On the evening of April 14, 1865, President Lincoln attended a performance of Our American Cousin, a popular comedy starring Laura Keene, at Ford’s Theater in Washington. Arriving late, he was accompanied by his wife and two young guests, Major Henry Rathbone and his fiancée, Miss Clara Harris. At least a dozen other people had been invited to go with the Lincolns but had, for a variety of reasons, declined the honor. The play, which had already begun, was briefly halted to welcome the arriving president.

By this time in his life, Lincoln was well aware that he faced danger. He disliked the special guard assigned to him but still kept an envelope filled with the threatening letters he had received. The possibility of assassination was a real one, and Lincoln, who had thought powerfully about death all of his life, once told his old friend Ward Hill Lamon about a dream he’d had.

There seemed to be a death-like stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered downstairs... It was light in all the rooms; every object was familiar to me. I kept on until I arrived at the East Room, which I entered. There I met with a sickening surprise. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. “Who is dead in the White House?” I demanded of one of the soldiers. “The President,” was the answer, “he was killed by an assassin!”... I slept no more that night.

Around ten o’clock John Wilkes Booth, an actor familiar to the theater’s staff, entered Ford’s and joked with the ticket taker, who allowed him in “courtesy of the house.” He had been at the theater earlier in the day, secretly boring a small hole in a wall through which he could open the door to Lincoln’s box if it were locked. Booth climbed to the dress circle and, around ten-thirty, entered the president’s box. Standing about four feet behind Lincoln, who was leaning forward to see one of his generals in the audience, Booth held a single-shot derringer with a barrel less than two inches long and fired a small round ball into the back of Lincoln’s head. (The ball is currently in the National Museum of Health and Medicine.) Major Rath-
bone rose to stop the assassin, but Booth stabbed him with a dagger, then leaped twelve feet to the stage, breaking his leg in the process. He waved the dagger, shouted, "Sic semper tyrannis!" ("Thus shall it ever be for tyrants!") and hurried to an exit, where a stagehand held a horse for him. Some in the audience were confused and thought the shooting was a part of the play until the screams came: "The president has been shot." They were followed by cries of "Booth!" from playgoers familiar with the actor.

The first doctor to reach Lincoln was Charles A. Leale, a twenty-three-year-old army surgeon fresh out of medical school. When Leale got to him, the president was already paralyzed, his eyes closed. Initially, Leale thought he was dead, but as the young doctor probed the wound with a finger, the president showed signs of life. Two other doctors rushed in, and the three agreed to have Lincoln removed to a house across the street. Too long to fit on the bed, Lincoln was stretched across it diagonally. Two more doctors, including Lincoln’s family doctor, Robert K. Stone, reached the stricken president; they would be followed by a stream of medical men, sixteen in all, and all useless. (One of them, army doctor D. W. Bliss, would also preside over the care of President Garfield when he was shot sixteen years later. His performance in that shooting was equally lacking.) The wound was probed twice more, but nothing was done for the dying president except to keep the wound free of coagulating blood. At 6:50 A.M. Lincoln stopped breathing, then recovered briefly, only to stop again. At 7:22 he “breathed his last.”

In a 1995 American Heritage article, “How Did Lincoln Die?,” Dr. Richard A. R. Fraser argues that Lincoln’s wound was not necessarily fatal. The attending doctors went against medical practice accepted even then by probing the wound, first with fingers and then a metal probe. According to Fraser, this unsterile activity certainly worsened Lincoln’s chances for survival, which was a distinct possibility given that many people, including Civil War combat victims, have survived greater head wounds than the one Lincoln suffered.
Within hours Vice-President Andrew Johnson (1808–1875), a Unionist senator from Tennessee who had also been targeted for assassination, was sworn in as the seventeenth president. The only member of the Senate from a seceded state to remain loyal, he was also a War Democrat among the Radical Republicans in Lincoln’s Cabinet and Congress. At the inauguration a few weeks earlier, Johnson had been noticeably drunk, the result of too much “medicinal” brandy. It would now fall to this former tailor, who had known frontier poverty just as Lincoln had, to stitch the severed nation back together.

Booth’s attack was the culmination of months of planning. Born in Maryland into one of America’s most prominent theatrical families, Booth was the son of Junius Brutus Booth, the leading Shakespearean actor in America. An actor himself, John Wilkes Booth was known to the Lincolns, who had seen him perform; Lincoln once invited him for a visit between the acts of a play, a request the actor ignored. A white supremacist and Confederate sympathizer who had never served in a Confederate army, Booth had earlier hatched a scheme to kidnap Lincoln, take him to Richmond, and exchange him for Confederate prisoners and a negotiated peace. By April, with no Confederate government in Richmond, Booth decided to kill the president instead. His fellow conspirators, some of them Confederate veterans and all but one Marylanders, were assigned to assassinate other Cabinet officers, including Vice-President Johnson, Secretary of State Seward, and General Grant. A brutal thug, Lewis Powell, was assigned to kill Seward at his home and nearly succeeded, but Seward was wearing a heavy neck brace that probably saved his life. Powell wounded two of Seward’s sons and a secretary before escaping.

After racing out of Ford’s to the waiting horse, Booth escaped over the Navy Yard Bridge. Joined by one accomplice, a half-witted and star-struck David Herold, they stopped at the house of Dr. Samuel A. Mudd, who set Booth’s leg in a splint. (Mudd knew Booth but said he did not recognize him that night.) The two then went to the home of a wealthy Confederate sympathizer, who hid them for six days. On April 21 they went to Virginia, eventually reaching the farm of Richard H. Garrett in Bowling Green. While sleeping in Garrett’s tobacco barn, Booth and Herold were surrounded by Union cavalry, who called for them to surrender. Herold did; Booth refused, and the barn was set afire. He was then shot and killed, with Sergeant Boston Corbett taking credit for the fatal shot.
As bleak as things were for the defeated Confederates, it was even more difficult and uncertain for the four million freed slaves, accustomed to centuries of a system that had not remotely prepared them for emancipation. For these millions displaced by the war’s end, there was a true emergency. To address that crisis, Congress had established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in March 1865. A temporary federal agency under the War Department, it was to assist the emancipated slaves in making the transition to freedom. A year later, when Johnson vetoed a congressional bill continuing the work of the bureau, the veto was overridden by Congress, and the department was repeatedly extended.

Headed by General Oliver Otis Howard, an abolitionist who had lost his arm during the Peninsula Campaign and later marched with Sherman to the sea, the Freedmen’s Bureau, as it was known, distributed trainloads of food and clothing provided by the federal government. The supplies went both to freed slaves and southern white refugees. During a relatively brief existence, the agency spent a staggering $17 million in direct aid. Much of it went to constructing hospitals for the former slaves and providing medical care. More than four thousand schools were built for black children, and most of the major Negro colleges in the United States, including Fisk and the Hampton Institute, were founded with the bureau’s assistance. (General Howard helped establish what would become a black university in Washington, D.C., which was named for him. He served as Howard’s third president, from 1869 to 1874.)

But the bureau was more than a friendly welfare agency. It held far-reaching powers that proved ripe for corruption. It regulated wages and working conditions, handled legal affairs, and oversaw the confiscation and redistribution of lands, one of its most controversial roles. Fulfilling Radical Republican Congressman Thaddeus Stevens’s call for “forty acres and a mule” for every freed black adult, the bureau was responsible for more than 800,000 acres of land that had been abandoned or confiscated from former Confederates, including Brierfield, the plantation of Jefferson Davis. The charges of corruption later leveled against the agency hurt its reputation, but Howard was cleared of any wrongdoing after a congressional investigation.
To white Southerners, the bureau came to represent the worst of what they thought the North had in store for them. Some blacks were settled on public lands under the Southern Homestead Act of 1867, but the hopes of massive land redistribution in the South never materialized. Property rights were still considered sacred by Congress, and much of the land meant for the former slaves ended up in the hands of speculators, lumber companies, railroads, and large plantation owners. When President Johnson announced the restoration of abandoned lands to pardoned Southerners, most free blacks had little choice but to participate in sharecropping arrangements. Working as tenant farmers who paid for seed and supplies with a portion of their crops, the sharecroppers learned that slavery had merely been replaced by this economic arithmetic that never quite added up in their favor, a new form of bondage from which there was equally little hope of escape.

As a guardian of voting rights, the Freedmen’s Bureau also failed to measure up. In the worst postwar voting catastrophe, forty-eight blacks died when the police of New Orleans put down a peaceful demonstration in favor of the black vote. General Philip Sheridan, the military governor of Louisiana, had been away during this “Riot of New Orleans” and called the killings a massacre. In other southern states, “Black Codes” designed to restore the prewar condition of blacks were quickly introduced. To many of the former slaves, it must have seemed that the war had changed very little.

Civil War Voices

Former slave Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and women’s rights pioneer, wrote about postwar racial attitudes in the nation’s capital (October 1, 1865).

A few weeks ago I was in company with my friend Josephine S. Griffing, when the conductor of a streetcar refused to stop his car for me, although [I was] closely following Josephine and holding on to the iron rail. They dragged me a number of yards before she succeeded in stopping them. She reported the conductor to the president of the City Railway, who dismissed him at once, and told me to take
the number of the car whenever I was mistreated by a conductor or driver. On the 13th I had occasion to go for blackberry wine, and other necessities for the patients in the Freedmen’s Hospital where I have been doing and advising for a number of months. I thought now I would get a ride without trouble as I was in company of another friend, Laura S. Haviland of Michigan. As I ascended the platform of the car, the conductor pushed me, saying “Go back—get off here.” I told him I was not going off, then “I’ll put you off” said he furiously, clenching my right arm with both hands, using such violence that he seemed about to succeed, when Mrs. Haviland told him he was not going to put me off. “Does she belong to you?” said he in a hurried angry tone. She replied, “She does not belong to me, but she belongs to humanity.” The number of the car was noted, and the conductor dismissed at once upon report to the president, who advised arrest for assault and battery as my shoulder was sprained by his effort to put me off. Accordingly I had him arrested and the case tried before Justice Thompson. My shoulder was very lame and swollen, but it is better. It is hard for the old slaveholding spirit to die. But die it must.

Left: Cartoon showing Andrew Johnson kicking the Freedmen’s Bureau.
Below: The Freedmen’s Bureau trying to settle dispute between freed blacks and white southerners.