Lincoln Lore

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LINCOLN'S DEATH

In many respects Abraham Lincoln pointed the way to the future. His economic ideas looked forward to America's commercial future and away from her agrarian past. He belonged to political parties now described by historians as parties of "modernization." His racial policies as president led to a more pluralistic American society. He was consciously innovative, obtaining a patent on his own invention and taking a keen interest in patent cases as a lawyer.

In other ways Lincoln was a man of his era. He had lived too long on the frontier to have much appreciation for nature. He thought of wilderness as something to be conquered. When his photograph was taken, he said the photographer had captured his "shadow."

In at least one crucial way, Lincoln was a man of the past. His political philosophy harked back to the axioms of Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence, and the eighteenth century. He believed in natural rights and the state of nature from which government evolved as a convenient instrument. Lincoln's political universe was statically Lockean.

One thing about Lincoln was decidedly medieval: his death. By that I do not mean the fact of his murder. Political assassination, unfortunately, also turned out to be the wave of the future in the United States. What I refer to as medieval was Lincoln's death, rather than his murder or, more properly, scenes of his deathbed.

Philippe Aries in *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* describes the "tamed death" of pre-industrial societies. In medieval romances knights met their deaths in a distinctive way. They usually knew they

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Alexander H. Ritchie's *Death of President Lincoln* stressed natural poses of intense concentration.

were going to die and they prepared for it. The ritual at their deathbed was organized by the dying person himself. The ritual was public, and the dying person's bedchamber was crowded with parents, friends, neighbors, priests, doctors, and retainers.

Crowded deathbed scenes will recall in the minds of faithful *Lincoln Lore* readers the issue of July 1964 in which R. Gerald McMurtry showed a dozen Lincoln deathbed scenes. Some were so thronged with celebrities that the printmakers published numbered keys to identify each person present.

Thus Lincoln's death harked back to the deaths of Gawain and Roland and Tristram. The death of Lincoln did not look forward to twentieth century death, what Aries calls "forbidden death." Death now customarily takes place in a hospital, not at home, and the dying person is not usually surrounded by his family and friends. Death has become, like sex in Lincoln's era, the forbidden subject.

Thanks to John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln was not able to arrange his own death ritual like a knight in a medieval romance. But it was arranged for him by others. The actual deathbed vigil was probably arranged by the government authorities who were assuming control of national affairs as Lincoln slid into death. The deathbed ritual as the American public came to know it was arranged by the painters and the printmakers who copied and spread the painters' works broadcast.

The painting and printmaking functions were combined in the work of Alexander Hay Ritchie. As the engraver of *The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation Before the Cabinet,* Ritchie had produced one of the most popular Lincoln prints of the era. By 1868 Ritchie had apparently determined to follow up his earlier success with the *Death of President Lincoln.* He painted the canvas and engraved and published the plate as well. The engraving was 32½ by 21½ inches in size. Artists' proofs sold for $30 and proofs after letters for $20.

As was the case with a few other large prints from the era, Ritchie also published a little pamphlet to tout his work — *Ritchie's Historical Picture, Death of President Lincoln, Engraved from the Painting by A.H. Ritchie* (New York: A.H. Ritchie & Co., 1868). Modern Lincoln collectors know it as Monaghan 911, and it is quite rare.

Ritchie was not an eyewitness to President Lincoln's death in the bedroom of the Petersen House in Washington. But, as the pamphlet describes it, "With a view to absolute historical accuracy in facts, the first care of the artist was to visit this room." Ritchie sketched every article in the room, "even to the worn out carpet."

The pamphlet does not say how Ritchie obtained the portrait likenesses of the various persons gathered about Lincoln's deathbed in the picture. Had he obtained life sittings, he would probably have boasted of it. Therefore, it is safe to assume that most or all were based on photographs.

"These are the personages who were actually gathered around the couch of the dying President," the pamphlet asserted, "and the artist has placed them as nearly as possible

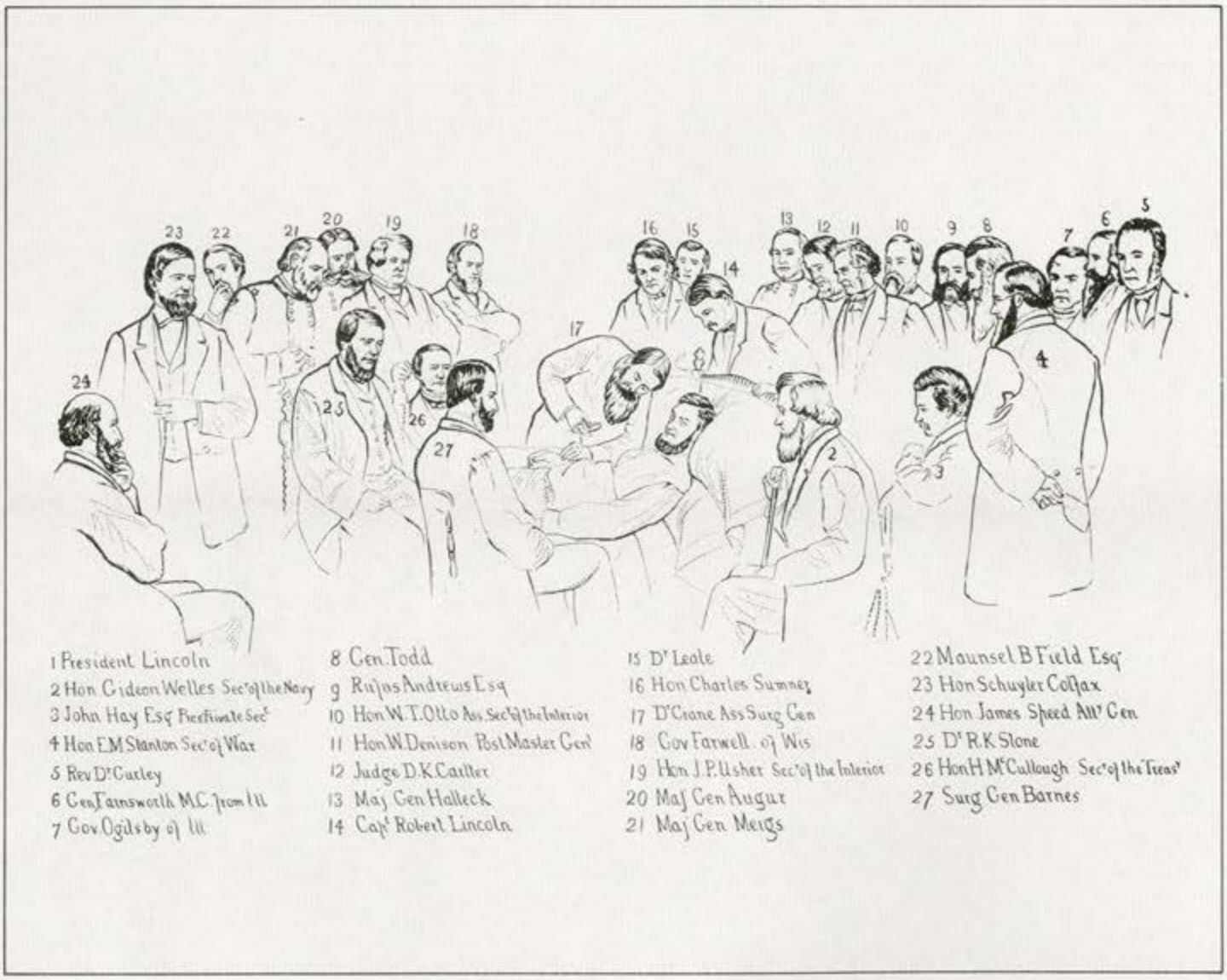

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FIGURE 2. The key to Ritchie's *Death of President Lincoln* appeared in the pamphlet which advertised the print.

in the respective positions occupied by them on the occasion." The "fidelity with which he has arranged the scene," the pamphlet went on, "is testified to in letters written to him by several of the leading actors in it." Ritchie prided himself on evading "the difficulty common to portrait-pieces in which a number of faces have to be arranged with a view to recognition. There is much variety of pose throughout the composition, nor is there to be seen any where in it the unpleasing formality that so often repeats the horizontal line of the frame with a parallel line of heads."

It is difficult for the historian to know what to make of these testimonial letters. Those who have visited the Lincoln sites in Washington know that Lincoln died in a very small room —into which Ritchie has packed twenty-four persons. Yet they do not look packed. Nevertheless, testimonials to the picture's accuracy came from the Lincoln family physician Robert K. Stone; Phineas D. Gurley, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, which the Lincolns attended in Washington; Secretary of the Treasury Hugh McCulloch; Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles; Surgeon General Joseph K. Barnes; Quarter Master General Montgomery C. Meigs (identified as "C. Meigs" in the pamphlet); Assistant Surgeon General C.H. Crane; Assistant Secretary of the Interior W.T. Otto; former Governor L.J. Farwell, of Wisconsin; General James F. Farnsworth, of Illinois; and David K. Cartter, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia.

These witnesses, genuine enough and honorable men to be sure, testified to the accuracy of the room, the portraiture, and the grouping. Yet the picture could hardly have been accurate in the last-named regard. For the viewer of the print to be able to see the scene, there could be no one in front of the bed to block the view of Lincoln. No one blocks the view of another person's head. No person has his back turned so as to present only the back of his head to the viewer. The men appear intent but, with the exception of John Hay, not tired or grief-stricken or haggard. And the number of men present seems questionable. Nevertheless, Ritchie gathered this impressive testimony to the accuracy of his picture.

The letters, some of them more carefully worded than others so that they suggest the artistic and evocative nature of the scene rather than its replicative accuracy, were really testimony to the old-fashioned idea of death. Ritchie portrayed Lincoln's deathbed as it should have looked.

The most remarkable testimony is the print itself. People in nineteenth-century America wanted to view the death rather than to avoid or shun it. They wanted, if Ritchie's engraving and the many other deathbed scenes that survive are proof, to hang pictures representing the deaths of great men on their walls. Like the men who wrote the testimonial letters, the American public thought it should be present as the country's leader died.

POSTSCRIPT

Two recent acquisitions show the interesting response of a photographer to the death of Abraham Lincoln. Henry F. Warren, of Waltham, Massachusetts, apparently came to Washington for Lincoln's inauguration in March 1865. He took photographs of Lincoln's son Tad and, on March 6, of Lincoln himself. He sold the picutres of the president as the latest photograph of Lincoln and then, suddenly, as the last photograph of Lincoln. From all available evidence it was the last photograph of Lincoln taken from life.

Readers interested in Lincoln's own views of death might wish to read Robert V. Bruce, *Lincoln and the Riddle of Death*, a pamphlet available free of charge by writing the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum.

AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

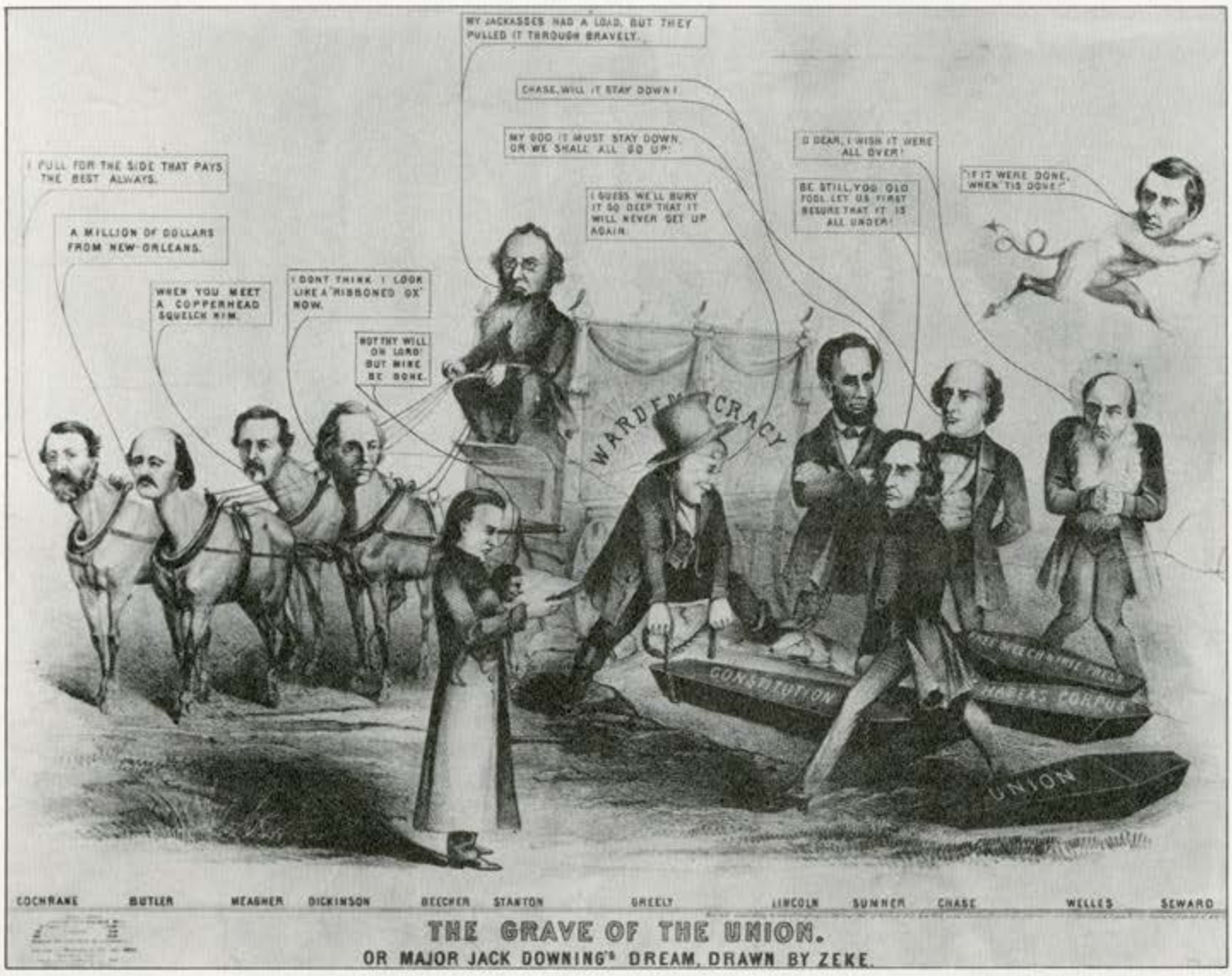
Herman Belz, professor of history at the University of Maryland, will present the seventh annual R. Gerald McMur-

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 3. The early version of Warren's photograph.

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 4. The final version of Warren's photograph.



From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 5. President Lincoln and Henry Ward Beecher presided over the burial of the Constitution in this 1864 poster cartoon.

try Lecture on Thursday, May 10, 1984, at 8:00 p.m. at the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum in Fort Wayne, Indiana. His subject will be "Lincoln and the Constitution: The Dictatorship Question Reconsidered."

Professor Belz is among the foremost authorities on the constitutional history of the United Staes. Symbolic of this status is his co-authorship of the sixth edition of *The American Constitution: Its Origin and Development* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983) with A. Kelly and W. Harbison. The book has long been the standard academic text on the subject.

Professor Belz has made a specialty of the constitutional history of America's middle period. His first book, *Reconstructing the Union: Theory and Policy during the Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969; reprinted by Greenwood Press in 1979), won the American Historical Association's prestigious Albert J. Beveridge Award. Among other things, this lucidly written book was especially notable for its convincing argument which narrowed the imagined distance between Lincoln and the so-called radicals in his party and which illustrated the importance of constitutional constraints on early Reconstruction policy.

A bevy of articles and two books by Professor Belz appeared in the 1970s. The books were *A New Birth of Freedom: The Republican Party and Freedmen's Rights, 1861-1866* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976) and *Emancipation and Equal Rights: Politics and Constitutionalism in the Civil War Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978). Among the articles were "The Constitution in the Gilded Age: The Beginnings of Constitutional Realism in American Scholarship," *American Journal of Legal History*, XIII (April 1969), 110-125; "The Realist Critique of Constitutionalism in the Era of Reform," *American Journal of Legal History*, XV (October 1971), 288-306; "Changing Conceptions of Constitutionalism in the Era of World War Two and the Cold War," *Journal of American History*, LIX (December 1972), 640-669; "The New Orthodoxy in Reconstruction Historiography," *Reviews in American History*, I (March 1973), 106-113; "New Left Reverberations in the Academy: The Anti-Pluralist Critique of Constitutionalism," *Review of Politics*, XXXVI (April 1974), 265-283; and "The American Response to Industrialism: A Conservative Interpretation," *Reviews in American History*, V (December 1977), 537-543. Proof of his ability to write clearly on subjects usually thought to be difficult and abstruse lies in all these works and in the fact that Professor Belz occasionally publishes in more popularly oriented periodicals like *The American Spectator* and *Commentary*.

Herman Belz was born in 1937. He earned his undergraduate degree at Princeton University in 1959 and his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Washington, where he completed his studies in 1966. Since that time he has taught at the University of Maryland (and, in the summer of 1968, at the University of Colorado). He has earned numerous awards, fellowships, and prizes, including a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship (1980-1981).

Professor Belz is currently at work on studies of "Judicial Objectivity and the Legitimacy of Supreme Court Decision Making" and "Changing Conceptions of Constitutionalism in the U.S., 1787-1987."