Lincoln Prize remarks  
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Union League Club, April 21, 2016

Good evening, everybody. I’m so happy to be here, and so honored.

I’ve been teaching the Civil War for nearly 25 years, and I’ve always had a few lines in my lectures about Lincoln’s assassination, but at some point I found myself taking a greater interest in this momentous event. I now trace that interest to September 11, 2001. That Tuesday was the first day of the Fall semester at New York University. The first plane hit the towers before I left my apartment, and the second as I was walking to class. Nine-eleven made me think about how people respond to transformative events on the scale of everyday life, which in turn conjured my faded memories of Kennedy’s assassination (I was five years old in 1963).

As a scholar of the Civil War, I wondered: What did people do—at home, on the street, at work, with their families, by themselves—when they heard the news of Lincoln’s assassination? I wanted to understand a catastrophic event on a human scale. I wanted to explore how personal responses to the assassination, recorded in the diaries people kept and the letters they wrote, illuminated larger national concerns: black freedom and equality, the problem of national reunion, the very meaning of the Civil War.

In researching and writing *Mourning Lincoln*, it became clear that personal responses to the assassination illuminated the roots of a long aftermath of irreconcilable visions of the nation’s future. No matter how majestic and resplendent were the public ceremonies honoring Lincoln, this end-of-war moment was not a time of unity and closure. The immediate aftermath of Lincoln’s assassination—those pivotal hours, days, and weeks—were, I soon realized, a key moment of intense strife that had been left out of the story, and a moment that resonates into the present day.

I knew when I began my research that the principle responses of mourners would be shock and grief. People were astonished, astounded, stupefied. They wrote that word of Lincoln’s death was a thunder clap from a clear blue sky. It was a dreadful dream; it felt like a play on a stage—today we would say, *I felt like I was in a movie*. And the grief: One former slave said that even the trees were weeping for Lincoln.

For Lincoln’s mourners, this grief felt universal, and proclamations of universal grief made by mourners themselves, at the time, have sustained an image of everyone, everywhere, across the whole nation, even the whole world, in sorrow. But of course that wasn’t true—not at all, and it was precisely this multivocal din of voices that interested me.

To the dismay of black and white mourners in the North, Lincoln’s northern enemies, the Copperheads, including Union soldiers, laughed, clapped, and cheered at news of the assassination, and when news arrived in the South, many Confederates positively reveled in Lincoln’s murder. As one young woman wrote in her diary: “Hurrah! Old Abe Lincoln has been assassinated!”—exclamation point! “Jubilant,” her “heart beating with excitement” (all her words), she listened as people around her exclaimed, “Isn’t it splendid?”
Lincoln’s mourners were infuriated, by the assassination and by these expressions of glee; to responses of shock and grief, we must add anger. And yet: We cannot draw a simple line, as some have done, from Lincoln’s assassination to supposedly vengeful policies of radical Reconstruction, that brief historical, and historic, moment of black equality that followed the war.

From the moment of Union victory on April 9, 1865, African Americans stood vigilant against reconciliation with the white South, and with the assassination less than a week later, Lincoln’s black mourners expressed great anxiety about the fate of freedom and equality. Lincoln’s white mourners, on the other hand, at first believed that former Confederates were fully vanquished: first by military defeat, then doubly subdued by the nation’s first presidential assassination. But true to the vision of Lincoln’s black mourners, Confederates were not subdued. In the immediate wake of the assassination, I found, white southerners wrote in their diaries of “renewing the struggle.” They wrote in their letters that the South would rise again. They dreamed of “a second war for independence,” precisely what the Civil War had been for African Americans, since the Revolution had excluded them from its principles of freedom.

Now former Confederates looked forward to the renewal of black subordination, and the re-establishment of their own political rights, with no federal interference. African Americans and their white allies, meanwhile, looked forward to racial equality: education, land, citizenship, and voting rights, all with the guarantee of federal enforcement. They wanted these policies not as vengeance for the assassination, but to avenge Confederate defiance in the face of defeat, and to avenge the cause of the war: slavery. Indeed, when Lincoln’s mourners looked beyond the assassin, John Wilkes Booth, to find a cause for the murder, it was precisely (I was intrigued to find) slavery that they named. On the very day Lincoln died, the accusations mounted, in private writings. Lincoln had been: “sacrificed to slavery”; taken by “an agent of that accursed system of Slavery and State[’s] Rights”; killed by “all the hate, wickedness, & guilt of Slavery.” Members of the Union League Club wrote in their meeting minutes that they hated the “pistol . . . of the assassin” and no less, the “lash of the slave-driver.”

And slavery remained the fear. Even legal freedom, wrote the editors of New York City’s black newspaper (their words:) left “an immense margin for oppressions akin to slavery.” Lincoln’s white mourners came to understand this. As one man wrote to his mother that summer, speaking of President Andrew Johnson: “If Andy doesn’t put his foot on slavery hard, they will try to start it again somehow.”

Soon Lincoln’s more radical mourners decided that God had permitted Lincoln’s demise for a specific political reason: in order to alert the victors to the intransigence of their defeated enemies. Very rapidly, too, President Johnson made apparent his complete dismissal of calls for black equality. Then, I found, African Americans just as rapidly reached for Lincoln. Black petitioners told President Johnson that he was replacing “a man who had proved himself indeed our friend,” reminding Johnson of the “liberty brought us and our wives and our little ones by your noble predecessor.” African Americans and their white allies now upheld Lincoln as a model of radicalism. They looked to the Emancipation Proclamation, of course, but they also looked to the second inaugural address that Lincoln had delivered six weeks before he was killed. There, Lincoln had declared that the war on the battlefield would last “until every drop of blood drawn with the lash” (slavery) “shall be paid by another drawn with the sword” (the war). The
war would not end until slavery ended.

Lincoln closed that address with the appeal (and these words were already famous when he was assassinated) for “malice toward none” and “charity for all,” exhorting his listeners to “strive on to finish the work we are in” and to “do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace.” Indeed, many at the time thought they knew what Lincoln meant, and many today—both historians and a more general public—understand these words in the same way: as the Union army approached triumph, it seemed Lincoln wanted the conquerors to treat their vanquished Confederate enemies with mercy.

But after researching *Mourning Lincoln*, I came to disagree with that reading. Rather, I believe, African Americans interpreted Lincoln’s imperative of “malice toward none” and “charity for all” to apply not to former Confederates, but just the opposite: to apply to themselves, in their quest for equality and citizenship. That’s why Lincoln’s black mourners inscribed those two phrases on the banner they carried through the nation’s capital on the Fourth of July 1865. The assassination had opened the eyes of these radicals to the necessity for revolutionary policies following Confederate defeat on the battlefield, because defeated Confederates who held political power could still win the war off the battlefield. And in fact, in the end, revenge and its fruits came more readily, not to Lincoln’s devastated mourners, but to his devastated enemies.

And so, my last point: In 2016, following the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination, we know that the quest for equality is not yet resolved, the meaning of the Civil War not yet resolved. With President Lincoln’s imperative of “a just, and a lasting peace” in mind, Frederick Douglass told his fellow mourners on the Fourth of July 1865 that “permanent peace” could not be accomplished without justice. Today we say, “No justice, no peace.”

Thank you.