

What We've Forgotten about Lincoln's Funeral, and What We've Never Known

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This 30-minute talk identifies **three major features** of Lincoln's funeral saga that were either lost from view in the twentieth century (the "forgotten") or were not clearly apprehended even in the late nineteenth century (the "never known"). The talk aims to look beneath the surface of the initial grieving (April 15 to 21, 1865) and of the funeral-train pageantry (April 21 to May 4) to uncover what the loss of Lincoln really signified to citizens of his time— to African Americans and white Americans alike.

These three major features of the funeral period (others could easily be enumerated) are inter-connected, and throughout the presentation, the audience will be encouraged to reflect on how Lincoln's physical body—not just his exemplary character, majestic words and heroic deeds-- carried powerful messages in its own right.

Feature #1: The collision of religion and republicanism in the mourning for Lincoln.

On April 15, 1865 Americans scrambled to make their already well-established republican hero a religious martyr too. At the time, hardly anyone realized that *sanctifying* him—claiming that God had chosen him for special distinction, and indeed, for a special post-mortem mission as a saintly man of

peace—might conflict with the preservation his republican identity. In actual fact, the religious excellence publicly imputed to him within hours of his death, and promoted vigorously throughout the funeral period, did ultimately help to shove his republican virtues aside.

Most writers on the post-assassination period have missed this collision of religion and republicanism after Lincoln's death. Countless authors have claimed that Lincoln's humanity was lost as he was turned into an "icon," "monument," or "divinity." But Americans didn't lose touch with Lincoln's *humanity* when they turned him into an icon. They just developed a distorted view of his humanity. They emphasized his supposedly saintly disposition and flawless character. They forgot his *republican* way of being human: the chief magistrate devoted to mixing with the people, avoiding any pretense of monarch-like superiority, while holding citizens to strict account as members of a *free* body politic.

Feature #2: African Americans and northern whites all mourned for Lincoln, but they did so in entirely different ways.

Many black and white Americans understood after April 15, 1865 that these two racial groups reacted very differently to the loss of Lincoln. This fact was almost entirely forgotten in the late twentieth century. In 1865, virtually every northerner, black or white, was shocked and saddened by Lincoln's death, but northern white Republicans often saw a silver lining in the calamity: the president's removal meant severe punishment ahead for the ex-Confederates, and perhaps even a restructuring of southern society and politics (economic opportunity for blacks and the vote for black men-- hence more votes for Republicans). Despite their

genuine sorrow, northern white orators bucked up their audiences with the comforting news that the Republic possessed a limitless supply of skilled chief magistrates. The Republic would do just fine without Lincoln.

Meanwhile, blacks north and south expressed their utter dread at the prospect of a future without Lincoln. African Americans performed the vital service of keeping Lincoln's republican beliefs alive even as they joined northern whites in sanctifying him. While late nineteenth-century whites mostly forgot about Lincoln's devotion to equality of opportunity for all men, African Americans made their trust in him and in his republicanism a central article of their faith.

The springtime funeral events of 1865 gave black Americans a unique chance to participate fully in the civic life of the Republic. They took advantage of this opportunity in every city on the funeral train route, including Springfield.)

Feature #3: Lincoln's physical body exercised its own potent influence over the mourning rituals.

From the first lying-in-state in Washington DC on April 18, 1865 to the last one in Springfield on May 4, 1865, the condition of Lincoln's corpse drew intense interest. At the time, virtually everyone understood that the president had made of his body a sacrificial gift to the people—he was not just an unfortunate victim of Booth's treachery, but a conscious martyr to the cause of union and liberty. Blacks and whites wanted access to him after his death just as they had wanted access to him during his presidency.

By the early twentieth century, Lincoln's actual body, and his sacrificial gift of it, had been eclipsed in Americans' affections by his sculpted body, by his sacred

words, and by his virtually holy spirit. (In the late twentieth century, the virtually holy spirit slipped away, leaving behind his sacred words and his sterling character.)

Focusing on Lincoln's physical body during the funeral period establishes the unique place of Chicago and Springfield in the mourning rituals. For in Illinois, unlike the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, and his boyhood Indiana-- where the first ten of twelve lyings-in-state took place-- Lincoln was received not only as a saint and a national Father, but as a neighbor and friend.

Since April 24, eastern newspapers had debated whether his body was too shrunken and discolored to be kept on view. In Chicago and Springfield, by contrast, his remains were greeted with an effusive and unconditional embrace. A family member had come home. To this day, attachment to Lincoln in Illinois reflects the special warmth of the welcome he received from the blacks and whites of Chicago and Springfield in early May, 1865.