

## Abraham Lincoln, What If ?

Chit Chat

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I presented a paper in 1992 entitled "Gettysburg, What If". It was about the Civil War which was a critical time for the United States if we were to remain a unified country such as it is today. The Civil War or some times called the War Between The States began April 12 1861 and was initially over the issue of states rights and the ability to secede from the Union of United States. Slavery only became an issue later. Both sides were unprepared for any real conflict. The battles in the first year and a half were one's with a relatively small number of troops involved. The North seemed to always come out second best due mostly to poor battlefield leadership. Nevertheless, both sides did suffered major casualties, which for the total war would amount to over 600,000 dead and wounded from the battle field , sickness and disease or about 2% of the total population of 31.000,000 at that time. The year 1863 did not start out much better for the North, until General Ulysses Grant's victory in May at Vicksburg, Mississippi which was a turning point for the war.

On July 1, 1863 the battle of Gettysburg began as the Southern forces commanded by General Lee for the first time invaded the northern territory of Pennsylvania. Lee, s army of 75,000 seemed invincible. New to the job, General Meade, was now leading the northern forces of about 84,000 men, Meade was recently appointed by Lincoln who had given up on his previous choice of generals not many months before. Both sides spent July 2 getting their forces together, near the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, with only minor skirmishes occurring. The morning of July 3 was relatively quiet. General Lee ordered a charge on the Union's lines. Pickett's 15,000 troops were to assault the center of the Union's lines and Longstreet's division was

supposed to attack their left flank at the same time. Longstreet did not approve of the plan and for the only time since the beginning of the war or afterwards did not follow orders promptly. He felt no sense of urgency to begin the attack enabling General Meade to move troops from his left flank to strengthen his center and thus barely repulsed Pickett's charge. Pickett lost over 5,000 soldiers or one third of the troops involved. This battle proved to be the

high mark for the South and Pickett's failure basically ended the battle of Gettysburg. The next day the Southern forces began a general retreat. The North was exhausted and General Meade did not try to interfere nor pursue the Confederates. He declared a victory. I have always wondered if it was chance, luck or divine province that Longstreet acted so uncharacteristically and made the North victorious. What if Lee had won this battle ??

Why this is important is that without this supposed victory at Gettysburg it is very unlikely that Lincoln would have been reelected as president the next year in 1864. There had been defeat after defeat by a poorly lead Union army since the beginning of the war. The people of the North dismayed by the terrible losses of men and were losing faith in their government's leadership. Earlier in 1863 Lincoln issued the famous Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves in the South as a means creating a moral justification for the war's continuation. Lincoln was seen in the South as an evil man seeking to take away legitimate states rights and the ownership of slaves, a valuable property. Even in the North ownership of slaves was quite prevalent especially in New York City for household help. Although the Proclamation of Emancipation applied only to the slaves in the South it was easy to see that the ban would in time become universal. The average person in the North thought well of Lincoln but the merchant class was concerned with the cost of the war. Lincoln was not a real party politician and during the war

did away with the right of habeas corpus and other aspects of a democracy, temporarily.

During the war Lincoln would walk alone from the White House to the Army Hospital to visit the wounded. He also had a private office there where he could be alone with his thoughts. Through these visits he saw first hand the carnage that wars create. Few presidents ever did as much as he did to see the suffering of the wounded and dying. Adding to his burden his son Willie had died of a disease in the White House in 1862. As a result his wife, Mary, had a nervous breakdown from which she never fully recovered and became paranoiac making their relation very strained.

Lincoln labored over the famous Gettysburg address he gave on November 19, 1863. It was written as and when he could from time to time initially on the back of an envelope. He had seen the dying and wounded in the hospitals in Washington and felt personally the losses of life on both sides exceeding 45,000 dead and wounded at Gettysburg. Later in the Fall General Ulysses Grant won another major battle defeating the Southerners at the Battle of Chattanooga in Tennessee after which Lincoln placed him in charge all Union armies in the East. Grant began to win battles with hard fighting for the next year, taking major casualties but forcing the Confederates to the south. Sherman's march to the sea with all its destruction of the country side in the Fall of 1864 was a major factor in the eventual Southern surrender in 1865, but it also increased the animosity in the South against the North and particularly Lincoln. It is difficult to imagine that Lincoln had either time or energy to look ahead to the post war years, beyond relief that it was over. The killing would stop and the United States would be maintained as it was.

It is now the Spring of 1865 and Lee has surrendered to Grant at

Appomattox on April 9. The Civil War was basically over. April 14, Good Friday, was a glorious day and Lincoln decides to take his wife, Mary, to see the play "American Cousins" at the Ford Theater with guests Major Rathbone and his lady friend Miss Harris. By this time concern about Lincoln's welfare had developed and he had four guards assigned so that one would always be with him any time he went to a public place. On the evening of April 14, the duty by chance fell to John F. Parker, the least competent of the four guards. He is a known alcoholic, careless and undisciplined. The Presidential Box at the Ford Theater had two bolted doors at its entry and it was expected that the armed guard would remain during the play in the closet-size space between the two doors. This arrangement had been used only a few times up to this point. The Presidential party arrives, the play is stopped and cheers resound as Lincoln greets the audience. He and his party take their seats and the play resumes. Shortly after this the guard Parker took his place between the two doors.

He does not notice that someone had tampered with the first entry door. Soon he is bored and decides to see the play for himself and unlocks the door, leaves his post and joins the audience. Now bored with the play he leaves to go to the bar for a drink or two and remained there until it was too late. John Wilkes Booth, the assassin, earlier that day had already carefully studied the layout of the seats in the box and being an actor, no one questioned what he was doing in the theater. He had drilled a small hole in the outer door to the box seat enabling him to see if there was a guard in the space between the two doors. No one, including Parker the guard noticed the evidence of tampering. Booth was a Southerner and felt he must avenge the defeat of the Confederate states and blamed Lincoln for the awful damage done to the South. He was a part time actor, emotional and given to verbal and physical outbursts. Going to his spy hole Booth could see that no guard was on duty. It was an easy matter to enter

the box seat and shoot Lincoln once in the back of his head, fatally. Lincoln would not die until the next day, April 15 at 7:22 am. None of Booth's friends or family was surprised when it was learned that he had shot Lincoln. Booth was not a rational, scheming person but a passionate idealist. He truly believed he would be hailed as a hero for the assassination, not only in the South, but also by many in the North. Ironically, it was only an assassination at this time that would make Lincoln a martyr and cause people to understand suddenly, what he had done for the country, unifying the South and North and preserving the United States of America. The post war years were difficult enough for the country with many blaming the South itself for the assassination. Would it have been different if Lincoln had lived ??

It was a random chance that the least competent guard would be on duty that evening and that anyone would really want or be able to kill the President. What would have happened if a more capable guard had been on duty that night ?? This is a matter of chance that impacted history and how Lincoln is remembered today in a almost mythic fashion. My main source for this paper was the six volume biography written in 1938 by Carl Sandburg who I believe was as objective as any author could be. Over time each new biography tries to find more reasons to exaggerate Lincoln's good qualities, perhaps, to improve readability. I question the ability to quote private conversations between Lincoln and his wife while they were in the box seat before he was shot or any other private conversations that would have to be hearsay. There are 40 or more different views of the actual assassination with no consensus on the details. I have relied on Sandberg's detailed biography for my version of the event, which has no record of personal conversations.

Now what would have happened if one of the more capable and dedicated

guards had been on duty that night at the Ford Theater and could have thwarted the assassination of Lincoln ? A matter of chance which impacted history and the way Lincoln has been remembered today now almost with reverence. More biographies have been written about Lincoln than any other single person with maybe the exception of Jesus Christ. Biographies which are supposed to be non-fiction often times are subject to the author's biases and prejudices on facts. Over time each new biography tries to find more reasons to exaggerate Lincoln's good qualities to improve readability. I have read countless biographies on Lincoln and there are many times when the same event is portrayed quite differently and always from a more positive view from author to author. Lincoln has become an icon equal to George Washington, and is of more interest to more people today as we celebrated his 200th birthday in February this year..

In conclusion, the "What if" question remains. My experience has been that no one, despite all kinds of prestigious credentials can really forecast the future accurately or consistently because there are always random, unexpected, seemingly small events, that will have an impact beyond understanding at the time that can and have changed the course of history.

My second conclusion: we expect non-fiction to be the facts only, but experience also indicates that even the facts can be distorted by prejudices or biases by an author in a way that can be misleading about what really occurred. So it pays to be very skeptical in reading only one author's view of any event in non-fiction. It is necessary to read several author's view of a person or event to know the person totality or what really did happen.