

Chapter 1

Lincoln Comes to Washington

“We feel humiliated to the last degree by it.”

On February 23, 1861, nine days before his inauguration, President-elect Abraham Lincoln sneaked into Washington on a secret night train, disguised in a soft felt hat, muffler, and short bobtail overcoat. Detective Allan Pinkerton, who traveled with him, provided the affair with a cloak-and-dagger coda when he telegraphed Lincoln’s friends: “Plums arrived here with Nuts this morning—all right.”

Lincoln had departed his home in Springfield, Illinois, twelve days earlier for a train tour across the northern states to Washington. The tour was a stately ceremonial procession, intended to introduce the new President-elect to the people. Bonfires, parades, cannon salutes, and noisy crowds greeted Lincoln’s train at every stop. All the major cities through which he would pass had formally invited him to speak, except the last—no welcome had come from Baltimore.

Maryland’s northern border marked the point where Lincoln would enter a slave state for the first time. Here he would go from a loyal region to one seething with rebellion. Baltimore’s sullen silence was especially alarming since there the presidential cars would have to stop, uncouple, and be drawn by horses across a mile of city streets before being put back on the rails to Washington. The city’s nickname was “Mobtown.” Its political thugs, the “Blood Tubs” and “Plug Uglies,” were notorious as the most vicious in the entire country, and if they rushed the train they were not likely to be stopped by police whose marshal, George P. Kane, was an open secessionist. A military escort couldn’t be trusted, either—the local militia companies were drilling nightly for the moment when they would seize the city buildings and hoist the Confederate flag.

On February 21, two days before Lincoln’s scheduled passage through Baltimore, the presidential train reached Philadelphia. That evening, as Lincoln shook hands with the crowd that packed the parlor of the Continental Hotel, his secretary tapped him on the shoulder and motioned him into a back room.

There he learned that Detective Pinkerton, working for the railroad whose line would take him to Washington, had uncovered a plot to assassinate him on his way through Baltimore. That same night, another messenger brought word that Charles Stone, the head of the loyal Washington militia, who had placed his own detectives in Baltimore, had also discovered a plot “for the destruction of Mr. Lincoln during his passage through the city.” When Lincoln reached his hotel in the Pennsylvania capital of Harrisburg the next day, friends pleaded with him to dodge the Baltimore threat.

Lincoln was reluctant. “What would the nation think of its President stealing into its capital like a thief in the night?” he groaned. The nation, however, was at such a hair trigger that General-in-Chief Winfield Scott had warned, “a dog fight now might cause the gutters to run with blood.” The stakes were too great for the risk to be ignored, and Lincoln’s friends persuaded him to change his schedule and pass incognito on a secret midnight special through Baltimore.

Two hundred men, secretly armed and organized, were detailed to guard railway bridges and crossings along the route. To camouflage their purpose, they went to work whitewashing the bridges, which they did continuously for hours—five, six, seven coats. Telegraph wires were cut along the route to intercept hostile messages and maintain the illusion that Lincoln was remaining overnight in Pennsylvania.

After dark, Lincoln was smuggled out of his Harrisburg hotel in a closed, horse-drawn coach that sped to the railway depot by a winding route, and soon he was on a train plunging through the dark toward Philadelphia. There, Detective Pinkerton and the country’s first female detective, Kate Warne, had arranged to hold the eleven o’clock train to Washington until Lincoln arrived, on the pretense of delivering an important package to the conductor, who was told the package had to be delivered to Washington by morning. For this last leg of the journey, Warne had reserved a seat for an invalid in the last car of the train.

The “important package,” actually a bundle of old newspapers, was delivered to the unsuspecting conductor, and “the invalid”—Lincoln—was secreted into a berth in the rear car at the same time. Pinkerton gave the new passenger’s ticket to the conductor, explaining that Warne’s invalid friend must not be disturbed. Pinkerton rode most of the way on the rear platform of the train, watching for signals flashed by the guards at the bridges and crossings as they sped by. A second bodyguard, Lincoln’s friend Ward Hill Lamon, sat inside with the contraband President-elect, his pockets bristling with two

pistols, two small derringers, and two bowie knives. The trip went quietly, and Lincoln stepped onto the platform in Washington just before dawn, embarrassed by his undignified spy-thriller entry into the capital. He was greeted by a lone congressman and whisked to a closely guarded reception at Willard's Hotel.

Outside the small circle who greeted him at Willard's, the first to find out about Lincoln's secret disappearance were the ten thousand drawn up at Calvert Station in Baltimore later that day waiting to get a look at the new President-elect and hoot at him. An early train was mistaken for Lincoln's, and according to the report in the *Baltimore Sun*, "as soon as the train stopped, the crowd leaped upon the platforms, and mounted to the tops of the cars like so many monkeys, until like a hive of bees they swarmed upon them, shouting, hallooing and making all manner of noises."

After the train pulled out, the restless crowd swelled steadily until the real presidential cars finally pulled up. Then, when Mrs. Lincoln and the children stepped out alone, the crowd erupted. "The moment the train arrived, supposing Lincoln was aboard, the most terrific cheers ever heard were sent up, three for the Southern Confederacy, three for 'gallant Jeff Davis,' and three groans for the 'Rail Splitter,'" a witness wrote to a friend in Georgia. "Had Lincoln been there . . . he would have met with trouble." After this ugly scene, he reported, "The crowd retired quietly in disgust."

* * *

When news of Lincoln's disappearance spread, the Baltimore crowd's angry reaction was echoed in the press. Newspapermen everywhere shook their heads scornfully in editorials. A Northern editor deplored Lincoln's having "skulked off himself and left his family to come in the train which would be sure to carry them to destruction." The Southern press pitched their comments in the higher key of open contempt. The reaction in the next day's *Baltimore Sun* was typical:

Had we any respect for Mr. Lincoln, official or personal, as a man, or as President-elect of the United States, his career and speeches on his way to the seat of government would have cruelly impaired it; but the final escapade by which he reached the capital would have utterly demolished it, and overwhelmed us with mortification. . . .

We do not believe the Presidency can ever be more degraded by any of his successors, than it has been by him, even before his inauguration; and so, for aught we care, he may go to the full extent of his wretched comicalities. We have only too much cause to fear that such a man, and such advisers as he has, may prove capable of infinitely more mischief than folly when invested with power.

A lunatic is only dangerous when armed and turned loose; but only imagine a lunatic invested with authority over a sane people and armed with weapons of offense or defense. What sort of a fate can we anticipate for a people so situated? And . . . what sort of a future can we anticipate under the presidency of Abraham Lincoln?

Things got worse. Joseph Howard, Jr., a writer for the *New York Times* already notorious as a hoaxer, awoke in Harrisburg on February 23 to find Lincoln gone, saw a chance for a prank, and imaginatively sketched Lincoln's disguise during his night ride as "a Scotch plaid cap and a very long military cloak." The *Times*, a Republican newspaper, printed it, and journals worldwide took it up as a good story. Everybody laughed. Cartoonists vied with each other to sketch "Washington's new arrival" in the most ridiculous strokes. *Harper's Weekly* sketched the journey showing Lincoln in the Scottish cap and long cloak, dashing for a waiting train. A *Vanity Fair* cartoon showed the president in Scottish kilts doing a high-stepping jig on a railway platform. Another showed a preposterously tall figure hidden completely in the cloak and topped with the plaid cap, wryly titled "From a Fugitive Sketch."

Political doggerel, a popular form of satire at the time, skewered Lincoln in papers across the nation. One Southern parody was set to the tune of "Dixie":

*Abe Lincoln tore through Baltimore,
In a baggage-car with fastened door;
Fight away, fight away, fight away for Dixie's Land.
And left his wife, Alas! Alack!
To perish on the railroad track!
Fight away, fight away, fight away for Dixie's Land.*

Elsewhere, thirteen new verses of "Yankee Doodle" were composed by the *Louisville Courier* and reprinted across the nation:

Harper's Weekly, March 9, 1861



"The MacLincoln Harrisburg Highland Fling"

*They went and got a special train
At midnight's solemn hour,
And in a cloak and Scotch plaid shawl,
He dodged from the Slave-Power.*

*Lanky Lincoln came to town,
In night and wind and rain, sir,
Wrapped in a military cloak,
Upon a special train, sir.*

The *Courier* continued: “[Lincoln] ran from the first whisperings of danger as fleetly as ever a naked-legged Highlander pursued a deer upon Scotia’s hills. The men who made the Declaration of Independence did not make it good in that way. They fought for their rights; Lincoln runs for his . . . and leaves his wife. They ought to swap clothes. She is a true Kentuckian. . . . No

Harper's Weekly, March 9, 1861



“The Flight of Abraham: The Special Train”

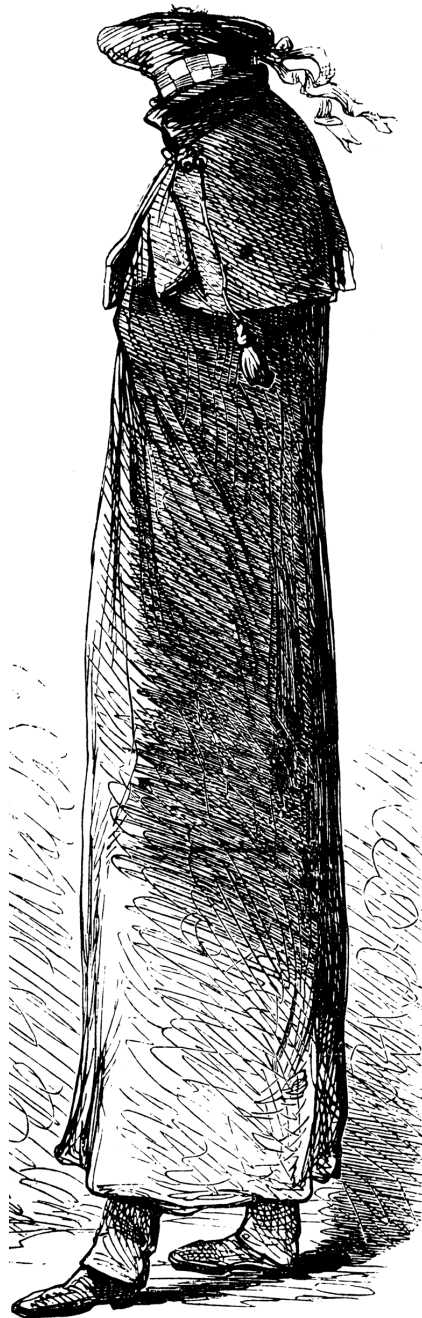
Kentucky-born man would have run all the way from Harrisburg to Washington, with but the ghost of an enemy in sight.”

The New Orleans *Daily Delta* was another voice in the overwhelming chorus of jeers from the South. Under the acid headline “Lo, the Conquering Hero Comes!” its comment began: “It is not pleasant to see even an enemy reduced to the state of degradation and humiliation into which our Black Republican foe has fallen.” It shed crocodile tears for “that once proud Republic, so shamed and debased before the world by the ridiculous, vulgar and pusillanimous antics of the coarse and cowardly demagogue whom a corrupt and crazy faction has elevated to the chair, once filled by Washington, Jefferson and Jackson.”

Even the Northern press winced at the President’s undignified start. “What brought him here so suddenly?” was on everybody’s tongue,” tut-tutted the editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. The New York *Weekly Journal of Commerce* mocked Lincoln’s “Flight of the Imagination.” *Vanity Fair* observed, “By the advice of weak men, who should straddle through life in petticoats instead of disgracing such manly garments as pantaloons and coats, the President-elect disguises himself after the manner of heroes in

“The New President of the United States: From a Fugitive Sketch”

Vanity Fair, March 9, 1861



two-shilling novels, and rides secretly, in the deep night, from Harrisburg to Washington.” The Brooklyn *Eagle*, in a column titled “Mr. Lincoln’s Flight by Moonlight Alone,” suggested the President and his advisors deserved “the deepest disgrace that the crushing indignation of a whole people can inflict.” The New York *World* shouted, “How unwisely, how unfortunately, was Mr. Lincoln advised! How deplorably did he yield to his advisers!” The New York *Tribune* joked darkly, “Mr. Lincoln may live a hundred years without having so good a chance to die.” To this morbid note the *New York Herald* added a sarcastic harmony: “What a misfortune to Abraham Lincoln and the Republican cause. We have no doubt the *Tribune* is sincerely sorry at his escape from martyrdom. Mr. Lincoln, with a most obtuse perception to the glory that awaited him, did not ‘take fortune at the flood.’”

“We feel humiliated to the last degree by it,” complained Republican Governor Blair of Michigan. “Never idol fell so suddenly or so far,” mourned Massachusetts Republican Henry Dawes.

Lincoln himself, according to the testimony of his friends Ward Lamon and Alexander McClure, ever afterward regretted his night ride into Washington as one of the worst blunders of his political career, fully convinced in retrospect that “he had fled from a danger purely imaginary.” “His friends reproached him, his enemies taunted him,” wrote Lamon later; the President “was convinced that he had committed a grave mistake in listening to the solicitations of a professional spy and of friends too easily alarmed, and frequently upbraided me for having aided him to degrade himself at the very moment in all his life when he should have exhibited the utmost dignity and composure.”

* * *

However much he may have blamed himself for the ridicule that greeted his arrival in Washington, Lincoln’s secret approach to the capital was a prudent response to real dangers during some of the tensest weeks in the nation’s history. Especially in view of the genuine danger, the contempt in the nation’s reaction to Lincoln’s unfortunate arrival was so widespread, so vicious, and so personal that it marks this episode as the historic nadir of presidential prestige in the United States. Though scandal and resignation would stain the terms of many presidents before and after Lincoln, presidential authority would never again sink to the low level it reached at Lincoln’s arrival.

How could a man elected President in November be so reviled in February? The insults heaped on Lincoln after his undignified stumble into

Washington were not the result of anything he himself had done or left undone. He was a man without a history, a man almost no one knew. Because he was a blank slate, Americans, at the climax of a national crisis thirty years in coming, projected onto him everything they saw wrong with the country. To the opinion-makers in the cities of the East, he was a weakling, inadequate to the needs of the democracy. To the hostile masses in the South, he was an interloper, a Caesar who represented a deadly threat to the young republic. To millions on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, he was not a statesman but merely a standard bearer for a vast, corrupt political system that had become unmoored from the bedrock of the Constitution and had conspired to rob them of “government by the people.”

The political times had made the anonymous Railsplitter’s presidency possible, and at the same time robbed it of esteem. His predicament was a legacy of the rowdy adolescence of American politics, the “Age of Jackson.” Three broad historical trends in Jacksonian America combined to create this lowest ebb of the presidency as Lincoln took it up. The first was the notorious disrepair of the presidency that Lincoln inherited—weak from the beginning, further weakened by decades of shabby treatment, and stained by feeble performances from a string of the poorest Presidents in the nation’s history. The second was the wave of corruption that had debauched the political system during the rise of political parties after Jackson and destroyed the public’s respect for its elected officials. The third was the hostility produced by the slavery crisis, which withered the people’s toleration for different points of view and resulted in the creation in the North of a sectional party—the Republicans—whose victory was unacceptable to the South, where Lincoln had not garnered so much as one vote. To appreciate the depth and breadth of the contempt that Lincoln faced during his four years in office, it is necessary to understand the savage times in which he so suddenly ascended.