

THE SECRET PLOT *to* MURDER  
LINCOLN BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

# THE HOUR OF PERIL



DANIEL STASHOWER

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE BEAUTIFUL CIGAR GIRL*

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TO MURDER LINCOLN  
BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

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For Sam and Jack,  
Rebellious Sons of Maryland

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In the hour of the nation's peril, he conducted Abraham Lincoln safely through the ranks of treason to the scene of his first inauguration as President.

—*Inscription on the grave of Allan Pinkerton*

It is perfectly manifest that there was no conspiracy—no conspiracy of a hundred, of fifty, of twenty, of three; no definite purpose in the heart of even one man to murder Mr. Lincoln in Baltimore.

—WARD H. LAMON, *Lincoln's friend and self-appointed bodyguard*

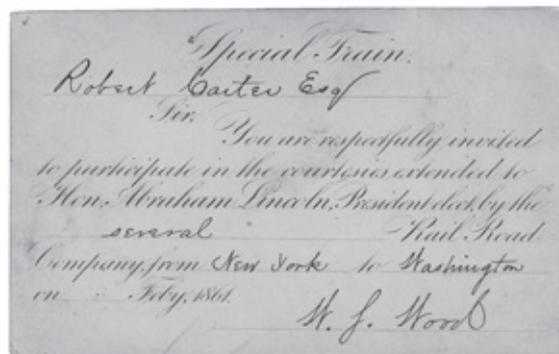
## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

In the following pages, I have standardized some of the eccentric spellings and capitalizations found in the source materials, and replaced the initials and code names used in Allan Pinkerton's records with the real names, when known, of the operatives concerned. Also, in that more genteel time, Pinkerton's operatives refrained from using profanity, employing discreet elliptical devices to obscure offending phrases. Recognizing that at least some contemporary readers will be familiar with these phrases and may find the device distracting, I have restored the original intent.

## INTRODUCTION

### ***LONG, NARROW BOXES***

“THIS TRIP OF OURS has been very laborious and exciting,” the young poet wrote to a friend back home in Illinois. “I have had no time to think calmly since we left Springfield. There is one reason why I write tonight. Tomorrow we enter slave territory. Saturday evening, according to our arrangements, we will be in Washington. There may be trouble in Baltimore. If so, we will not go to Washington, unless in long, narrow boxes. The telegram will inform you of the result, long before this letter reaches you.”



A special ticket issued for Abraham Lincoln’s inaugural train. *Courtesy of the Alfred Whital Stern Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress*

Twenty-two-year-old John Milton Hay had ample cause for worry as he set down these words in February 1861. He had signed on as a personal secretary to Abraham Lincoln just a few days earlier, on the eve of Lincoln’s inauguration as president of the United States. For several weeks, Lincoln had faced a mounting threat of assassination on his journey to the capital, culminating in a “clear and well-considered” murder plot to be carried out at a whistle-stop appearance in Baltimore. Over a period of thirteen days, as the president-elect traveled by train from Springfield to Washington, a makeshift, self-appointed security detail raced to uncover hard evidence of the looming peril, in the hope of persuading Lincoln to adopt “necessary and urgent measures” before placing himself in harm’s way.

Leading the effort was the detective Allan Pinkerton, whose fame as a fierce and incorruptible lawman was sweeping through America’s cities and out to the expanding edges of the frontier. Pinkerton and his agents were becoming legendary for their relentless, single-minded pursuit of lawbreakers, whose photographs were cataloged in a famous “rogue’s gallery” at their Chicago headquarters. The dramatic Pinkerton logo

—with the motto *We Never Sleep* coiled beneath the image of a stern, unblinking eye—became a potent emblem of vigilance, bringing the term *private eye* into the American lexicon.

In Baltimore, however, Pinkerton would be tested as never before. The detective had built his success on a slow, methodical style of investigation—“Our operations are necessarily tedious,” he once declared—but the rapidly evolving situation in Baltimore required speed, improvisation, and no small measure of luck. Pinkerton, who had gone to the city to investigate a vague threat against railroad property and equipment, had not expected to uncover an assassination conspiracy. “From my reports you will see how accidentally I discovered the plot,” he later admitted. “I was looking for nothing of the kind, and had certainly not the slightest idea of it.” Once on the scent, however, he pursued it with feverish energy, and he soon became convinced that dramatic measures would be needed to spare the president-elect’s life. By this time, however, the train had already left the station, in every sense of the phrase, as Lincoln made his slow, inexorable progress toward the capital, determined to make a public display of openness and goodwill in the days leading up to his inaugural. Pinkerton now found himself contending not only with the conspirators but also with the intractability of Lincoln and his advisers, who were reluctant to alter their careful plans—and invite public scorn—on the basis of vapory rumors. “All imagination,” Lincoln declared at one stage. “What does anyone want to harm me for?”

The stakes were enormous. “Had Mr. Lincoln fallen at that time,” wrote Pinkerton, “it is frightful to think what the consequences might have been.” Lincoln’s election three months earlier had thrown the country into crisis. By the time he set off for Washington, seven states had seceded from the Union. Lincoln hoped to “soothe the public mind” on his two-thousand-mile inaugural train journey, giving over a hundred speeches, in which he would offer calming words to the North and extend a hand of reconciliation to the South. Over half a million people flocked to see him at railroad depots and trackside watering stops, all of them anxious for a sign that the country would be safe in his hands. “The gradual disruption of the Union that dark winter lay like an agony of personal bereavement,” wrote one well-wisher. “I longed to read in the face of our leader the indications of wisdom and strength that would compel the people to anchor in him and feel safe.”

As the train rolled east, however, the warnings of danger grew more insistent. Newspapers throughout the South reported that a large cash bounty was on offer to “whomsoever” managed to assassinate Lincoln before he took office. There was also a real possibility that the state of Maryland, where Lincoln’s train would cross below the Mason-Dixon line for the first time, would secede from the Union before he reached the border. If so, Washington would be entirely cut off from the North. As Maryland went, many believed, so went the nation.

In Baltimore, Pinkerton and his detectives were doggedly piecing together details of a “murderous compact” to be carried out at one of the city’s train stations. “It had been fully determined that the assassination should take place at the Calvert Street depot,” Pinkerton wrote. “When the train entered the depot, and Mr. Lincoln attempted to pass through the narrow passage leading to the streets, a party already delegated were to engage in a conflict on the outside, and then the policemen were to rush away to quell the disturbance. At this moment—the police being entirely withdrawn—Mr. Lincoln

would find himself surrounded by a dense, excited and hostile crowd, all hustling and jamming against him, and then the fatal blow was to be struck.” As the detective would explain to William Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner turned biographer, the plot had been audaciously simple and efficient. “Excuse me for endeavoring to impress the plan upon you,” he wrote. “It was a capital one, and much better conceived than the one which finally succeeded four years after in destroying Mr. Lincoln’s life.”

Others believed that an attack would be launched while Lincoln was still aboard his train, and that police and city officials were colluding in the plot. “Statesmen laid the plan, bankers endorsed it, and adventurers were to carry it into effect,” ran an account in the *New York Times*. “[T]he idea was, if possible, to throw the cars from the road at some point where they would rush down a steep embankment and destroy in a moment the lives of all on board. In case of the failure of this project, their plan was to surround the carriage on the way from depot to depot in Baltimore, and assassinate him with dagger or pistol shot.”

With time running out, Pinkerton hatched a desperate, perhaps foolhardy plan: He would abandon the relative security of Lincoln’s small cadre of escorts in favor of a surprise maneuver, catching the plotters unawares. The risks were enormous, as the detective readily admitted. If exposed by a careless word or intercepted message, the president-elect would be left almost entirely unprotected. In Pinkerton’s view, however, this perilous feint offered the only chance that Lincoln would survive to become president. As the president-elect’s train neared the “seat of danger,” the only remaining difficulty was to convince Lincoln himself.

\* \* \*

IN APPROACHING THE STORY of the Baltimore plot, a writer must make certain choices and assumptions. Most readers, it would seem, will know that Abraham Lincoln survived the crisis to become president of the United States, and that soon afterward the nation was plunged into the Civil War. The events of February 1861 continue to capture our attention, however, not only for the drama of the plot and its detection but also because Lincoln’s handling of the crisis and its fallout would mark a fateful early test of his presidency, with many dark consequences. In charting the sweep of events that carried the nation into war, it is customary to focus on landmarks of policy and social change, such as the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott decision. Set against these milestones, the drama in Baltimore is often overlooked, pushed aside by the more pressing urgencies that were to come, and obscured by its own uncertainties and contradictions. Seen in the light of what was to come, however, the Baltimore episode stands as a defining moment, marking a crucial transition from civilized debate to open hostilities, and presenting Lincoln with a grim preview of the challenges he would face as president. In many ways, it was the wrong story at the wrong time; Lincoln himself would be quick to diminish the importance of what had occurred, and its lessons were not learned.

Many dilemmas arise in exploring the facts of the Baltimore plot—sources conflict; historical agendas collide. There is also a certain mythologizing effect cast over the firsthand accounts, most of which were written in the heavy gloom that followed Lincoln’s assassination, in 1865. As a result, the fallen president is portrayed as a

saintly and resolute figure, preternaturally aware of his own destiny, and much given to gazing heroically into an uncertain future. In many cases, well-intentioned colleagues have placed dialogue in his mouth that might have been lifted from the hackneyed Beadle's Dime Novels of the day. At the same time, the sheer volume of "Lincoln as I knew him" books presents its own challenge. It is quite possible that the two-thousand-mile route from Springfield to Washington could be paved over in volumes of reminiscence, and no two of them would agree on what Lincoln said or thought about the fateful trip through Baltimore, or even on the strangely controversial topic of what he wore on his head.

Allan Pinkerton presents an even greater set of contradictions. "Stormy, husky, brawling," as Carl Sandburg would say of Chicago, Pinkerton's adopted hometown, the detective and his legacy are riddled with paradoxes. A Scottish immigrant who made good in America, Pinkerton was proud of his rags-to-riches success, and collaborated on more than a dozen lively, self-promoting memoirs that detailed his most celebrated cases. Yet throughout his life, he remained guarded and difficult to read, as enigmatic as one of the cipher keys he used to send encrypted messages to agents in the field. He began his career as an idealistic social reformer, vowing never to investigate "trade-union officers or members in their lawful union activities," but he is remembered today as a strikebreaker, and a puppet of America's robber barons. Though he rose to fame as America's "Number One Lawman," he thought nothing of flouting the law in the service of a greater good, and spent years defying the Fugitive Slave Act, assisting runaways as a stationmaster on the Underground Railroad. Civil War historians castigate him for his work as General McClellan's chief of intelligence, during which he supposedly exaggerated his estimates of enemy troop strength, but during the Baltimore affair he came under fire for insisting that the conspiracy was far smaller than others had supposed, and that the danger was all the greater because of it. And finally, at the moment when he wished to collect laurels from the public for his service to President Lincoln, Pinkerton found himself branded a liar, and mired in a bitter feud that would cloud his legacy for generations to come.

As a result of these conflicts and ambiguities, the details of the Baltimore plot soon became a subject of controversy. Some critics questioned whether Pinkerton's actions were justified, while others were quick to point out the flaws in his investigation. Even Lincoln's personal secretaries, John Nicolay and John Hay—both of whom traveled with the president-elect on the train from Springfield—were decidedly cautious in stating that Pinkerton's case had "neither been proved nor disproved by the lapse of time."

There is no denying that at least some of Pinkerton's evidence was pure hearsay. Much of it was obtained in saloons and brothels, under circumstances where the telling of falsehoods is not unknown. But Pinkerton's detractors tend to overlook the fact that his conclusions were confirmed and amplified by Lincoln's most trusted advisers, including Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, the commanding general of the United States. There is no question that Pinkerton's methods were high-handed and at times unlawful, but many of the cavils that were heaped upon him in 1861 would not be expressed or even considered today. It is now understood that there are dangers to be apprehended when a president moves freely through a vast crowd or rides in an open conveyance. Those apprehensions did not yet exist at the start of the Lincoln

presidency. As one New York newspaper noted at the time, “assassination is not congenial to the American character.” Perhaps not, but it would soon become all too real.

“The events about to be related have been for a long time shrouded in a veil of mystery,” Pinkerton wrote in a memoir published near the end of his life. “While many are aware that a plot existed at this time to assassinate the President-elect upon his contemplated journey to the capital, but few have any knowledge of the mode by which the conspiracy was detected, or the means employed to prevent the accomplishment of that murderous design.”

Strangely, those words are as true today as they were in Pinkerton’s time, and the detective was already swimming against a tide of criticism when he wrote them. The distinguished historian John Thomas Scharf, chronicling the history of his native Maryland in 1879, insisted that Pinkerton’s actions had been an insult to the “fair fame of one of the chief cities of the country,” and expressed a hope that the matter would “soon be settled once and for all.”

I myself am a resident of Maryland, and I am as partial to blue crabs and black-eyed Susans as the next man. At a remove of 150 years, however, I believe it is possible to treat this episode without undue risk to the fair fame of Baltimore. It bears noting, however, that to this day our state song—“Maryland, My Maryland”—makes reference to “the despot’s heel” and “tyrant’s chain” of Lincoln and his kind, and builds to a final, spirited rallying cry: “Huzza! She spurns the Northern scum!”

Lincoln would likely have been amused. “Fellow citizens,” he wisely declared in the early years of his presidency, “we cannot escape history.”

## PART ONE

### ***THE COOPER*** and ***THE RAIL-SPLITTER***



Allan Pinkerton in 1861. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

**PROLOGUE**  
***HIS HOUR HAD NOT YET COME***



Lincoln's inaugural ceremonies, March 4, 1861. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

SECURITY THAT DAY was the tightest Washington had ever seen. Sharpshooters crouched on the rooftops along Pennsylvania Avenue and in the windows of the Capitol. Armed soldiers—many of them “in citizen’s dress”—fanned out through the crowd, looking for agitators. Companies of uniformed volunteers swelled the ranks of the parade marchers, and a corps of West Point cadets readied themselves to form a sort of flying wedge around the presidential carriage. A cavalry officer riding nearby used his spurs to keep his mount—and those nearby—in an “uneasy state,” making it difficult for a marksman to get off a shot “between the dancing horses.” Inauguration Day—March 4, 1861—found the city tensed for a blow.

Just past noon, an elegant horse-drawn carriage rolled to a stop at the side entrance of Willard’s Hotel on Fourteenth Street, two blocks east of the White House. Looking gray and doddering, President James Buchanan eased himself down from the open coach. The Old Public Functionary, as he was known, had just departed the Executive Mansion for the last time as president. In keeping with the solemnity of the occasion, he wore a formal but out-of-date swallowtail coat and an immense white cravat that spread over his chest “like a poultice.” He appeared thoroughly worn-out, one

observer noted, and had few political allies left to mourn his exit. “The sun, thank God, has risen upon the last day of the administration of James Buchanan,” declared the *New York World*.

Willard’s Hotel, the city’s largest, was packed to capacity for the inaugural festivities, with proprietor Henry A. Willard booking an average of three people to a room. In the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the stately six-story building could be “much more justly called the centre of Washington and the Union than either the Capitol, the White House, or the State Department.” This had been especially true since the arrival ten days earlier of President-elect Abraham Lincoln, whose presence in the hotel had sparked a “quadrennial revel” of visitors. “Everybody may be seen there,” Hawthorne would write. “You exchange nods with governors of sovereign States; you elbow illustrious men, and tread on the toes of generals.”

The arrival of President Buchanan would mark the end to the political scrum. Pausing for a moment outside the hotel, Buchanan removed his low-crowned silk hat and passed through the side entrance. Moments later, he reemerged, walking arm in arm with Abraham Lincoln. The president-elect wore a new black cashmere suit, which had been made for him in Chicago, and carried a gold-tipped ebony cane. As the two men stepped into the waiting carriage, a group of soldiers standing near the hotel entrance snapped to attention, and a Marine band struck up “Hail to the Chief.” Lincoln smiled and tipped his stovepipe hat, but his face appeared drawn and even more heavily lined than usual. He had been up most of the night, laboring over a final draft of his inaugural address. Moments earlier, while waiting for Buchanan to arrive, he had sat jotting notes as his son Robert read the speech aloud, giving him a better sense of how the words would strike the ears of his listeners. Distracted by this last-minute tinkering, Lincoln left Willard’s Hotel without paying his tab. Several weeks later, when the lapse was brought to his attention, he sent the money over from the White House with a note of apology.

Lincoln and Buchanan sat side by side as their driver swung the carriage onto Pennsylvania Avenue, signaling the start of a “glad and sumptuous” parade that would carry them to the Capitol. The hour-long procession featured floats, marching bands, columns of veterans of the War of 1812, and a richly appointed “tableau car” carrying thirty-four “beauteous little girls,” each representing a state of the Union. A throng of some 25,000 people crowded along both sides of the broad avenue. Many in the crowd had come from out of town to witness the proceedings, and a few had been obliged to spend the night sleeping on the pavement after being turned away at the city’s overbooked hotels. Those who could not get a clear view scrambled for higher ground. “The trees upon the corners,” reported a Philadelphia paper, were “as full of small boys as an apple tree in fruit-bearing season.”



“The Inaugural Procession at Washington,” from *Harper’s Weekly*, March 1861. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

The temperature that afternoon had turned cool and bracing, and it is likely that the atmosphere in the presidential carriage was chillier still. During his campaign, Lincoln had criticized Buchanan sharply, though neither man escaped censure in the press as Inauguration Day approached, especially in the South: “An imbecile official is succeeded by a stupid Rail Splitter,” declared an Atlanta newspaper. As the carriage neared the Capitol, however, Buchanan is said to have struck a conciliatory note. Anticipating his return to his estate in Pennsylvania, the outgoing president turned to his successor. “My dear sir,” he said, “if you are as happy in entering the White House as I shall feel on returning to Wheatland, you are a happy man indeed.”

Lincoln, by all accounts, gave a delicate reply: “Mr. President, I cannot say that I shall enter it with much pleasure, but I assure you that I shall do what I can to maintain the high standards set by my illustrious predecessors who have occupied it.”

Barely two and a half years had elapsed since Lincoln had launched his campaign for the United States Senate—and the historic series of debates against Stephen A. Douglas—with his famous warning of the dangers of disunion over the issue of slavery: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Now, as Lincoln prepared to take the oath to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution” as president of the United States, many of the diplomats and politicians gathered at the Capitol believed that a civil war was inevitable and that Lincoln would take office only to preside over the disintegration of the Union. Almost at that very moment, some seven hundred miles away in Montgomery, Alabama, the “Stars and Bars” flag of the Confederacy was being raised at the state capitol, with seven stars to represent the seven states that had already seceded.

“A more enviable, but at the same time more delicate and more hazardous lot than that accorded to Abraham Lincoln never fell to any member of this nation,” wrote journalist Henry Villard in the *New York Herald*. “The path he is about to walk on may lead to success, glory, immortality, but also to failure, humiliation and curses upon his memory. He may steer clear of the rock of disunion and the shoal of dissension among those that elevated him to the office he is about to assume, and safely conduct the Ship of State from amidst the turbulence of fanaticism and lawlessness to the port of peace and reunion. But he may, on the other hand, take his place at the helm of the craft only to sink with it.”

In keeping with the gravity of the moment, Lincoln had spent weeks laboring over his inaugural address, which he saw as an opportunity to pull the divided nation back from crisis. The president-elect sought a great deal of advice about the speech, but even his closest advisers were at odds over whether he should extend an olive branch to the South or fire a warning shot. Lincoln himself initially favored a strong, even confrontational message, stating that the Union would be preserved at all costs, that secession was illegal, and that he, as commander in chief, intended to enforce the law of the land. Toward that end, he planned to close the address with a ringing, provocative challenge: “In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war ... With *you*, and not with *me*, is the solemn question of ‘Shall it be peace, or a sword?’”

As Inauguration Day approached, however, Lincoln moderated the warlike tone, acting on the counsel of advisers such as William H. Seward, his designated secretary of state, to display “the magnanimity of a victor.” If the speech were delivered as originally drafted, Seward believed, both Virginia and Maryland would immediately secede, effectively cutting off Washington from the Northern states. “Every thought that we think ought to be conciliatory, forbearing and patient,” he insisted.

Even as Lincoln revised and polished his address, however, there were many who felt that the moment for healing had passed. “Mr. Lincoln entered Washington the victim of a grave delusion,” said Horace Greeley, the famed publisher of the *New-York Tribune*. “His faith in reason as a moral force was so implicit that he did not cherish a doubt that his Inaugural Address, whereon he had bestowed much thought and labor, would, when read throughout the South, dissolve the Confederacy as frost is dissipated by the vernal sun.”

In order for Lincoln to deliver the address, however, he had to make it safely through the brief, final leg of his procession to the Capitol, a journey that had begun three weeks earlier in Springfield, Illinois. Many of Lincoln’s most trusted advisers believed that his life had been in danger at every moment, especially during the thirteen days he had spent aboard the Lincoln Special, the private train that carried him on his winding, disjointed path to Washington. Even now, on the very doorstep of the presidency, many feared that there were sinister forces at work that would prevent Lincoln from taking the oath of office. The papers were filled with “persistent rumors” of an armed uprising, with a force of men numbering in the thousands poised to descend on Washington. Others spoke of groups of assassins hidden within the throngs at the Capitol grounds. “There is some apprehension felt concerning the possible action of a large gang of ‘Plug-Uglies’ who are here from Baltimore,” reported the previous day’s *New York Times*. “Strange to say, heavy bets are pending on the question of his safety through tomorrow’s exercises, and great anxiety is felt at Headquarters concerning certain unpublished designs.” Lincoln himself had received anonymous threats of violent opposition to the inauguration. “Beware the Ides of March,” warned one correspondent, “the Suthron people will not Stand your administration.” Another spoke of a “sworn band of 10, who have resolved to shoot you in the inaugural procession.” Lincoln waved such threats aside, the *Times* reported, and remained utterly unfazed: “He says, ‘I am here to take what is my right, and I shall take it. I anticipate no trouble, but should it come I am prepared to meet it.’”

Though steps were taken to keep the security measures as inconspicuous as

possible, some observers were appalled by the seemingly belligerent display of military force. “Nothing could have been more ill-advised or more ostentatious,” declared an anonymous diarist of the day. “I never expected to experience such a sense of mortification and shame in my own country as I felt today, in entering the Capitol through hedges of Marines armed to the teeth.” Not surprisingly, the Southern press seized on the unprecedented show of force to heap scorn on the incoming president. “I have seen today such a sight as I could never have believed possible at the capital of my country,” wrote a journalist in the *Charleston Mercury*, “an inauguration of a President surrounded by armed soldiery, with loaded pieces and fixed bayonets.” Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, the seventy-four-year-old commanding general of the United States, offered no apologies. Convinced of the existence of a plot against Lincoln, the old soldier spent inauguration day commanding a battery of light artillery on Capitol Hill. “I shall plant cannon at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue,” he declared, “and if any of the Maryland or Virginia gentlemen who have become so threatening and troublesome of late show their heads, or even venture to raise a finger, I shall blow them to Hell!”

At a few minutes past 1:00 P.M., the inaugural procession arrived at the Capitol, with its new, half-finished steel dome obscured by scaffolding. Uniformed volunteers arrayed themselves in a double row along the length of the building, forming a human barrier between the crowd and a square-roofed wooden canopy that had been erected at the east portico. Lincoln and Buchanan, meanwhile, were escorted into the Senate Chamber along a makeshift covered walkway, which had been layered with planks to guard against the possibility of sniper fire. Once inside, Lincoln appeared “grave and impassive as an Indian martyr” during the swearing-in of his vice president, Hannibal Hamlin. The outgoing president, meanwhile, looked pale and distracted. “Mr. Buchanan sighed audibly, and frequently,” noted a correspondent from the *New York Times*, “but whether from reflection upon the failure of his Administration, I can’t say.”

At about 1:30 P.M., a long line of politicians and dignitaries, including the justices of the Supreme Court, filed beneath the unfinished dome of the Capitol rotunda and passed through the doors leading outside to the east portico. As Lincoln emerged at the top of the Capitol steps, he received a “most glorious shout of welcome” from the crowd below.

At the bottom of the stairs, beneath the wooden canopy, stood a “miserable little rickety table” holding a pitcher of water and a glass. After introductory remarks by his friend Edward D. Baker, Lincoln—looking “pale, and wan, and anxious”—stepped forward to speak. For a moment, he hesitated, searching for a place to set down his hat. Stephen Douglas, the Illinois Democrat who had so vigorously contested Lincoln’s bid for both the Senate and the White House, happened to be seated close by. Seeing Lincoln’s predicament, he stepped forward to assist his former rival. “If I cannot be President,” Douglas is supposed to have said, “I can at least be his hat-bearer.” The *Times* correspondent, eager for one last dig at the outgoing president, noted that Buchanan, “who was probably sleepy and tired, sat looking as straight as he could at the toe of his right foot.”

For some moments, the president-elect stood quietly and gathered himself, weighing down the loose pages of his speech with his ebony cane as he adjusted his eyeglasses.

“The ten thousand threats that he should be assassinated before he should take the oath did not impel him to make a gesture implying fear or haste,” observed the *New-York Tribune*, “and he stood forth a conspicuous mark for the villains who had threatened to shoot him as he read.” When at last Lincoln began to speak, one listener recalled, his voice “rang out over the acres of people before him with surprising distinctness.”

No incoming president had ever faced such a balancing act in trying to appease so bitterly divided a country, a dilemma that cartoonist Thomas Nast neatly captured in a double portrait called *The President's Inaugural*. In one panel, Lincoln appeared as an angel of peace, waving palm garlands over a caption that read: “This is the way the North receives it.” But the facing panel showed Lincoln as a Roman centurion with his foot pressing down on a vanquished foe, brandishing a sword over the words “This is the way the South receives it.”

Both sides found ample evidence in Lincoln’s words to support their differing views. The speech contained many warnings to the South about the consequences of hostile action. “Physically speaking, we cannot separate,” Lincoln declared, adding that the laws of the Union would be “faithfully executed in all the states.” At the same time, however, he insisted that there was no need for “bloodshed or violence,” a point he underscored as the address concluded with a ringing expression of hope for reconciliation:

I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

The address completed, Lincoln stepped back and bowed his head. Then, in one of the day’s many ironies, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney stepped forward to administer the oath of office. Taney, an eighty-three-year-old Maryland slaveholder, had performed this service six times previously, stretching back to the inauguration of Martin Van Buren, in 1837. More recently, Taney had delivered the majority opinion in the notorious *Dred Scott v. Sanford* case, declaring among other things that slaves were entitled to no protections under the Constitution, and that Congress had no authority to prohibit slavery in federal territories. The decision had had a galvanizing effect on the abolitionist movement and had helped to propel Abraham Lincoln into the national spotlight. Now, as the slavery issue pushed the country to the brink of war, Taney was obliged to swear in one of his most outspoken critics as the sixteenth president of the United States.

For all the challenges that lay ahead, which Lincoln himself described as greater than those faced by George Washington, he had already met the first test of his presidency: He had survived his journey to the inaugural ceremony. “No mean courage was required to face the probabilities of the hour,” wrote Frederick Douglass, the famed abolitionist. The new president had “stood up before the pistol or dagger of the sworn assassin, to meet death from an unknown hand, while upon the very threshold of the office to which the suffrages of the nation had elected him.” Horace Greeley