

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Lincoln Under Enemy Fire

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Feature Essay

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Lincoln Under Enemy Fire

Lincoln Under Enemy Fire (1948) by John H. Cramer

Before he came under the direct, surprise enemy fire of the failed actor John Wilkes Booth while watching the comedy *Our American Cousin* in Ford's Theater on the evening of April 14, 1865, the Great Emancipator knowingly exposed himself to enemy sharpshooters nine months earlier on the afternoon of July 12, 1864, so that he could witness the national drama of our Civil War at Fort Stevens on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., during Confederate General Jubal Early's daring, desperate assault on the Capitol.

The most popular account of the commander-in-chief under enemy fire at Fort Stevens is the one that involves The Yankee from Olympus, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. Colonel Holmes was assigned the duty of showing the President the defenses around Washington. When the six-foot-four Lincoln, his height increased by his tall plug hat, exposed himself and bullets began to fly, Colonel Holmes yelled, Get down, you fool! Later, in the act of leaving, Lincoln walked back to say, Good-bye Colonel Holmes. I'm glad you know how to talk to a civilian.

Lincoln biographers and Civil War historians do not make much of this incident, when they mention it at all. John H. Cramer made very much of it, indeed, in his 1948 book *Lincoln Under Fire: The Complete Account of His Experiences During Early's Attack on Washington* And complete it is, being Cramer's gathering of many testimonials in letters, journals, and memoirs, published and unpublished up to 1948.

All recorded witnesses agree that Lincoln was there, along with his wife, the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, and a somewhat foolhardy crowd of

Washingtonians and that he was either fired upon as a tall, exposed figure in a stove hat or that the actual target was the military doctor who stood beside him and who fell wounded.

The witnesses, who include soldiers, officers, and members of Lincoln's high-placed entourage, among others, differ among themselves only on relatively minor details. Historians seem to mistrust not only Holmes's account but also that of one or two less famous witnesses. Lucius E. Chittenden, register of the treasury, recalled that a young colonel of artillery was severely worried that the President had ignored his declarations of concern for his safety. He finally got up enough courage to say, Mr. President, you are standing within range of five hundred rebel rifles. Please come down to a safer place. If you do not, it will be my duty to call a file of men and make you. The President responded: And you would be quite right, my boy! . . . You are in command of this fort. I should be the last man to set an example of disobedience (51). Elizabeth Thomas, an elderly African American, looked out the window of her basement nearby and saw Lincoln standing tall on the bank of the trenches and yelled to men near him, My God, make that fool get off that hill and come in here! She remembered later that the President only smiled (57).

Those images of President Abraham Lincoln exposing himself to enemy fire, told to cease and desist for his own good and thus for the good of the country, are the stuff of folklore, and sure enough B. A. Botkin quotes not Holmes but Chittenden, devoting also many pages to other Lincoln lore in his book *A Civil War Treasury of Tales, Legends, and Folklore* (1960). And it was a newsworthy event, though not nearly an item of importance commensurate with its effect on the outcome of the war, given the severe consequences had sharpshooters hit their target in the theater of war before Booth's aim was true in the theater of pretense. That consideration ought to have been enough to move more historians to make much of it.

One witness observed that never before had a president, the commander-in-chief, exposed himself to enemy fire. But several incidents do somewhat parallel that of Lincoln. General Lee exposed himself at Seminary Ridge just before Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. From three thousand lips at once burst the cry, *General Lee to the rear!* -- and not a foot would stir until he was led back through a gap in the line. General Stonewall Jackson, riding recon at twilight with a few officers May 2, 1863, in a confused wilderness setting at Chancellorsville, was wounded by his own men, and died a few days later.

General Nathan Bedford Forrest, The Wizard of the Saddle, leading his Critter Company against Sherman's cavalry on the road to Corinth a few days after the battle of Shiloh in July 1862, charged ahead of his men, Union soldiers surrounded him, hundreds of rifles fired upon him, one shot got him in the hip, another hit his horse, but he shot his way back to his own men. The iconic image of reckless exposure to enemy fire is Winslow Homer's famous painting of a Confederate private Inviting a Shot Before Petersburg, Virginia, 1864, daring the Union Troops to shoot him.

Given David Donald's importance as a major Lincoln biographer, his 1948 review of Cramer's book is a good argument for rediscovering this Roshamon study of a so-called minor event. With astonishing thoroughness Mr. Cramer has tracked down about twenty-five firsthand versions (and some fifteen secondary interpretations of those accounts) of what actually happened to Lincoln at Fort Stevens. The tales are confused and diverse. *Lincoln under Enemy Fire* deals with what its author modestly terms an interesting but unimportant" episode of the President's career. But if it is no major revelation of Lincoln, it tells much about Lincoln biographers, their sources, and their methods. This little book is, in fact, a case study in historical evidence, and Mr. Cramer handles his material with an honesty and a lack of pretentiousness that any scholar might envy.

Having satisfied his fervent desire to gather all the facts as conveyed by eyewitnesses, Cramer apparently was not moved to delineate some of the implications of that extraordinary event. Nor have historians, having read Cramer's research, been so moved.

Consider first that this is a supreme example of faulty human perception, the theme that inspired Ambrose Bierce's short stories *In the Midst of Life* (1891). The vision of men and women under fire that day had to be affected by fearsome excitement, raising questions such as:

Who fired upon the exposed figure, sharpshooters or line soldiers?

Who did they think they saw, the enemy President or a tall, more-foolish-than-most civilian among the crowd of spectators?

Did a sharpshooter recognize him as the President of the United States of America and spare him out of a transcendent sort of respect and admiration or even fear? If a sharpshooter recognized him as President Lincoln, did he correct

his vision on the assumption that the president would never conduct himself in such a foolhardy way?

Were they shooting at the tall man in civilian clothes or at the man in uniform standing by him?

Did Lincoln realize how exposed he stood?

What was Lincoln's mood that day?

Was there something in his mind that led him consciously or unconsciously to expose himself and the fate of the nation to enemy fire?

Was he trying to prove his courage to his wife, to military and civilian folks under his command as commander-in-chief?

Would we do well to subject each episode of the war to this sort of imaginative interrogation? For example, to learn what happened in the attack upon the crater at Petersburg we go to the historian of the hour, the one we expect to trust as the authority who has reviewed past research recorded in books by previous historians with, we hope, the addition of newly revealed information. But if we read six or so accounts by six historians we may very well feel, as Cramer did when he examined eyewitness testimonials, that we are reading about six different battles (I have done that exercise myself). We would do well, I think, to imagine the possible implications—a role well suited to readers who do not feel the restraints historians perhaps need to feel.

As we stand at the window in view of the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, I propose that as we consult the 128 volumes of the *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* and other eyewitness documents and the work of historians derived from them, we let this striking Lincoln example serve as a metaphor for the general unreliability or at least incompleteness of statements held up as factual and as an invitation to allow our emotions, imaginations, and intellects to come fully into play.

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