

Lincoln on the Verge: Thirteen Days to Washington

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REVIEW

FRANK J. WILLIAMS

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Widmer, Ted. *Lincoln on the Verge: Thirteen Days to Washington*. Simon & Schuster, April 2020. ISBN-13 : 978-1476739434. 606 pp. \$35.00

During February 1861, President-elect Lincoln traveled by train from his home in Springfield, Illinois to the nation's capital, Washington, D.C. While he crossed through eight states, crowds gathered to greet him at train stations along his route. The trip was both personally and politically perilous, but it offered him an opportunity to establish himself as a visible leader. Widmer's book shows the president's trip as his first step to a preordained immortality.

Widmer describes President-elect Lincoln's whistle-stop tour as "racing against time" in order to reach Washington. Washington, at that time, was a hostile place populated with longtime politicians, cunning lobbyists, and fire-eating zealots plotting the perpetuation of slavery. Widmer, a former White House speech writer, reviews some of President-elect Lincoln's one hundred speeches and incalculable handshakes along that route. The book shows how President-elect Lincoln transformed quickly from a candidate to a statesman.

On February 11, 1861, in Springfield, Illinois, an emotional President-elect bid "an affectionate farewell" to 2,000 friends before the "Presidential Special" left town. Thousands lined the tracks trying to get a glimpse of the man who embodied their hopes. Those onlookers were "Lincoln's kind of people and he reached out toward them every few miles, waving, or bowing, or shaking hands, or saying a few quick words sometimes from the train that slowed but did not stop."

The President-elect's journey from Springfield to Washington drew "wild multitudes" both in towns that had been "awakened" to the anti-slavery cause and towns whose allegiance remained uncertain. The trip served as a way for the President-elect to connect with those who

had elected him. He used his “mobile stage” to speak “in the open air...an exciting way to breathe new life into the Republic.” Lincoln demonstrated a populous touch while visiting each town. Frederick Douglass once said that Lincoln had a “wonderful success in organizing the loyal American people for the tremendous conflict before them.”

While detailing President-elect Lincoln’s odyssey, Widmer quotes liberally from Homer and weaves a rich tapestry contrasting the concurrent journey of the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis. His portrayal of Lincoln, and those he met through their diaries, letters, and long-lost local papers, is enthralling. Lincoln was not only speaking to Americans who attended his speeches on the rail line. While traveling between these towns, he ably worked the press to rally its support.

Widmer, to his credit, emphasizes the President-elect’s speech in Philadelphia. Lincoln’s speech was given in front of Independence Hall in what Widmer describes as “the most sublime statement of what it means to be an American, of the human rights that belong, in fact, to all people on Earth.” That Philadelphia speech demonstrates the truth of Lincoln’s statement that he had “...never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” Lincoln believed that the Declaration of Independence was sacrosanct and more important than the Constitution itself.

During his speech at Independence Hall, he “talked humbly about the way he understood the Declaration [of Independence] and the hope it inspired...the equal rights that inhere all people.” Lincoln ended his speech with a “stunning” admission: He would be “one of the happiest men in the world” if the United States could be saved with its great idea intact. He added, he would “rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it.” This statement about regicide was both literally and figuratively true. Detective Allan Pinkerton warned Lincoln that an armed mob awaited him in Baltimore, and he must deviate from his planned route to avoid the “death trap.” Yet Lincoln chose to continue the planned route. Widmer writes, “his odyssey was complete.” Days later, Lincoln arrived at the Capitol for his inauguration to speak directly of “the better angles of our nature.”

Lincoln’s confidence grew from the tour as his train entered New Jersey where he told state legislators that, while he favored reconciliation, “I fear we will have to put the foot down firmly.” Widmer noted “[t]his was the clear statement everyone was waiting for,” adding the

President-elect “had found his footing, in every sense.” The tour exhausted and, at times, frightened, the President-elect. At least two assassination attempts were made. Lincoln’s hands were injured from shaking so many thousands of well-wishers. Widmer explains that although a success, Lincoln’s troubles would only begin upon his arrival in Washington.

This book radiates with examples of President Abraham Lincoln’s melancholy. President Lincoln’s melancholy originated and continued from his own life experiences. Widmer’s book is revelatory, addressing an important – yet underappreciated – episode that placed President-elect Lincoln “on the verge” of developing the confidence and courage to become America’s greatest president. The volume is “on the verge” of clearly replacing Victor Searcher’s fine book a generation ago, as the go-to source regarding President-elect Lincoln’s odyssey.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular *Civil War Book Review* columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.