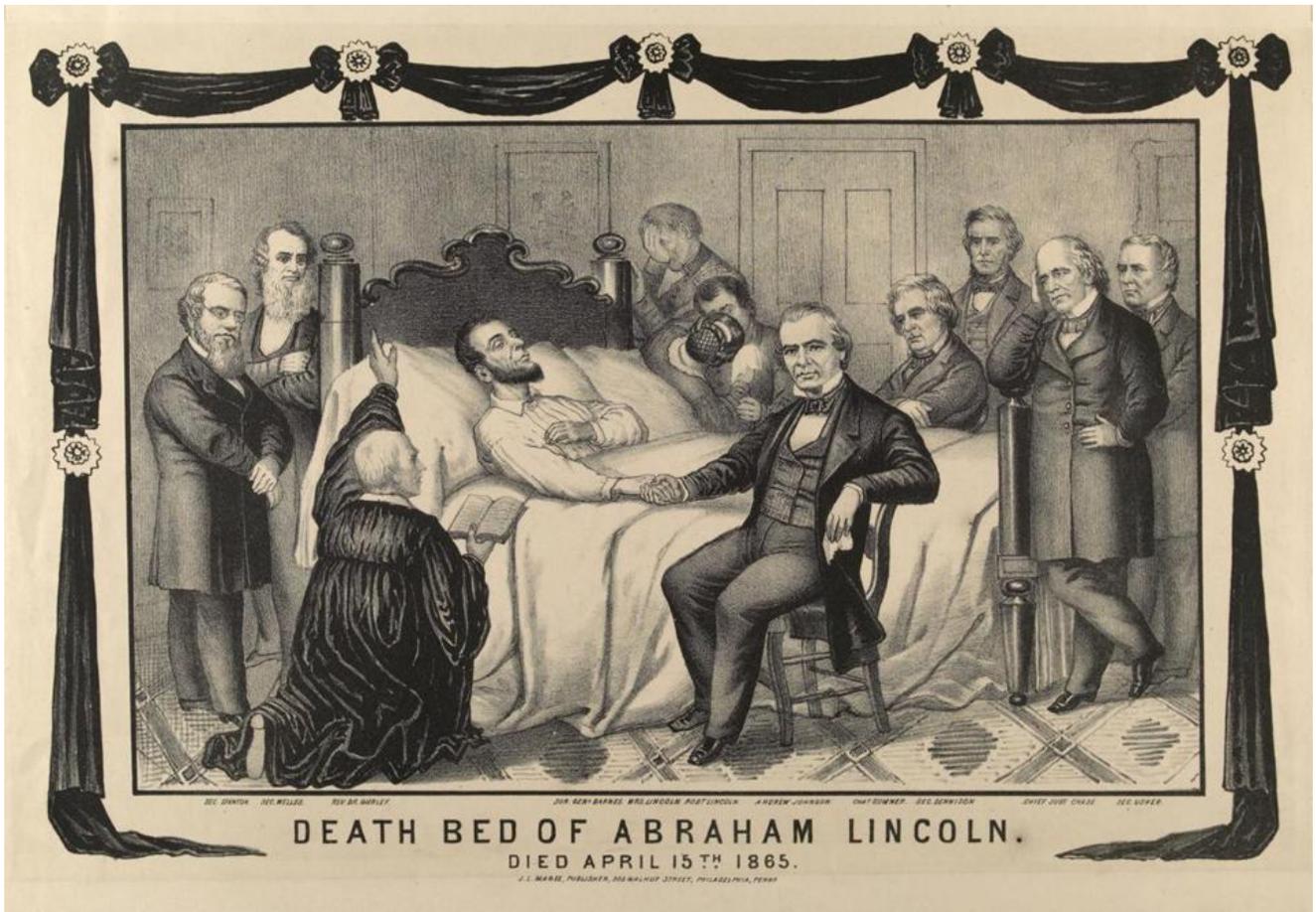


Q&A

# A nation united in mourning Lincoln? Think again

From anger to glee, historian Martha Hodes's new book uncovers Americans' real reactions to the president's assassination



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An engraving of the deathbed of Abraham Lincoln, by J. L. Magee, Philadelphia, 1865.

By Ruth Graham | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 22, 2015

WHEN PRESIDENT Abraham Lincoln was assassinated 150 years ago this spring, it was easy for his shocked supporters to imagine that everyone, everywhere, was grieving alongside

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A nation united in mourning Lincoln? Think again. Ideas. The <https://www.bostonjournal.com/News/2015/02/22/nation-united-m...>  
them. As one wrote to her brother, she was comforted by the universal feeling of one sorrow that overcame all.”

But that nation was made up of millions of people, and in fact, as a new book demonstrates, they were anything but unified. Lincoln was shot by Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865, just five days after the South surrendered the Civil War, and when he died the next day, it did not magically heal those national wounds. Historian Martha Hodes’s new book, “Mourning Lincoln,” depicts a fractious, raucous country in the wake of its leader’s assassination. Drawing from hundreds of letters and diaries from all over the country, she illustrates a much more complex portrait than one of a somber “nation in mourning.”

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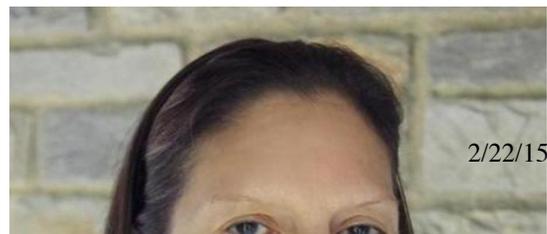
To be sure, many Americans did mourn. Hodes reports that on April 15 alone, one New York department store sold the equivalent of \$1 million in black decorations, and many buildings were quickly shrouded in bunting. But others in both the North and the South whooped with glee. When a 17-year-old white girl in South Carolina got the news, according to her diary, she crowed “Hurrah!” and celebrated with her family, who agreed: “Isn’t it splendid?”

Others were filled with fear: Thousands of black residents of Washington, D.C., gathered at the White House as news of the shooting first spread, with some wondering if slavery would be reinstated. Still other responses were simply mundane. In New Orleans, a woman complained that she couldn’t go hat shopping because the stores had closed in response to the death.

Hodes opens each chapter with the reactions of three protagonists—a wealthy abolitionist couple in Salem and a die-hard Confederate in Jacksonville, Fla. Sarah and Albert Browne wrote frequent letters to each other while Albert traveled through the South working for the Treasury Department during the war. Rodney Dorman, a lawyer furious about the South’s defeat, kept journals that ran to thousands of pages. (Dorman, too, was a Massachusetts native, but he would later deny it, telling a census-taker he was born in South Carolina.) While Sarah Browne lamented, “No words could express enough of horror and grief,” Dorman praised assassin Booth as “a great public benefactor.”

Hodes spoke to Ideas from her home in Manhattan, where she is a professor of history at New York University.

**IDEAS:** My impression had always been that there was pretty universal grief at Lincoln’s assassination. That clearly wasn’t the case. Were there certain reactions that particularly surprised you?



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**HODES:** Not just grief on the part of the mourners, of which there was a great deal, but also anger—fury in fact. There were soldiers’ diaries where the men would write about wishing there was one more battle....They wanted to exterminate the enemy they were so angry....And then of course reading the responses of Confederates, the utter glee they expressed when they got the news of Lincoln’s assassination. They thanked the assassin, they praised God. It was clearly a reprieve from the horror of defeat, which they had just experienced.



BRUCE DORSEY

**Martha Hodes**



*‘Lincoln also had Northern enemies....There’s one case where a [Union] soldier says, after Lincoln is shot in the head by John Wilkes Booth, he said he has as much of a brain now as he ever had.’*

Martha Hodes, New York University history professor and author of ‘Mourning Lincoln’

**IDEAS:** How did black Americans in particular react to the news?

**HODES:** African-Americans, North and South, claimed that their loss was greater than the loss of Lincoln for white Americans. White mourners who noted that down did not dispute that fact. They understood that that was true. African-Americans had more at stake in the end of the Civil War in terms of the end of slavery, freedom, and equality, what was coming, than any white person ever could....White mourners and even abolitionists did not grasp the fact that Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson, would be a disaster for the future of black freedom and equality. And black mourners grasped this immediately.

**IDEAS:** People were arrested for tearing down bunting, mobs were said to tar and feather those who refused to mourn, and Union soldiers were tried for treason for celebrating the assassination. Why did it seem so important for Lincoln’s supporters to try to suppress those “incorrect” responses?

**HODES:** Lincoln also had Northern enemies, Northern antagonists, and they were also filled with glee at Lincoln’s assassination....There’s one case where a [Union] soldier says, after Lincoln is shot in the head by John Wilkes Booth, he said he has as much of a brain now as he ever had. That was incredibly offensive to people, to the soldiers who were mourning for Lincoln....It really made it difficult for the mourners to continue on with this mythology that the whole nation was grieving.

**HODES:** Memoirs are by their very nature polished, they're burnished, they're crafted, and the biggest thing is that they're embellished, not because anybody wants to deceive anybody but because that's what happens with memory....In memoirs, the number of men who claimed to have carried Lincoln's body out of the theater and across the street to the boardinghouse where he died is completely impossible.

**IDEAS:** Are there parallels to the tradition of swathing building facades in black bunting today?

**HODES:** The Boston Marathon bombing, I was living in Cambridge that year when it happened....People had made shrines of flowers and candles of running shoes and teddy bears at the site of the disaster. It has the same effect. It's making private grief communal.

**IDEAS:** What did Lincoln's sudden death and its timing mean for his legacy?

**HODES:** Lincoln was assassinated five days after General Lee surrendered to General Grant. It was such an incredible whiplash from overwhelming joy to overwhelming sorrow. That made a difference in the intensity of the responses. When I started this research I thought I would find that over time following the assassination, Lincoln became more and more elevated and deified. What I did find was that his deification was so instantaneous....

Lincoln was a very enigmatic man. He hated slavery his whole life...but he was a lawyer and he was very diplomatic, and he did it in ways that made it possible to carry out legally. So then what happens [after the assassination] is African-Americans and their white allies look back and elevate the most radical parts of Lincoln.

**IDEAS:** In some ways, the 21st century seems like an era of particularly performative grief—I think of everyone tweeting “RIP” when a public figure dies. But, looking back, it seems like a fairly universal instinct. What did that look like in the 19th century?

**HODES:** The first thing people want to do is they want to confirm the information, whether they saw it in a newspaper headline or they heard that this telegram had come into the telegraph office. What they do is they go outside and start spreading the news. They knock on people's doors, they knock on people's windows....And then out on the street, over and over people peer into other people's faces. They write this in different ways, but they're all saying the same thing. They want to look at other people's faces to verify that this really happened....If everybody out on the street is crying, that's the version of, well if it's on my Facebook feed it must be true.

**IDEAS:** What do you think the reactions to Lincoln's assassination tell us about contemporary reactions to major news events?

**HODES:** I would venture to say that feelings of universalism are never true, historically. There's almost always tension or disagreement or outright conflict, but people screen out that conflict at the moment, and most especially they screen it out in their memories....In many ways tragedies bring people together, certainly, but that's not the end of the story. There are also ways in which tragedies can make conflicts more acute.

*Ruth Graham, a writer in New Hampshire, is a regular contributor to Ideas.*

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