

150 years after his assassination, Lincoln keeps evolving in memory, myth



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WASHINGTON • Abraham Lincoln, the great emancipator from Illinois who was shot by assassin John Wilkes Booth 150 years ago Tuesday, has been evolving in myth and memory.

As recent scholarship and events have shown, the Civil War and Lincoln's struggle to abolish slavery are part of a continuum that extends to today's struggles over equality and race.

With the anniversary of his death approaching, historians and moviemakers are taking a fresh look at Lincoln's words, actions, his considerable abilities as a communicator and his unique relationship to black Americans. Racial flashpoints in Ferguson and in North Charleston, S.C., where white police officers fatally shot black men, demonstrated that the same racial divisions confronting Lincoln in 1865 continue to plague Americans today.

Ceremonies commemorating the assassination's anniversary are planned at the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill., and at Ford's Theater and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington.

The election of Barack Obama, another son of Illinois who frequently quoted Lincoln in his 2008 campaign, was supposed to mark a pivot into post-racial politics. But Obama's presidency has rehashed many of the same issues that confronted Lincoln.

Lincoln in history: See the historic images

"All generations re-think Lincoln, and for this generation, it's about re-thinking the meaning of freedom in a moment that is decidedly not the post-racial moment some expected with the election and re-election of the nation's first black president," said Martha Hodes, an author and professor of history at New York University.

Hodes said Lincoln's memory was hitched to "resonating current events" and "renewed

calls for justice.”

Other historians agree, pointing to ongoing political fights over voting rights.

“Lincoln was murdered not because he issued the Emancipation Proclamation nor because he expedited the passage of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery throughout the land, but because on April 11, 1865, he publicly called for black voting rights,” said Michael Burlingame, Naomi B. Lynn Distinguished Chair in Lincoln Studies, at University of Illinois at Springfield.

Booth, in the audience for that speech, vowed then to kill Lincoln, said Burlingame, author of the 2008, two-volume: “Lincoln: A Life.”

“It seems to me appropriate that we consider Lincoln as much a martyr to black civil rights as Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers ... or any of the other champions of the civil rights movement of the 1960s,” Burlingame said.

Lincoln has not always been viewed that way, as Lincoln scholars explained during a late-March symposium at Ford’s Theater.

After the adulatory “cult of Lincoln” in the 1950s, “a big change took place,” said Richard Wightman Fox, a history professor at the University of Southern California.

In the 1960s and 1970s Lincoln’s memory was pushed aside. Historians and civil rights activists questioned whether Lincoln was fervent enough in his push to abolish slavery, irrespective of the obstacles he faced in institutionalized slavery and a more overtly racist 19th century.

Liberal scholars began viewing Lincoln as “unfortunately linked to the warfare state and so Vietnam and other factors entered into this declining adulation,” Fox said.

“Lincoln never faded from view,” Fox said, “it is just that opinion about him became entirely less favorable.”

For African-Americans, that devaluing of the Lincoln legacy began during the Great Depression, when blacks were disproportionately suffering, said Edna Greene Medford, chair of the history department at the historically black Howard University.

Lincoln suddenly became a symbol of disappointment.

“These former slaves recalled what life was supposed to be and what it was not,” Medford said. “They were saying, ‘Lincoln freed us, but he didn’t give us anything but our freedom. We needed land, we needed more opportunity.’”

But the connection with Lincoln “never totally dies out,” Medford continued. “Because remember in 1963 and Martin Luther King, and that march to the [‘I Have a Dream’]

speech goes to the Lincoln Memorial. And [King] talks about emancipation and how people are still suffering.”

LINCOLN’S MEMORY TODAY

Medford said that today, many black Americans “understand the complexity of the man and are understanding more what Lincoln was about, why he did what he did” as a leader in a more overtly racist era in American history.

James Cornelius, curator of the Lincoln Collection at the Lincoln Museum and Library in Springfield said recent scholarship on letters Lincoln wrote to families of soldiers had deepened a sense that the man from Illinois “cared deeply, individually, about each man he sent off to war, and possible death.”

“It’s only in the last five years or so that we’ve begun to grasp the extent of his paperwork on this point, as a reflection of his understanding of his duty as commander in chief to every soldier,” Cornelius said.

The Lincoln Library museum is commemorating its 10th anniversary April 19 and has broken presidential library attendance records with 3.7 million visitors in that time.

Steven Spielberg’s 2012 “Lincoln,” starring Daniel Day-Lewis, familiarized new generations with everything from Lincoln’s epic struggles over the war and abolition, to the way he walked, talked and used humor to achieve political goals.

Reflecting that interest, Ford’s Theater has had months of exhibits, forums and speeches.

The restored, working theater seven blocks from the White House will host a 36-hour stretch of candlelight vigils with actors in period costume giving tours and speeches beginning Tuesday and lasting through the night. A wreath-laying ceremony on the steps of the Peterson Boarding House will take place precisely at 7:22 a.m. Wednesday to mark the time of Lincoln’s death. Bells throughout Washington will peal shortly thereafter, just as they did on April 15, 1865.

Six days later, a two-week funeral train procession began retracing much of the 1,650-mile trip through seven states that Lincoln took from Springfield to Washington to take office in 1861.

Fox, the USC professor, said Obama and Spielberg brought Lincoln back “to a kind of centrality in our culture as the emancipator, and that is an historically decisive and significant development.”

“We have to protect (that legacy) if we care about equality, as Lincoln did,” Fox said. “That is Lincoln in a nutshell. He is a zealot for equality. He just thinks it has to take time to happen.”

Events commemorate Lincoln assassination

The Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum in Springfield, which is commemorating its 10th anniversary on April 19, will note Lincoln's death on Tuesday with an afternoon performance of "One Destiny," a play about Lincoln's assassination. An evening Lincoln readings vigil is scheduled to end at 10:15 p.m., coinciding with the time Booth shot him.

Springfield will mark the end of Lincoln's cross-country funeral procession on May 1-3 with three days of symposiums, flag ceremonies, Civil War encampments and historic home tours. Howard University historian Edna Greene Medford will speak there about "Lincoln's Legacy of Justice and Opportunity: Our Challenge a Century and a Half Later."

For more information, go to www.illinois.gov/alplm/tenthanniversary