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## **Emblems of Woe: How the South Reacted to Lincoln's Murder**

*By David Hardin*

*The following excerpt is taken from **Emblems of Woe: How the South Reacted to Lincoln's Murder**, an e-book by David Hardin (Now and Then Reader pub., 2014). Hardin, a Huntsville resident, writes here of the harsh response and near-mutiny of many Union soldiers in parts of the occupied South, including Huntsville, upon hearing the news of President Lincoln's death on April 15, 1865. With permission of David Hardin.*

THE SHORT-FUSE reaction of Union Army soldiers, as evident in Nashville and in [Union General William T.] Sherman's fears for Raleigh, was a genuine menace not only to captured Confederate soldiers but to civilians at hand. That the number of retaliatory killings—that is, murders—was comparatively few hardly minimizes the many other punitive actions (arrests, assaults, vandalism) that underscored the seething rage of Union soldiers. Nor was Nashville alone in recording multiple homicides. In New Orleans the *Daily Picayune* for April 20 listed at least nine such city murders in a twenty-four-hour period.

Nor was the South alone. In Chicago, an almost gleeful Union private observed, soldiers shot boisterous, anti-Lincoln

*“villains so quickly, that the cry [of joy] dies in their throats mingled with the death rattle. ... The swift Justice is approved by all good citizens.”*

The emotions of Union soldiers in response to the assassination are abundantly mirrored in diaries, memoirs, and letters to home. An Iowa soldier wrote his wife: *“I have heard only one sentiment expressed, and it seems to be universal throughout the army. Woe to the South if this Army is compelled to pass through it again.”*

An Ohio officer said his men were consumed with rage and *“walking about with clenched fists swearing that they would have revenge.”* A Union soldier in North Carolina, remarking on Sherman’s talks with [Confederate General] Joe Johnston, warned that if

*“we make another campaign it will be an awful one. ... We hope Johnston will not surrender.”*

In Washington enraged soldiers had to be kept under tight control, which, said a fellow Yank, probably prevented a massacre as there *“were many ex-Confederate soldiers in the city, also many Southern sympathizers.”* One man was killed by a soldier after calling Lincoln a *“black rascal.”*

In the wake of the news, officials in such cities as New Orleans, Atlanta, and Savannah, Georgia, were told by military authorities to draft public statements of grief. In Vicksburg, soldiers’ demands forced resolutions compelling citizens to wear mourning for thirty days and to raise money for a Lincoln monument. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, nine men were arrested for *“expressing pleasure”* at the death; they were made to labor about town while wearing signs labeled *“Assassination Sympathizer.”* In North Carolina soldiers prevented from attacking defeated Confederates instead set fire to a *“princely”* plantation.

In Richmond, a city already half-destroyed by war, a Union division commander ordered his camp to be surrounded by other troops while he broke the news to his men and urged them to maintain *“moderation, conciliation, and magnanimity”*. He also

vowed to join them to annihilate “*the Southern Slaveholding race*” if the assassination proved to be linked to the Rebel government. In Mobile two women who shouted “**Glory to God!**” when they heard of Lincoln’s death were refused passage by the captain of a military transport, as soldiers on board had threatened to kill them once at sea.

No act, it seems, was too small. In occupied Huntsville, Alabama, the diarist Mary Jane Chadick recorded the order of Union General R.S. Granger, warning of punishment for persons “exalting” the assassination. Soon a “Mr. Westley Parkes was seen standing on the porch of his brother’s house, laughing and talking with some young ladies, which excited suspicion that they were rejoicing in regard to the above [Granger’s order]. The house was searched, and last night some of the furniture was moved out with a threat to burn the house.” The following day, April 17, “Miss Ella Scruggs and Miss Edmonia Toney were arrested and taken to the Courthouse on a charge of having rejoiced at the late news. Col. Horner read them a lecture and dismissed them.”

Behind this sometimes murderous rage of Union soldiers lay the sheer admiration they held for Lincoln, the man they affectionately called “Old Abe” and “Father Abraham.” Not only had they fought under him during the war, but with peace finally near Lincoln was trusted as the one man to set matters right again. Of course it depended on the individual’s viewpoint and priorities as to what those matters might be, and how the president might do it; Lincoln had left the future open to individual speculation.

Admiral David D. Porter, who attended a meeting with Lincoln, [General Ulysses S.] Grant, and Sherman prior to Appomattox, came away convinced that Lincoln “*wanted peace on almost any terms.*” Porter thought Lincoln came to the meeting “with the

most liberal views toward the rebels.” After the assassination, Grant described Lincoln’s postwar policy as a;

*“desire to have everybody happy, and above all his desire to see all people of the United States enter again upon the full privileges of citizenship with equality among all.”*

A large number of Southerners seem at least to have “sensed” this generosity—dreading the alternative—and Grant’s humane regard for [Confederate General Robert E.] Lee and his army at Appomattox had added to the impression. Thus it would be the bitterest irony for Lincoln’s army now to be plotting revenge. And yet, in a soldier’s view, Lincoln himself had been cheated of victory. His death went beyond murder; it was incomprehensibly unfair.

That is why a New Jersey officer, Captain George Bowen, feared trouble from his men who were camped near Appomattox when told of the assassination.

*“The men are insane with rage,”* he wrote in his diary. *“It is all we can do to restrain our men from wreaking their vengeance on the poor fellows who are making their way home on foot from Lee’s army.”*

Factors besides the assassination, however, were also at work upon the emotions of the Union soldier in April 1865. One of them was the pall now cast on the exaltation of having won a war and survived.

Another was the outrage building over revelations of Confederate prison camps and the sufferings of helpless thousands.

Finally, and not least, was the coarsening that a long war brings to soldier and non-soldier alike.

One of Sherman's officers wrote in March 1865, as his army looked to North Carolina:

*"We have given South Carolina a terrible scourging. We have destroyed all factories, cotton mills, gins, presses and cotton; burnt one city, the capital, and most of the villages on our route as well as most of the barns, outbuildings and dwelling houses, and every house that escaped fire has been pillaged. ... There was recklessness by the soldiery in South Carolina that they had never exhibited before and a sort of general 'don't care' on the part of the officers."*

He did not mention rape, but that is also a characteristic of the wrath of invading armies.

For those especially with Sherman, it scarcely mattered if some place like Raleigh too should now be put to the torch. There it was more difficult to relay the news and keep the peace than Sherman would later indicate. The *Raleigh Standard* did its part on April 18 by saying, *"We announce with profound grief the assassination of the President of the United States."* Yet army muscle was still needed to keep the ranks in line.

Union Private John Ferguson of Illinois wrote in his diary on April 20 that a

*"strong guard had to be placed around the city of Raleigh to keep the soldiers from racking out their vengeance on the citizens of Raleigh".*

This was a genuine threat, as some two thousand soldiers had slipped out of camp to do their worst. Ultimately destruction was prevented by the arrival of General John Logan's XV Corps and its artillery. Logan's wife, who wrote his biography, described her husband mounted on his horse, flying "*from one command to another, calling on the men to be worthy of their own heroic deeds and innocent of the blood of guiltless people.*" Emotions soon cooled. Victory parades beckoned; so, at last, did hearth and home. But for a short time, for many Southerners, these post-assassination days and nights were among the most harrowing of the war.

Nor did they bode well for the future.

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**The Author:** *David Hardin is a veteran newspaperman who grew up on the Civil War battlefield of Nashville, Tennessee. He has been a writer and editor at newspapers across the South, including those in Nashville; Raleigh, North Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; Miami and Tampa, Florida; Jackson, Mississippi, and Huntsville. Among his journalism awards is a Pulitzer Prize. Besides "Emblems of Woe," Hardin is the author of "After the War: The Lives and Images of Major Civil War Figures After the Shooting Stopped" (Rowman & Littlefield pub., 2010). He has lectured on it at the Library of Congress and Lipscomb University. Hardin and his family live in the Huntsville area. He's a Vols fan.*