Clap Your Hands Ye People All,” with “melodious and touching voices only possessed [according to Porter] by the negroes of the South.”

At last the president stepped off toward downtown Richmond, undeterred by the rapidly expanding crowd. In a protective formation around him and his son stood Admiral Porter, Captain Penrose, two other military officers, and the ten or twelve sailors, now carrying firearms with bayonets. Apparently this quixotic band of pilgrims had no idea how to get to their destination—the Union army headquarters of General Godfrey Weitzel in Jefferson Davis’s Confederate White House—so African-American members of the crowd agreed to lead the way up Main Street toward the city. “We all stood a chance of being crushed to death,” Porter recollected decades later. “I now realized the imprudence of landing without a large body of marines.” Penrose, writing less than a week after the march, praised the president’s courage “in going through the streets” but considered him “foolhardy” for setting off on foot, adding, “I never passed a more anxious time than in this walk.” The group was “pushed, hustled, and elbowed along without any regard to their persons,” wrote Lieutenant Commander John S. Barnes forty years later. Barnes was pushing through the crowd trying to catch up with the president’s party. “Nothing could have been easier,” he remembered, “than the destruction of the entire party.”

Nearly everyone who commented on the April 4 walk—whether writing before or after the April 14 assassination—agreed that Lincoln and the rest of his group had faced a real threat of physical harm. The situation resembled president-elect Lincoln’s arrival in Buffalo, New York, in February 1861, when an excited crowd pressed up against the train and he was forced to run a gauntlet of manhandling well-wishers. On that occasion one of the soldiers assigned to protect him, Major David Hunter, did suffer a shoulder or collarbone injury. Only after the assassination did observers routinely claim that Lincoln had narrowly escaped death in Richmond. As a matter of course, later biographers have endorsed the graphic account prepared by William Crook and published in 1915, fifty years after the Richmond trip (which he quite likely did not make himself, only hearing about it when the president’s party returned to City Point on April 5). “We had not gone far,” Crook wrote, when the blinds of a second-story window of a house on our left were partly opened, and a man dressed in gray pointed something that looked like a gun directly at the President. I dropped Tad’s hand and stepped in front of Mr. Lincoln. I was sure he meant to shoot. . . . It seems to me nothing short of miraculous that some attempt on his life was not made.”

Charles Coffin of the Boston Journal, who made the entire three-quarter-mile hike with the president’s party from the downtown dock to Weitzel’s headquarters, guessed that the crowd surrounding Lincoln had ballooned to “possibly three thousand” people by the time they all arrived at Capitol Hill, a few blocks from their destination at 12th and Clay Streets. At that point a Union officer on General Weitzel’s staff came upon the marchers by accident and, as he remembered in 1887, observed Lincoln “walking with his usual long, careless stride, and looking about with an interested air and taking in everything.” “Is it far to President Davis’s house?” Lincoln supposedly asked Graves.

17. Gerry, Through Five Administrations, 54. See footnote 10, supra, on Crook’s reliability as a witness. Cf. David Donald’s biography Lincoln (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 577, which relies on Crook’s testimony but pushes beyond him by specifying that Crook’s apparition in generic gray “was clad in a gray Confederate uniform.” He “stood in a second-story window and appeared to point a rifle directly at Lincoln; but no shot was fired, and the group moved on.” This apparently slight modification typifies the process by which stories about iconic cultural heroes evolve over centuries through unintended accretion. I give further details on the walk proper—from the time Lincoln left his embarkation point at the foot of 17th Street until he reached General Weitzel’s headquarters—in my “Lincoln’s Practice of Republicanism,” in Holzer et al., eds., The Living Lincoln.
The officer gladly offered his services, showing him the way and serving as tour guide once they had reached the mansion.\textsuperscript{18}

With Tad contentedly occupied outside, seated in an open carriage and, in juvenile imitation of his father’s authority, entertaining an admiring audience of African Americans and Union soldiers, Lincoln, according to Graves, engaged in some impish, Tad-like behavior indoors. He sat down and said, “this must have been President Davis’s chair,” before popping up moments later to rummage excitedly through the upstairs rooms. Graves was struck by the president’s “boyish manner,” which again expressed, as it had in the streets of the city, his exuberant interest in “everything.” In a second eyewitness account, published in 1907, John S. Barnes observed that the “pale and haggard” president, “utterly worn out with fatigue and the excitement of the past hour, . . . sank down . . . in the chair almost warm from the pressure of the body of Jefferson Davis!” These accounts agree that Lincoln intended to occupy what he took to be Davis’s official chair, but that he did so in a state of either boyish elation or grownup exhaustion; in neither case, we are supposed to infer, could he have demonstrated arrogance or disrespect toward the unseated Davis.\textsuperscript{19}

Journalists reporting the scene at the time did mention the Davis chair, but unlike Barnes and Graves they gave it no special symbolic significance. The \textit{Richmond Whig} noted that Lincoln “seated himself in the reception room and reception chair of Jefferson Davis,” whereupon “three cheers for Admiral Porter were then proposed [quite possibly by Lincoln, tweaking Porter for the successful but alarming ride up the James River] and given with hearty good will.” The \textit{New York Herald} mentioned him “moving to and fro in the official chair

\textsuperscript{18} Charles Carleton Coffin, \textit{The Boys of ’61} (1881; reprint, Boston: Estes & Lauriat, 1896), 54; Thomas Thatcher Graves, “The Fall of Richmond II: The Occupation,” in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., \textit{Battles and Leaders of the Civil War}, vol. 4 (1887; reprint, New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1956), 4:728. In his dispatch written on April 4 and published in the \textit{Boston Journal} on April 10, 1865, Coffin said “a colored man acted as guide” for the group of marchers. In \textit{The Boys of ’61}, a revision of his 1866 book \textit{Four Years of Fighting} (Boston: Ticknor & Fields), Coffin said he guided the president’s group himself. In accordance with the apparent law of greater-intimacy-with-Lincoln-as-memories-evolve-and-other-witnesses-die-off, Coffin wrote in 1885 that Lincoln had called out to him before the barge was finished docking at the wharf, requesting Coffin’s help in finding Jefferson Davis’s house. Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., \textit{Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time} (New York: North American Review, 1885), 181.

\textsuperscript{19} Thomas Thatcher Graves, “The Fall of Richmond,” 728; Barnes, “With Lincoln from Washington to Richmond in 1865,” 748–49.
of the late Jefferson Davis, . . . running his hands frequently through his hair” in “great nervousness of manner,” as he took in the news from General Weitzel that Judge Campbell was ready to meet with him about peace terms. Lincoln did talk with Campbell, but only after taking the time to gather his wits, and only to tell Campbell to come back for a waterfront meeting the next morning.20

Graves and Barnes, however, did not originate the symbolic use of this second-most-famous chair in all of Lincoln lore (the first being the red damask rocking chair in which the president was seated at Ford’s Theatre ten days after his Richmond trip). The memorable chair in Davis’s mansion entered the Lincoln mythology long before Graves or Barnes, decades later, offered their fond recollections of the president in Richmond. It turns out that the eager mythmaking preceded even the event itself. Northerners were already talking about the appropriateness of Lincoln’s sitting in Davis’s chair before the president had left City Point for Richmond. Settling into the defeated chieftain’s seat of power seemed to many people the natural, expected course of action for any leader reasserting a sovereign claim.

On the evening of April 3—the night before the Richmond trip—speakers at mass meetings across the North routinely praised the prowess of the president and his generals in liberating Petersburg and Richmond. At the Bryan Hall gathering in Chicago, the Honorable Edwin C. Larned, a former U.S. Attorney appointed by Lincoln, told a packed house, already whipped up by the “most excellent music” of the 8th Veteran Reserve Corps band, that—in the reporter’s paraphrase—“he fancied Lincoln sitting in Davis’s armchair in Richmond telling stories.” If Edwin Larned thought it fitting for the commander in chief to plop down in the chair of the vanquished Confederate leader, we can be sure that many others, perhaps Lincoln himself, brought the same image to mind before he ever set foot in Jefferson Davis’s house.21

The Davis chair’s long career as a symbol for the transfer of power and for the superiority of either North or South had begun. The power

20. Richmond Whig dispatch, April 5, 1865, reprinted in the Rochester Semi-Weekly Union and Advertiser, April 11, 1865, 1 (also in Washington Evening Star, April 8, 1); “Richmond,” New York Herald, April 9, 5.

21. “The Fall of Richmond,” Chicago Tribune, April 4, 1865, 4. After the assassination, some northern eulogists referred not only to the president’s Richmond trip, but to Davis’s chair: Lincoln “lived to enter Richmond among the acclamations of the liberated slave,” said Theodore Cuyler in his April 23 sermon at the Lafayette Street Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, “and to sit down in the arch-traitor’s deserted seat.” Our Martyr President: Voices from the Pulpit of New York and Brooklyn (New York: Tibbals & Whiting, 1865), 171.
of the symbol lay in its use of Lincoln’s and Davis’s bodies to convey visceral emotion along with political allegiance. Thomas Graves developed the image of a strapping, innocently jubilant president, dropping into the chair only long enough to reanoint it as northern property, and then bounding through the mansion in juvenile elation over his newfound domain. John Barnes depicted an exhausted commander-in-chief, sinking into the chair to rest, speaking only to request a simple glass of water, while “almost” noticing the warmth left behind from the body of a fleeing Jefferson Davis. The image of Davis’s abrupt departure suggested his personal impotence, now that his army couldn’t protect him. His subsequent flight by train to Danville, Virginia, paralleled Lincoln’s embarrassing flight by train through Baltimore in 1861 (in both cases their detractors mocked their unmanly disguising of themselves while in flight). In each instance, the man’s opponents could milk the term flight until it connoted weak-kneed fright, not courageous escape.

While Barnes and Graves were laying down the mythic northern interpretation of the chair, white southerners may already have been laboring on their own version, imagining a slouching, impudent Lincoln thumbing his nose at Davis’s domestic hearth and presidential dignity. However and whenever this southern version of the story originated, it appeared forcefully in twenty-first-century Richmond. In 2003, when a statue of the president and his son Tad was dedicated in the city, one die-hard critic of the monument justified his opposition by referring to Davis’s desecrated chair. He asserted that Lincoln, the supposedly generous and forgiving reconciler of North and South, had “walked into the White House of the Confederacy and plopped down in Jeff Davis’s chair and propped his muddy boots up on Jeff Davis’s desk and said, ‘Hey, we won!’ Some healer!” A less irate but still jaundiced account appeared in 2003 in a New York Times travel column. “Lincoln’s emphasis [was] on national healing,” the author granted, but “the president did indulge himself in a bit of gloating, trying out Jefferson Davis’s chair in the Confederate White House.”

22. Brag Bowling comment to Andrew Ferguson, in Ferguson, “When Lincoln Returned to Richmond, Part II” The Weekly Standard, December 18, 2003, accessed December 19, 2003, http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/5401xqhf.asp; Elizabeth Olson, “Journeys: 36 Hours, Richmond, VA,” New York Times, Travel section, June 6, 2003. Taking a turn trying out Jefferson Davis’s furniture appealed to other northerners too. Thomas Morris Chester wrote one of his columns for the Philadelphia Press while proudly occupying “the chair where Jeff. Davis sat when he visited the [Confederate] Senate” in the Hall of Congress. A former Confederate officer ordered him to get up and leave, but Chester refused and successfully defended his position with his fists. “Carleton” [Charles Coffin], “Matters in Richmond,” April 5 dispatch to
Scarcely alone in anticipating Lincoln’s rendezvous with Davis’s chair, the Honorable C. A. Larned also had company in expecting the president to “tell stories” while seated there. The *Chicago Tribune* editorial page joined him in predicting that “the President, in Jeff. Davis’s easy chair, with his feet under Jeff. Davis’s mahogany, will undoubtedly be reminded of many a little story of a man he once knew who suddenly left Richmond.” Other newspapers also waited for a story from Lincoln on this occasion, making their own craving for his humor newsworthy in its own right. “It is not known whether the occasion [of the Richmond visit] reminded Mr. Lincoln ‘of a little story,’” wrote the *New York Tribune*’s Richmond correspondent, “but it is to be presumed that it did.”23

No sooner had the *Tribune* man begged for a story than the *Springfield Republican* and *Boston Journal* obliged, publishing a reworked Lincoln tale in the absence of an original one. “Mr. Lincoln has told his ‘little story’ in Richmond,” announced the *Republican* on April 10 (the *Boston Journal* reprinted the story the next day). “While seated in the parlor of the fugitive Confederate President, some one related to him the circumstances of Davis’ flight. He said it reminded him of the negro [sic], who, when his preacher told the congregation there were only two roads, one leading to hell and the other to damnation, exclaimed, ‘Den dis nigger take to de woods.’”24

Racially stereotyping jokes, casually demeaning to African Americans, Chinese, Irish, and other groups, came as easily to Lincoln as they did to most other mid-nineteenth-century white Americans, North and South. And on at least two other occasions in 1864 and 1865 he did tell a version of this one, featuring the same ignorant Negro “taking to the woods” rather than opting for hell or damnation. The *Springfield Republican* simply applied the preexisting Lincoln staple to the case at hand. With Davis on the run from Union forces (he would be captured on May 10 in southern Georgia), what better way to humiliate him than to adapt this tale of simple-minded self-preservation? Lincoln actually

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could have spoken this old standby in the Confederate White House on April 4, but it seems unlikely he did. The Republican and Journal both printed it as editorial “filler” rather than as part of a regular dispatch from Richmond. And there seems little chance Lincoln could have told it in a room full of military officers without any of those present repeating it to journalists or invoking it in their own later recollections.25

The drama of Tad and Abraham Lincoln’s arrival in Richmond unfolded in four acts, oscillating back and forth from danger to safety: the risky adventure on the river; the warm ritual greeting by the African Americans at the dock; the perilous trek through the downtown streets; the repose and refreshment at General Weitzel’s headquarters. Tad had played a key role in the story, adding familial intimacy to the public pageantry. Northerners and southerners could apprehend the president’s public body, mingling with the people, as coextensive with his private body, marching alongside his small boy. The Lincoln statue dedicated in Richmond in 2003 plays on this theme, portraying father and son enjoying a quiet moment on a bench, the least “imperial” posture that could have been preserved for posterity.

During the ten days from April 5 to April 15—the remainder of Lincoln’s life—northerners saw republican meaning as well as family connection in the Lincolns’ visit to Richmond. They praised Lincoln for his intrepid effort, in the words of Massachusetts Speaker of the House Alexander Hamilton Bullock, “to purge and restore and perpetuate the same republic” that George Washington had inaugurated. Saving the American republic meant rekindling the bond among the states and renewing the bond between the people and chief magistrate. Bullock pointed to Lincoln’s “simple passage” into the capital of the Confederacy as a fundamental purgative for the republic: the president had eschewed “the pomp, or circumstance or caparisons of war” and walked “quietly as the humble citizen president of the United States to the mansion so recently occupied” by Jefferson Davis.26


26. Alexander Hamilton Bullock, “The Man for the Hour,” Springfield Republican, April 15, 1865, 2. Published in the same issue of the newspaper that announced Lincoln’s assassination, Bullock’s encomium to Lincoln—delivered sometime after the Richmond trip and before his death—ironically ended with an appeal to “Divine Providence [for] the continued life and health of that great and good man.”
After Lincoln’s death on April 15, the Richmond excursion immediately took on religious meanings that mingled with, and for some people supplanted, the republican ones. It became Lincoln’s “last deed,” as Methodist minister Gilbert Haven called it, corresponding to his “last word,” the Second Inaugural Address. On Easter Sunday, April 16, one preacher after another likened his Richmond entry to the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem—each man had been greeted by an outpouring of popular enthusiasm, and each man had met his end within days. The modesty that had always signaled Lincoln’s republican virtue now disclosed his sanctity of character and his readiness for the ultimate sacrifice. Tad Lincoln could now slip out of the story, since his father was striding alone through Richmond toward martyrdom, glowing already with a special, solitary purity. The reason Lincoln’s “triumphal entry into Richmond” carried no hint of pretension, according to the Unitarian preacher Henry Clay Badger, was that like Jesus, he had grown “more humble as he was more exalted.” In Richmond he marched “already with the martyr’s halo round his brow.”

At least one northern minister dissented from the chorus of praise showered on Lincoln for his self-deprecating behavior in Richmond. In his eulogy for Lincoln on April 19, the Northampton, Massachusetts, preacher Gordon Hall suggested the president had gone overboard in his deference to Richmond’s white citizens. “Our loyal colored troops must not parade in captured Richmond. Why? Because there were enemies of our country there whose delicate nerves would be injured. Black men [black Union troops] . . . must not be seen parading the streets, lest it should interfere with the prejudices and sensibilities of traitors.” The Reverend Hall seems to have been the only northern speaker to fault Lincoln’s performance of humility in Richmond.

All northern observers agreed after April 15 that Lincoln had confronted a real threat of assassination in Richmond, not just the same risk of injury faced by all the members of his party. Writing his dispatch to the Boston Journal on April 4, right after completing the walk to General Weitzel’s headquarters, Charles Coffin had made no mention of any danger to the president. But looking back weeks later, he too dredged up an ominous sign: some white men in the Richmond


crowd were flashing “daggers in their eyes” at the president. Like the other commentators after the assassination, Coffin could not help seeing Richmond as a steppingstone to Ford’s Theatre.29

After the assassination Coffin and many others combined the republican and religious meanings of Richmond. Yet with so many other testimonials being offered to Lincoln’s saintliness of character, Coffin chose to emphasize his solidarity with the people. Lincoln had “entered the city unheralded,” holding “his little son by the hand”; “no guard of honor, no grand display of troops.” Most remarkable of all, in letting the people approach him Lincoln had welcomed African Americans into the fold of the people. Freedmen and women “came from all the by-streets, running in breathless haste, shouting and hallooing and dancing with delight.” Lincoln recognized them “as human beings by returning their salutations!”

Coffin pointed again, as he had on April 4, to the single incident during the president’s walk that impressed him the most. “An old negro, removing his hat, [bowed to him] with tears of joy rolling down his cheeks. The President removed his own hat, and bowed in silence; . . . it was a bow which upset the forms, laws, customs, and ceremonies of centuries. It was a death-shock to chivalry, and a mortal wound to caste.” Pilloried in 1861 for passing secretly at night through Baltimore—thus behaving like a quaking monarch, afraid of his own people—Lincoln revealed himself on April 4, 1865, entering “the ancient, aristocratic but now collapsed capital of the confederacy” (in the words of New York Herald reporter William Merriman), as a virile republican hero, at one with his fellow Americans of all colors and conditions.30

29. After returning to Washington on April 9, Lincoln was told by Congressman Schuyler Colfax that many had feared for his safety in Richmond. In a speech delivered in Indiana on April 24, Life and Principles of Abraham Lincoln (Philadelphia: James B. Rodgers, 1865), 10, Colfax said that Lincoln replied, “Why, if anyone else had been president and had gone to Richmond, I would have been alarmed too, but I was not scared about myself a bit.” Someone in the South Bend, Indiana, audience must have wondered if the president, having expressed concern about hypothetical others, had therefore been worried about the others in his party, especially Tad.