

**A Book Review: *Lincoln on the Verge: Thirteen Days to Washington* by Ted Widmer**

The thirteen days refer to Lincoln's trip by train from Springfield, Illinois to Washington, D.C, just before his inauguration. Widmer does a thorough, imaginative, enlightening job of telling us about Lincoln's journey.

First, Widmer develops the context of Lincoln's election. He calls attention to the political power of the South, noting that in the first sixty-one years of our country slaveowners held the presidency for fifty years. Southerners similarly dominated both houses of Congress and the Supreme Court. Widmer also sketches the development of those unifying technologies, the railroad and the telegraph. He traces Lincoln's legal career, especially his work for railroads. He draws a worthy complex and understanding picture of Mary Todd Lincoln and her emotional turmoil.

Prefacing each chapter with a quotation from Homer's *Odyssey*, Widmer casts Lincoln's trip as epic. It was a thirteen day, 1,900 mile, circuitous trip by special train, with overnight stops in multiple cities. Huge, enthusiastic crowds welcomed him, almost mobbed him, at every stop. The people came out to see their new hero at villages and stood along the track to catch a glimpse. At each city he met with dignitaries, including former presidents Tyler and Fillmore and future presidents Hayes and the ill-fated Garfield.

With a view to uniting the country, Lincoln gave speech after speech, shook thousands of hands. All the while, assassination plots (emphasis on the plural) were forming, especially in Baltimore. And, even before Lincoln began his trip, seven of the Southern states seceded, formed a common government, and chose Jefferson Davis as president. Ironically, John Breckinridge, the sitting Vice President, had run and lost to Lincoln and became Davis' Vice President! While Lincoln was making his arduous and celebratory way to Washington, Davis made his own non-triumphant trip by train from Brierfield, his Mississippi plantation, to Montgomery, Alabama, the first Confederate capital.

Widmer makes clear the real danger posed by the assassination plots,

with those in Baltimore being particularly dangerous. One railroad president, warned about the plots, engaged Allen Pinkerton to safeguard Lincoln. For the last leg of Lincoln's Odyssey, Pinkerton arranged – and Lincoln took – a train scaled down to disguise Lincoln's presence, from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, changing trains safely in Baltimore in the middle of the night. It was a tired, almost exhausted Lincoln who arrived safely in Washington, D.C. to be inaugurated a few days later.

Widmer's book abound in fascinating parallels and coincidences. My favorite is the while Lincoln was greeted enthusiastically by cheering crowds in Albany, also in Albany, thrilling a crowded theater was John Wilkes Booth.

This is a rich, compelling book. It will repay rereading. I will reread it.

Bob

McDonnell