

President Lincoln Is Assassinated

After defeats at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, friends of the South watched events unfold with greater gloom. Grant went on to defeat the South at Chattanooga and was then appointed supreme commander of Union forces. He took command of the Army of the Potomac and assigned General William T. Sherman the task of marching to Atlanta and then from Atlanta to the coast. When General Joe Johnston could not stop the advance, President Davis replaced him with General John Hood. Hood lost Atlanta in September 1864, and Sherman made a path 60 miles wide to the coast, arriving in Savannah on December 22, 1864. The South, divided at the Mississippi in 1863, had been divided again. Meanwhile, Grant was conducting a relentless campaign that began with the Wilderness in May 1864; ignoring enormous losses, he pinned Lee's army down in the trenches at Petersburg, Virginia.

Lincoln Is Reelected

Also devastating to Confederate supporters was Lincoln's reelection in 1864. During the war, a group of Democrats called "Copperheads" tried to stir up opposition to the war and to Lincoln. They had counted on the 1864 election as a way for those who did not like the war, the draft, the Emancipation Proclamation, or Lincoln to defeat him by electing George McClellan. When Lincoln won, most accepted it. John Wilkes Booth did not, however.

John Wilkes Booth

Booth was the son of famous actor Junius Booth and grew up in an acting family. John Wilkes wasn't as impressed with the lines of Shakespeare's plays as with the action. In sword-fighting scenes, he was so intense that he often injured his opponent. He sometimes leaped from boulders on the stage to give greater effect. He loved plays with sinister plots and high drama. He was popular with the ladies and with a strange assortment of admiring misfits. Among these were Lewis Powell and George Atzerodt, known to be "a notorious coward."

When Booth was unhappy, he drank; and as news of Confederate defeats came, he was more despondent than ever. He loved the South and felt a need to do something desperate and theatrical to save it. He had plotted a kidnapping of Lincoln in the past, but his plans never worked out. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865, made kidnapping useless. Booth had heard Lincoln's brief and conciliatory speech at the White House on April 11 and vowed, "That is the last speech he will ever make." His thoughts now turned to murder.

Assassination at Ford's Theatre

On April 14, 1865, Booth learned that Lincoln would attend Ford's Theatre that evening, and he called his friends together. Atzerodt was to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson, Powell was to kill Secretary of State Seward, and Booth would kill Lincoln. Atzerodt did nothing, but Powell broke into Seward's home and attacked him in his bed. However, Booth would have to play the leading role himself.

Sneaking into Lincoln's box at Ford's Theatre, Booth shot Lincoln in the head. In the leap from the box to the stage, his spur caught in the bunting, and he landed off-balance, breaking his leg. Shouting "*Sic semper tyrannis*," which means "thus always to tyrants," Booth left the stage and rode off into the night.

President Lincoln was carefully carried across the street to a nearby boarding house. Lincoln never regained consciousness. He died the following morning. On April 26, Booth was surrounded in a barn near Port Royal, Virginia. He was shot and died a few hours later.