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Paranormal Lincoln

Joe Nickell

His guiding of the United States through its greatest crisis and his subsequent martyrdom have caused the shadow of the tall, sixteenth president to loom still larger. Called "the most mythic of all American presidents" (Cohen 1989, 7), Abraham Lincoln has long been credited by paranormalists with supernatural powers. These include an early mirror-vision, prophetic dreams, and spiritualistic phenomena. His ghost, some say, even haunts the White House.¹

In the Looking Glass

Many people have portrayed Lincoln as a man given to belief in omens-particularly those relating to his assassination. An incident often cited in this regard occurred at his home in Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln related it to a few friends and associates, including Noah Brooks in 1864. Brooks shared it with the readers of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* the following July-three months after Lincoln's death-recounting the president's story "as nearly as possible in his own words":

It was just after my election in 1860. . . . I was well tired out, and went home to rest, throwing myself down on a lounge in my chamber. Opposite where I lay was a bureau, with a swinging-glass upon it-[and here he got up and placed furniture to illustrate the position]-and, looking in that glass, I saw myself reflected, nearly at full length; but my face, I noticed, had two separate and distinct images, the tip of the nose of one being about three inches from the tip of the other. I was a little bothered, perhaps startled, and got up and looked in the glass, but the illusion vanished. On lying down again I saw it a second time-plainer, if possible, than before; and then I noticed that one of the faces was a little paler, say five shades, than the other. I got up and the thing melted away, and I went off and, in the excitement of the hour, forgot all about it-nearly, but not quite, for the thing would once in a while come up, and give me a little pang, as though something uncomfortable had happened. When I went home I told my wife about it, and a few days after I tried the experiment again, when [with a laugh], sure enough, the thing came again; but I never succeeded in bringing the ghost back after that, though I once tried very industriously to show it to my wife, who was worried about it somewhat. She thought it was "a sign" that I was to be elected to a second term of office, and that the paleness of one of the faces was an omen that I should not see life through the last term. (Brooks 1865, 224-225)

The same story was told by Ward Hill Lamon in his book, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*. Lamon was a friend of Lincoln's, a fearless man who accompanied him to Washington for his protection, being given the special title, Marshal of the District of Columbia. In discussing the matter of the double image in the mirror, Lamon stated: "Mr. Lincoln more than once told me that he could not explain this phenomenon" and "that he had tried to reproduce the double reflection at the Executive Mansion, but without success." In Lamon's account it was not Mrs. Lincoln but the president himself who thought the "ghostly" image foretold "that death would overtake him" before the end of his second term (Lamon 1995, 111-112).

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In recent years, paranormalists have gotten hold of Lincoln's anecdote and offered their own interpretations. Hans Holzer states that "What the President saw was a brief 'out of the body experience,' or astral projection," meaning "that the bonds between conscious mind and the unconscious are temporarily loosened and that the inner or true self has quickly slipped out" (Holzer 1995, 65).

Such an explanation utterly fails to fit the evidence. Lincoln did not describe an out-of-body experience—a feeling of being outside one's physical self—but, according to Brooks (1865, 225), "The President, with his usual good sense, saw nothing in all this but an optical illusion."

The nature of this optical illusion can be deduced from the circumstances. The double image was of Lincoln's face only, could be seen in a particular mirror but not others, and vanished and reappeared with respect to a certain vantage point. Taken together, these details are corroborative evidence that the mirror was the cause. An ordinary mirror can produce a slight double-image effect due to light reflecting off the front of the glass as well as off the silvering on the back. In modern mirrors this is usually not noticeable, and the shift in the image is slight in any event. But in the case of old mirrors, whose glass plates "were generally imperfect" (Cescinsky 1931), a distinct double image might be produced, like that shown in Figure 1. (Unfortunately, the actual mirror-topped bureau Lincoln described is no longer to be found at the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, much of the furniture having been dispersed in earlier years [Suits 1998].)

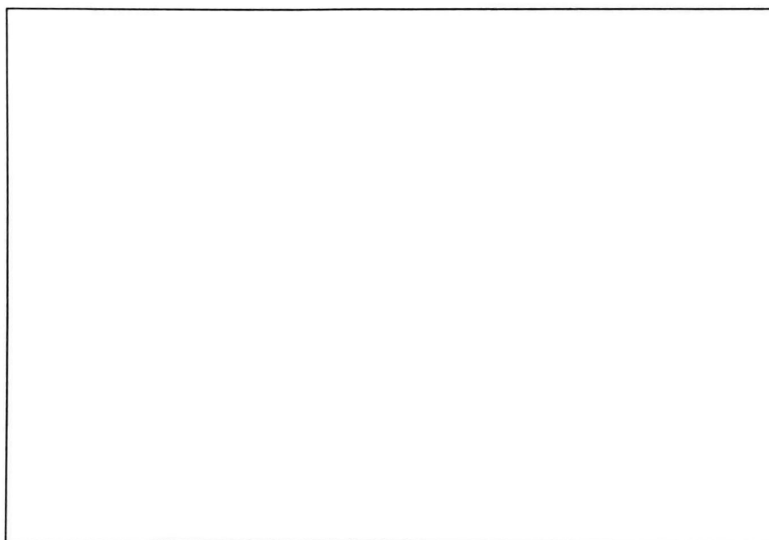


Figure 1. Double image of author (and of photographer Rob McElroy) reproduces a curious effect experienced by Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and thought by Mrs. Lincoln to be an omen.

Dreams of Death

The mirror incident sets the stage for claims of even more emphatically premonitory experiences. These were dreams Lincoln reportedly had that foretold dramatic events. One he related to his cabinet on April 14, 1865. The previous night he had dreamed he was in some mysterious boat, he said, "sailing toward a dark and indefinite shore." In another version it was of "a ship sailing rapidly" (Lewis 1973, 290). When Lincoln was assassinated only hours later, the dream was seen as weirdly prophetic. The story grew in the retellings which spread, says Lloyd Lewis in *Myths After Lincoln* (1973, 291) "around the world."

In fact, Lincoln had not thought the dream presaged his death. He had actually mentioned it in reply to General Grant, his guest that Good Friday afternoon, who had expressed worries about General Sherman's fate in North Carolina. Lincoln felt that Sherman would be victorious because, he said, the dream had often come to him prior to significant events in the war. According to Lewis (1973, 290): "For a President of the United States, in a time like

the Civil War, to dream that he was sailing rapidly to an unseen shore was certainly not remarkable. Most of his waking hours, across four years, were spent in wondering where the Ship of State was going."

Lincoln supposedly described an even more ominous dream to Mrs. Lincoln, not long before his assassination, then again to Ward Hill Lamon (1895, 115-116) who reconstructed Lincoln's words as follows:

About ten days ago, I retired very late. I had been up waiting for important dispatches from the front. I could not have been long in bed when I fell into a slumber, for I was weary. I soon began to dream. 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. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. . . . Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, 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. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, some gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. "Who is dead in the White House?" I demanded of one of the soldiers. "The President," was his answer; "he was killed by an assassin!" Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd, which awoke me from my dream. I slept no more that night; and although it was only a dream, I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since.

Lamon's account may be true, although he has been criticized for having "fed the fire of superstition that people were kindling about the name of Lincoln" (Lewis 1973, 294). In fact, however, Lamon had added a sequel to the story which is invariably ignored:

Once the President alluded to this terrible dream with some show of playful humor. "Hill," said he, "your apprehension of harm to me from some hidden enemy is downright foolishness. For a long time you have been trying to keep somebody-the Lord knows who-from killing me. Don't you see how it will turn out? In this dream it was not me, but some other fellow, that was killed. It seems that this ghostly assassin tried his hand on some one else." (Lamon 1895, 116-117)

In any event, that Lincoln should have dreamed of assassination-even his own-can scarcely be termed remarkable. Prior to his first inauguration in 1861, Pinkerton detectives had smuggled Lincoln into Washington at night to avoid a change of trains in Baltimore where an assassination plot had been uncovered (Neely 1982, 16-17). Lincoln had subsequently "received untold number of death threats" (St. George 1990, 66), and on one occasion had a hole shot through his top hat by a would-be assassin (Neely 1982, 282).

Among the Spirits

Lamon (1895, 120) insisted that Lincoln "was no dabbler in divination-astrology, horoscopy, prophecy, ghostly lore, or witcheries of any sort." Yet soon after his death spiritualists sought to use Lincoln to give respectability to their practices by citing the occasions he had permitted seances in the White House, as well as to claim contact with his own departed spirit. The extent of Lincoln's involvement with spiritualism has been much debated.

Actually, it was Mrs. Lincoln who was involved with spiritualists. She turned to them in her bereavement over the death of Willie, the Lincolns' beloved eleven-year-old son who died of "bilious fever" in 1862. One such spiritualist medium was Henrietta "Nettie" Colburn (1841-1892). Mary Todd Lincoln met her at a "circle" or seance at the Georgetown home of Cranstoun Laurie, chief clerk of the post office in Washington. On one occasion, a seance with Nettie was being held in the White House's Red Parlor when the president stumbled upon the group and watched with curiosity. Another time he accompanied Mary to a seance

at the Lauries' home. At least one biographer has suggested that Lincoln's marginal involvement may have stemmed from a desire "to protect his gullible wife" (Temple 1995, 199).

That was exactly what Lincoln did with regard to a trickster named Charles J. Colchester. Styling himself "Lord Colchester," he conducted seances wherein "spirit rappings" were produced. A concerned Lincoln asked Dr. Joseph Henry (1797-1878), the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, for his advice about Colchester, whereupon Dr. Henry invited the medium to give a demonstration at his office. The scientist determined that the sounds came from Colchester and he suspected trickery. Later, Noah Brooks caught the medium cheating and warned Colchester not to return to the Executive Mansion (Temple 1995, 200). Lincoln himself was not interested in seances, but, according to Lloyd Lewis's *Myths After Lincoln* (1973, 301), "In these dark hocus-pocuses Mrs. Lincoln found comfort, and Lincoln let them go on for a time, careless of whether the intellectuals of the capital thought him addle-pated or no."

Spectral Visits

It is ironic that Lincoln did not believe in spiritualism, since his ghost is now reportedly so active. Although his Springfield home is decidedly unhaunted, according to curator Linda Suits (1998), who says neither she nor anyone she knows has had a ghostly encounter there, other places compete for attention. There have been numerous reported sightings of Lincoln's ghost at his tomb in Springfield as well as at Fort Monroe in Virginia and, in Washington, at both the White House and Ford's Theater (where Lincoln was assassinated) (Cohen 1989, 11; Winer and Osborn 1979, 125; Jones 1996, 15).

Understandably, perhaps, it is the White House that seems to receive the most attention—especially the "Lincoln Bedroom" (which, in Lincoln's time, was actually his office). The notion that his ghost frequents the stately rooms and corridors doubtless began with Mrs. Lincoln's post-assassination seances and it was probably given impetus by a figurative remark made by President Theodore Roosevelt (who served from 1901-1909): "I think of Lincoln, shambling, homely, with his strong, sad, deeply-furrowed face, all the time. I see him in the different rooms and in the halls" (St. George 1990, 84). Such feelings are still common and may trigger sightings among imaginative people and those predisposed to see ghosts. The first person to report actually seeing Lincoln's ghost was Grace Coolidge (First Lady from 1923 to 1929), who saw his tall figure looking out an Oval Office window (Scott and Norman 1991, 74; Cohen 1989, 10). During her tenure, guests were lodged in the "Lincoln bedroom" and "Every newcomer was informed of the legend that when the great light over the front door was dimmed for the night the ghost of Abraham Lincoln was supposed to pace silently to and fro on the North Porch" (Ross 1962, 109).

Among subsequent Lincoln sightings was one by Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands (who had a prior interest in spiritualism). She was a guest of President Franklin D. Roosevelt when she heard a knock during the night at her bedroom door. Opening it, the drowsy queen saw the figure of Abraham Lincoln looking down at her, causing her to swoon (Ronan 1974, 40; Cohen 1989, 10). Religious leader Norman Vincent Peale claimed that a prominent actor (whom he would not name) had been a White House guest when he awoke to Lincoln's voice pleading for help. The actor sat up to see "the lanky form of Lincoln prostrate on the floor in prayer, arms outstretched with fingers digging into the carpet" (Winer and Osborn 1979, 135). And President Reagan's daughter Maureen said she had occasionally seen Lincoln's ghost—"an aura, sometimes red, sometimes orange"—during the night. So had her husband Dennis Revell (Caroli 1992, 39).

These examples are typical of many ghost sightings that are due to common "waking dreams," an experience that occurs when someone is just going to sleep or waking up and perceives ghosts, lights, or other strange imagery (Nickell 1995, 41, 46). Other apparitions are most likely to be seen when one is tired, daydreaming, performing routine chores, or is otherwise in a reverie or dissociative state (see e.g., Mackenzie 1982). This may help explain sightings such as one by Eleanor Roosevelt's secretary, who passed by the Lincoln Bedroom one day and was frightened to see the ghostly president sitting on the bed and pulling on his boots (Alexander 1998, 43; Jones 1996, 8).

Once the notion of a ghost is affixed to a place, almost anything—an unexplained noise, mechanical malfunction, misplaced object, or the like—can be added to the lore. For example, on one of my appearances on "The Michael Reagan Show," Mike told me an anecdote about

his father and their dog, Rex. According to President Reagan, when passing the Lincoln Bedroom Rex would often bark but would refuse to enter the room (Reagan 1998; see also Caroli 1992, 39, and Alexander 1998, 45). Mike related the story as more of a novelty than as proof of a supernatural occurrence. (President Reagan's daughter, Patti Davis, once asked her father if he had ever seen Lincoln's ghost. "'No,' my father answered-a bit sadly, I thought. 'I haven't seen him yet. But I do believe he's here'" [Davis 1995].) Neither the Bushes nor, as far as they could tell, their dog Millie ever saw the ghost of Lincoln, or indeed any of the other historical specters who are occasionally reported (Alexander 1998, 45).

Not all of the reports of Lincoln's ghost, however, have featured apparitions. In earlier times there were frequent reports of sounds that were variously interpreted, some describing them as heavy footfalls (Cohen 1989, 10; Jones 1996, 8), others as knockings at the door, with Lincoln's ghost typically being thought responsible. Not only Queen Wilhelmina but also "Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Herbert Hoover and Harry Truman all said they heard mysterious rappings, often at their bedroom doors" (Scott and Norman 1991, 74). However, ghosthunter Hans Holzer (1995, 70) concedes: "President Truman, a skeptic, decided that the noises had to be due to 'natural' causes, such as the dangerous settling of the floors. He ordered the White House completely rebuilt, and perhaps this was a good thing: It would surely have collapsed soon after, according to the architect, General Edgerton."

For all his greatness Abraham Lincoln was of course human. Among his foibles were a tendency to melancholy, a sense of fatalism, and a touch of superstition from his frontier upbringing. However, as this investigation demonstrates, neither his life nor his death offers proof of paranormal or supernatural occurrences-not his very human apprehensions of mortality, not his wife's sad seduction into spiritualism, and not the evidence, even if expressed as anecdotes of ghostly apparitions, that his great legacy lives on.

Acknowledgments

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Note

1. Among other implicitly paranormal claims relating to Lincoln are the "mysterious coincidences" that are often claimed between him and President John F. Kennedy. See Martin Gardner, *The Magic Numbers of Dr. Matrix* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1985) and Bruce Martin, "Coincidence: Remarkable or Random?" *Skeptical Inquirer* 22(5) (September/October 1998): 23-28.

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Lincoln

Garrison Wells "The Lincoln No one Knows: The Mysterious Man Who Ran the Civil War." (Rathledge Hill Press Nashville Tennessee 1993)

246 related to Secretary of Navy Gideon Welles during April 14, 1965 cabinet meeting dream of water

documents are silent about "compulsive interest in signs, omens, portents, and dreams."

246 - his issuing of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was based on a sign given to him during the battle of Antietam
- if he won God was giving a sign Wells "God decided this question in favor of the slaves"

248

~~Arch~~ Springfield Ill 200 6, 1860 pre-dict saw two forces - discussed with May Todd
- tried to duplicate the chair and mirror in Washington

252 - dreamed of his death by assassin 3 days in row
- said dreams are prominent in the Bible

Fodor, Nandor. *An Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science*. Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1966. First published 1933.

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liekkö In Finnish folklore, an IGNIS FATUUS light, comparable to the British JACK-O'-LANTERN. The *liekkö*, which means "the flaming one," is believed to be the soul of a child who was buried in the forest. It presides over plants, roots and trees.

Lily Dale See SPIRITUALISM.

Lincoln, Abraham (1809–1865) The 16th president of the United States was assassinated while in office, an act of violence that has reverberated through time in haunting phenomena in many locations. An interesting factor adding to the ghost stories was Abraham Lincoln's own involvements with the occult: he apparently had a psychic gift of his own and had an interest in SPIRITUALISM. He had paranormal experiences and dreamed of his own death. In death, he did not rest in peace; his body was moved numerous times to different graves.

Early Life

Lincoln grew up a lanky country boy in Springfield, Illinois, prone to melancholy and moodiness. He studied law and was drawn to politics in a desire to right social wrongs. He had a reputation for honesty. He won a seat in the Illinois state legislature (1834–41), was a congressman in the House of Representatives (1847–49), and was elected to the U.S. Senate (1858). He then won the Republican nomination for president in the 1860 election, campaigning against Stephen Douglas. Lincoln's views against slavery earned him many enemies. He won the presidential election by Electoral College vote, but lost the popular vote, carrying only 40%. He was hanged in effigy the day he was elected.

Interest in Spiritualism

Lincoln showed personal interest in Spiritualism early in his political career. After the death of his favorite son, Willie, in 1862, he attended seances in an effort to contact Willie's spirit. Most historians attribute Lincoln's interest and involvement in Spiritualism to his wife, Mary Todd, whom he married in 1842. Yet there is evidence that Lincoln's interest was independent of Mary and was deeply rooted in his own sense of purpose and destiny. In a letter to his friend Joshua F. Speed in 1842, Lincoln observed that he had "always had a strong tendency to mysticism" and had often felt controlled "by some other power than my own will," which he felt came "from above."

Lincoln's experiences with several mediums may have had an influence on his issuance in 1863 of the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves in the rebellious states. His antislavery position was in fact well

established before then; he regarded slavery as an evil and had opposed its extension. His election to the presidency in 1860 incited the secession of the Southern states and the ensuing American Civil War (1861–65).

Throughout his presidency, Lincoln may have met with various mediums who were invited to the White House by Mary; these mediums included J.B. Conklin, Nettie Colburn, Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Cranston Laurie and Cora Maynard. Maynard, a favorite of Mary Todd Lincoln, took credit for the Emancipation Proclamation, saying in her autobiography that Lincoln issued it at the direction of her spirits. Nettie Colburn also claimed credit, citing an hour-and-a-half trance during which she lectured Lincoln that the war would not end until he freed the slaves. While it is unlikely that Lincoln made his decision because of such spirit utterings, he may have heard things from the mediums that reinforced his own inner conviction to take such action.

Similarly, medium Cora Richmond claimed that Lincoln and the Joint Congressional Committee on Reconstruction sought her advice, a claim refuted by historians.

Paranormal Experiences

During the fighting, Lincoln became withdrawn and spent a great deal of time meditating and praying. He had a major hand in directing the Union army. Though his generals complained about his "meddling," he may have had intuitive or psychic insights that prompted him to steer certain courses of action.

On one occasion, Lincoln visited the telegraph office of the War Department, looking for the latest news of a battle. Later that night, he returned in a state of panic, ordering a line through to his commanders. He seemed certain that Confederate forces were about to cut through Union forces. Asked how he knew that, he reportedly replied, "My God, man! I saw it."

Son Willie's death from scarlet fever in 1862 further stressed Lincoln; both he and Mary suffered deep grief. Willie, Lincoln's favorite of his three boys, was buried in a crypt in Georgetown belonging to the William Thomas Carroll family, friends of the Lincolns. Willie was expertly embalmed to appear as though sleeping. Lincoln visited the crypt often and reportedly twice had the coffin opened so that he could gaze again on the face of his beloved son. He once told Salmon P. Chase, his secretary of the treasury, that he often felt Willie near him and spoke to him.

Lincoln's position on slavery led to his assassination by actor John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865. Booth shot Lincoln in the back of the head as he and Mary sat in his box at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. Lincoln died within a few hours.

Lincoln had startling premonitions of his own death. Shortly before his election in 1860, he saw a vision of himself in mirrors on several occasions that upset him. He would see two separate and distinct images of his face, one of which was deathly pale and vanished as he gazed

at it. He told Mary about the faces; she interpreted the vision as a sign that he would be reelected to a second term but would not survive it.

Ten days before the assassination, Lincoln had a dramatic and prophetic dream of his own death. He wrote in his journal:

I retired late. I soon began to dream. There seemed to be a deathlike stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered down-stairs. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room; no living person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds of distress met me as I passed along.

It was light in all the rooms; every object was familiar to me; but where were all the people who were grieving as if their hearts would break? I was puzzled and alarmed. What could be the meaning of all this? Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, I kept on until I arrived at the East Room, which I entered. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, some gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. "Who is dead in the White House?" I demanded of one of the soldiers. "The President," was his answer. "He was killed by an assassin." Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd, which awoke me from my dream. I slept no more that night; and although it was only a dream, I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since.

The night before he was killed, Lincoln told a member of his cabinet that he had dreamed he would be assassinated. The day of his assassination, Lincoln confided to his bodyguard, W.H. Crook, that he had dreamed for three nights straight that he would be assassinated. Crook beseeched him not to go that night to Ford's Theatre, but Lincoln demurred saying he had promised his wife they would go. Perhaps he knew he would be shot that night, for when they departed for Ford's, Lincoln said "good-bye" to Crook instead of "good night."

Lincoln's premonitions did not save him, but a premonition may have saved the life of General Ulysses S. Grant, who, with his wife, Julia, was to be with Lincoln in the theater the night the president was shot. Julia awoke that morning with an oppressive sensation that something terrible was going to happen. She persuaded Grant to stay home. Later, it was revealed that Booth had planned to assassinate Grant as well that evening.

Ghost Train Home

Initially, Lincoln was to be buried under the Capitol's dome. Plans then changed to Virginia and finally to his hometown of Springfield. There was a huge public demand to see the president's body. A special funeral train bore Lincoln's body and the body of Willie home to Springfield for

burial. The trip took 14 days. The train stopped in cities for mourners to file past the open casket. About 2 million people turned out.

Since then, every April at the anniversary of the assassination, a phantom funeral train is reported traveling the tracks along the route taken by the official funeral train, from Washington through New York State and west to Illinois. The train never reaches its destination. (According to some stories, there are two phantom trains. The first engine pulls several cars draped in black and belching black smoke. One is a military car from which issues forth the sounds of a dirge. The second steam engine pulls only a flatcar bearing the president's coffin.)

The Albany, New York, *Evening Times* once gave the following account of the phantom train passing through town:

Regularly in the month of April, about midnight the air on the tracks becomes very keen and cutting. On either side of the tracks it is warm and still. Every watchman, when he feels the air, slips off the track and sits down to watch. Soon the pilot engine of Lincoln's funeral train passes with long, black streamers and with a band of black instruments playing dirges, grinning skeletons sitting all about.

It passes noiselessly. If it is moonlight, clouds come over the moon as the phantom train goes by. After the pilot engine passes, the funeral train itself with flags and streamers rushes past. The track seems covered with black carpet, and the coffin is seen in the center of the car, while all about it in the air and on the train behind are vast numbers of blue-coated men, some with coffins on their backs, others leaning upon them.

If a real train were passing its noise would be hushed as if the phantom train rode over it. Clocks and watches always stop as the phantom train goes by and when looked at are five to eight minutes behind.

Everywhere on the road about April 27 watches and clocks are suddenly found to be behind.

Repeated Burials

In Springfield, two gravesites awaited Lincoln: one in Oak Ridge Cemetery and the other on Mather Hill in the center of the city (now the site of the state capitol building). Mary chose Oak Ridge, but city officials preferred Mather Hill, intending to build a monument there. Mary prevailed, and the bodies of Lincoln and Willie were taken to Oak Ridge, as was the body of another son who had died, Eddie, exhumed from another cemetery. The bodies were interred in a temporary tomb while work began on a monument tomb. Visitors reported seeing a spectral figure walking about, believed to be Lincoln, and hearing footsteps and the sounds of sobbing.

The bodies were moved into the monument tomb on September 19, 1871, and were joined by the body of son Tad, who had meanwhile died. Work still was incomplete, and Lincoln was moved again on October 9, 1874, into a marble sarcophagus. The monument was then dedicated.

An attempt to rob Lincoln's grave was foiled in November 1876. As a precaution against further such attempts, Lincoln's body was moved deeper into the catacomb into a "secret" grave. Stories abounded that Lincoln's body had been stolen and his crypt was empty.

His body remained there until 1886, when a new crypt was built for him within the monument catacomb. His casket was opened for identification of the remains. But in 1899, the monument was torn down and construction was begun on a new one. The bodies—which by this time also included Mary and a grandson—were exhumed and moved. Lincoln was placed into a white marble sarcophagus.

Lincoln still had not reached his final resting place. In 1901, his casket was opened again for the purposes of identification, and he was then buried in an underground vault, sealed in concrete.

Visitors today still report ghostly footsteps, weeping and whispering when they visit the tomb.

The Decline of Mary

Mary never recovered from her husband's death. She became increasingly withdrawn and paranoid, and dependent on opium and her "spirit guides." She talked incessantly about the assassination and drove her friends away. She said that she talked to her dead husband every day. SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHY was in vogue, and Mary sat for William Mumler under an assumed name. The resulting photograph shows a misty likeness of the dead president as well as the portrait of his wife.

In 1875, son Robert Lincoln had his mother institutionalized, an act that earned him her undying hatred. After her release, she went into self-imposed exile in France, living the rest of her days in a small hotel room. She was in constant pain from arthritis and wore a money belt to protect her dwindling funds. She kept her windows covered and obsessively packed and unpacked her 64 crates of clothing. Mary died on July 12, 1882, 17 years after the assassination. She was buried in the Lincoln catacomb in Springfield.

Lincoln's Haunts

Lincoln's family home in Springfield, owned and operated by the National Park Service as a historical site, has long been associated with haunting phenomena. Staff and visitors have reported apparitions of a tall, thin man sometimes accompanied by a small boy, believed to be Lincoln and his son Willie. A rocker rocks by itself, wind rushes in corridors, objects are moved, phantom piano music is played and voices are heard. People say they feel cold spots and are touched by invisible hands.

Lincoln's ghost reportedly continues to haunt the WHITE HOUSE. Ghostly footsteps attributed to him were reported in the second floor corridors by staff. The first person to see his alleged ghost was Grace Coolidge, wife of Calvin Coolidge, the 30th president of the United States (1923–29), who observed his silhouette standing at a window in the Oval Office, looking out over the

Potomac. Since then, his ghost has been seen or sensed in this pose; the poet Carl Sandburg once said he felt (but did not see) Lincoln stand by him at the window. The haunting re-creates a real scene observed one night during Lincoln's presidency by Army Chaplain E.C. Bolles. Bolles had arrived in the Oval Office to meet with Lincoln; the president was gazing mournfully out the window. "I think I never saw so sad a face in my life, and I have looked into many a mourner's face," wrote Bolles of the episode.

Lincoln's bedroom, called the Lincoln Room, also is a site of hauntings. It is the quarters of visiting heads of state, many of whom report strange phenomena, from footsteps to visual hallucinations. When Queen Wilhelmina of The Netherlands visited President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–45), she told of hearing footsteps in the corridor outside and a knock at the door. When she opened the door, she was astonished to see Lincoln standing before her, dressed out in frock and top hat. The queen fainted. At least one other guest saw Lincoln sitting on the bed, putting on his boots.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt often sensed Lincoln's presence, usually late at night when she was writing. Sometimes the Roosevelts' dog, Fala, would bark excitedly for no apparent reason.



Abraham Lincoln. Courtesy New-York Historical Society.



Mary Todd Lincoln. Courtesy New-York Historical Society.

President Harry S. Truman (1945–53) also believed he heard Lincoln walking about. After Truman's presidency, the ghost seemed to disappear from the White House. During the administration of President Ronald Reagan (1981–89), the president's daughter Maureen reported seeing Lincoln's ghost in the Lincoln Room.

In addition to being heard at the White House, Lincoln's ghostly footsteps are reported near his gravesite in Springfield, Illinois. Popular legend has it that the grave is empty.

Haunting phenomena have been reported at Ford's Theatre as well. It was closed after the assassination. The famous Civil War photographer Matthew Brady took a photograph of the interior. Reportedly the print revealed a semitransparent figure standing in the Lincoln box, believed by many to be the ghost of Booth.

Ford tried to reopen the theater but was unsuccessful, and he sold it. In 1933, it was taken over by the National Park Service. It was renovated and reopened in 1968 as a daytime theater and nighttime playhouse. Actors, including Hal Holbrook, reported icy sensations at center stage, and a tendency to forget lines. Other phenomena include phantom footsteps, strange laughter and voices, the sounds of weeping and lights turning on and off by themselves. A singer said she was distracted one night by a

light flashing on and off in the Lincoln box, which is permanently closed to the public.

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Lindbergh, Charles See GREMLIN.

Little Bastard, Curse of The life and promising film career of the American actor James Dean were cut short by a fatal car accident in September 1955. Dean once said he believed he was predestined to die in a speeding car, and the legend that grew up around the circumstances of his death attributes a curse on the car in which he met his violent fate. Following Dean's death, the curse affected others who came into contact with the wreck.

James Bryan Dean, born February 8, 1931, in Marion, Indiana, rose to fame in the film industry as the prototypical disaffected, rebellious young man. His leading roles in *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* turned him into a superstar. He never finished his last film, *Giant*, costarring Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson; it was completed without him following his death.

Like his celluloid image, Dean liked to live on the dangerous, thrill-seeking edge. He loved fast sports cars and motorcycles; his favorite hobby was racing. He was an adroit driver and performed well behind the wheel, taking top honors in his first several races.

For most of the summer of 1955, Dean was on location near Marfa, Texas, for *Giant*. His employer, Warner Brothers, fearful of a mishap, forbade him from racing during production. He did not, however, stop driving pell-mell on his own.

After the location filming, Dean returned to Los Angeles, where his eye was caught by a new sports car, a silver-gray 1955 Porsche Spyder. Thinking it would make a fine entry in upcoming races at Salinas on October 1, he bought it, but on the condition that one of Porsche's top mechanics, Rolf Wuetherich, accompany him as mechanic to all races. The deal was struck.

Although Dean was thrilled with the car—he puckishly named it the "Little Bastard"—several of his friends allegedly were not. Ursula Andress, Alec Guinness, Nick Adams (star of the TV series *The Rebel*) and George Bar-

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Investigative Files

Paranormal Lincoln



Joe Nickell

His guiding of the United States through its greatest crisis and his subsequent martyrdom have caused the shadow of the tall, sixteenth president to loom still larger. Called "the most mythic of all American presidents" (Cohen 1989, 7), Abraham **Lincoln** has long been credited by paranormalists with supernatural powers. These include an early mirror-vision, prophetic dreams, and spiritualistic phenomena. His **ghost**, some say, even haunts the White House.¹

In the Looking Glass

Many people have portrayed **Lincoln** as a man given to belief in omens—particularly those relating to his assassination. An incident often cited in this regard occurred at his home in Springfield, Illinois. **Lincoln** related it to a few friends and associates, including Noah Brooks in 1864. Brooks shared it with the readers of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* the following July—three months after Lincoln's death—recounting the president's story "as nearly as possible in his own words":

It was just after my election in 1860. . . . I was well tired out, and went home to rest, throwing myself down on a lounge in my chamber. Opposite where I lay was a bureau, with a swinging-glass upon it—[and here he got up and placed furniture to illustrate the position]—and, looking in that glass, I saw myself reflected, nearly at full length; but my face, I noticed, had two separate and distinct images, the tip of the nose of one being about three inches from the tip of the other. I was a little bothered, perhaps startled, and got up and looked in the glass, but the illusion vanished. On lying down again I saw it a second time—plainer, if possible, than before; and then I noticed that one of the faces was a little paler, say five shades, than the other. I got up and the thing melted away, and I went off and, in the

excitement of the hour, forgot all about it-nearly, but not quite, for the thing would once in a while come up, and give me a little pang, as though something uncomfortable had happened. When I went home I told my wife about it, and a few days after I tried the experiment again, when [with a laugh], sure enough, the thing came again; but I never succeeded in bringing the **ghost** back after that, though I once tried very industriously to show it to my wife, who was worried about it somewhat. She thought it was "a sign" that I was to be elected to a second term of office, and that the paleness of one of the faces was an omen that I should not see life through the last term. (Brooks 1865, 224-225)

The same story was told by Ward Hill Lamon in his book, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*. Lamon was a friend of Lincoln's, a fearless man who accompanied him to Washington for his protection, being given the special title, Marshal of the District of Columbia. In discussing the matter of the double image in the mirror, Lamon stated: "Mr. **Lincoln** more than once told me that he could not explain this phenomenon" and "that he had tried to reproduce the double reflection at the Executive Mansion, but without success." In Lamon's account it was not Mrs. **Lincoln** but the president himself who thought the "ghostly" image foretold "that death would overtake him" before the end of his second term (Lamon 1995, 111-112).

In recent years, paranormalists have gotten hold of Lincoln's anecdote and offered their own interpretations. Hans Holzer states that "What the President saw was a brief 'out of the body experience,' or astral projection," meaning "that the bonds between conscious mind and the unconscious are temporarily loosened and that the inner or true self has quickly slipped out" (Holzer 1995, 65).

Such an explanation utterly fails to fit the evidence. **Lincoln** did not describe an out-of-body experience-a feeling of being outside one's physical self-but, according to Brooks (1865, 225), "The President, with his usual good sense, saw nothing in all this but an optical illusion."

The nature of this optical illusion can be deduced from the circumstances. The double image was of Lincoln's face only, could be seen in a particular mirror but not others, and vanished and reappeared with respect to a certain vantage point. Taken together, these details are corroborative evidence that the mirror was the cause. An ordinary mirror can produce a slight double-image effect due to light reflecting off the front of the glass as well as off the silvering on the back. In modern mirrors this is usually not noticeable, and the shift in the image is slight in any event. But in the case of old mirrors, whose glass plates "were generally imperfect" (Cescinsky 1931), a distinct double image might be produced, like that shown in Figure 1. (Unfortunately, the actual mirror-topped bureau **Lincoln** described is no longer to be found at the **Lincoln** Home National Historic Site, much of the furniture having been dispersed in earlier years [Suits 1998].)



Figure 1. Double image of author (and of photographer Rob McElroy) reproduces a curious effect experienced by Abraham **Lincoln** in 1860 and thought by Mrs. **Lincoln** to be an omen.

Dreams of Death

The mirror incident sets the stage for claims of even more emphatically premonitory experiences. These were dreams **Lincoln** reportedly had that foretold dramatic events. One he related to his cabinet on April 14, 1865. The previous night he had dreamed he was in some mysterious boat, he said, "sailing toward a dark and indefinite shore." In another version it was of "a ship sailing rapidly" (Lewis 1973, 290). When **Lincoln** was assassinated only hours later, the dream was seen as weirdly prophetic. The story grew in the retellings which spread, says Lloyd Lewis in *Myths After Lincoln* (1973, 291) "around the world."

In fact, **Lincoln** had not thought the dream presaged his death. He had actually mentioned it in reply to General Grant, his guest that Good Friday afternoon, who had expressed worries about General Sherman's fate in North Carolina. **Lincoln** felt that Sherman would be victorious because, he said, the dream had often come to him prior to significant events in the war. According to Lewis (1973, 290): "For a President of the United States, in a time like the Civil War, to dream that he was sailing rapidly to an unseen shore was certainly not remarkable. Most of his waking hours, across four years, were spent in wondering where the Ship of State was going."

Lincoln supposedly described an even more ominous dream to Mrs. **Lincoln**, not long before his assassination, then again to Ward Hill Lamon (1895, 115-116) who reconstructed Lincoln's words as follows:

About ten days ago, I retired very late. I had been up waiting for important dispatches from the front. I could not have been long in bed when I fell into a slumber, for I was weary. I soon began to dream. 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. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. . . . Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, 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. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, some gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. "Who is dead in the White House?" I demanded of one of the soldiers. "The President," was his answer; "he was killed by an assassin!" Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd, which awoke me from my dream. I slept no more that night; and although it was only a dream, I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since.

Lamon's account may be true, although he has been criticized for having "fed the fire of superstition that people were kindling about the name of **Lincoln**" (Lewis 1973, 294). In fact, however, Lamon had added a sequel to the story which is invariably ignored:

Once the President alluded to this terrible dream with some show of playful humor. "Hill," said he, "your apprehension of harm to me from some hidden enemy is downright foolishness. For a long time you have been trying to keep somebody-the Lord knows who-from killing me. Don't you see how it will turn out? In this dream it was not me, but some other fellow, that was killed. It seems that this ghostly assassin tried his hand on some one else." (Lamon 1895, 116-117)

In any event, that **Lincoln** should have dreamed of assassination-even his own-can scarcely be termed remarkable. Prior to his first inauguration in 1861, Pinkerton detectives had smuggled **Lincoln** into Washington at night to avoid a change of trains in Baltimore where an assassination plot had been uncovered (Neely 1982, 16-17). **Lincoln** had subsequently "received untold number of death threats" (St. George 1990, 66), and on one occasion had a hole shot through his top hat by a would-be assassin (Neely 1982, 282).

Among the Spirits

Lamon (1895, 120) insisted that **Lincoln** "was no dabbler in divination-astrology, horoscopy, prophecy, ghostly lore, or witcheries of any sort." Yet soon after his death spiritualists sought to use **Lincoln** to give respectability to their practices by citing the occasions he had permitted seances in the White House, as well as to claim contact with his own departed spirit. The extent of Lincoln's involvement with spiritualism has been much debated.

Actually, it was Mrs. **Lincoln** who was involved with spiritualists. She turned to them in her bereavement over the death of Willie, the Lincolns' beloved eleven-year-old son who died of "bilious fever" in 1862. One such spiritualist medium was Henrietta "Nettie" Colburn (1841-1892). Mary Todd **Lincoln** met her at a "circle" or seance at the Georgetown home of Cranstoun Laurie, chief clerk of the post office in Washington. On one occasion, a seance with Nettie was being held in the White House's Red Parlor when the president stumbled upon the group and watched with curiosity. Another time he

accompanied Mary to a seance at the Lauries' home. At least one biographer has suggested that Lincoln's marginal involvement may have stemmed from a desire "to protect his gullible wife" (Temple 1995, 199).

That was exactly what **Lincoln** did with regard to a trickster named Charles J. Colchester. Styling himself "Lord Colchester," he conducted seances wherein "spirit rappings" were produced. A concerned **Lincoln** asked Dr. Joseph Henry (1797-1878), the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, for his advice about Colchester, whereupon Dr. Henry invited the medium to give a demonstration at his office. The scientist determined that the sounds came from Colchester and he suspected trickery. Later, Noah Brooks caught the medium cheating and warned Colchester not to return to the Executive Mansion (Temple 1995, 200). **Lincoln** himself was not interested in seances, but, according to Lloyd Lewis's *Myths After Lincoln* (1973, 301), "In these dark hocus-pocuses Mrs. **Lincoln** found comfort, and **Lincoln** let them go on for a time, careless of whether the intellectuals of the capital thought him addle-pated or no."

Spectral Visits

It is ironic that **Lincoln** did not believe in spiritualism, since his **ghost** is now reportedly so active. Although his Springfield home is decidedly unhaunted, according to curator Linda Suits (1998), who says neither she nor anyone she knows has had a ghostly encounter there, other places compete for attention. There have been numerous reported sightings of Lincoln's **ghost** at his tomb in Springfield as well as at Fort Monroe in Virginia and, in Washington, at both the White House and Ford's Theater (where **Lincoln** was assassinated) (Cohen 1989, 11; Winer and Osborn 1979, 125; Jones 1996, 15).

Understandably, perhaps, it is the White House that seems to receive the most attention-especially the "**Lincoln** Bedroom" (which, in Lincoln's time, was actually his office). The notion that his **ghost** frequents the stately rooms and corridors doubtless began with Mrs. Lincoln's post-assassination seances and it was probably given impetus by a figurative remark made by President Theodore Roosevelt (who served from 1901-1909): "I think of **Lincoln**, shambling, homely, with his strong, sad, deeply-furrowed face, all the time. I see him in the different rooms and in the halls" (St. George 1990, 84). Such feelings are still common and may trigger sightings among imaginative people and those predisposed to see ghosts. The first person to report actually seeing Lincoln's **ghost** was Grace Coolidge (First Lady from 1923 to 1929), who saw his tall figure looking out an Oval Office window (Scott and Norman 1991, 74; Cohen 1989, 10). During her tenure, guests were lodged in the "**Lincoln** bedroom" and "Every newcomer was informed of the legend that when the great light over the front door was dimmed for the night the **ghost** of Abraham **Lincoln** was supposed to pace silently to and fro on the North Porch" (Ross 1962, 109).

Among subsequent **Lincoln** sightings was one by Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands (who had a prior interest in spiritualism). She was a guest of

President Franklin D. Roosevelt when she heard a knock during the night at her bedroom door. Opening it, the drowsy queen saw the figure of Abraham **Lincoln** looking down at her, causing her to swoon (Ronan 1974, 40; Cohen 1989, 10). Religious leader Norman Vincent Peale claimed that a prominent actor (whom he would not name) had been a White House guest when he awoke to Lincoln's voice pleading for help. The actor sat up to see "the lanky form of **Lincoln** prostrate on the floor in prayer, arms outstretched with fingers digging into the carpet" (Winer and Osborn 1979, 135). And President Reagan's daughter Maureen said she had occasionally seen Lincoln's **ghost**- "an aura, sometimes red, sometimes orange"-during the night. So had her husband Dennis Revell (Caroli 1992, 39).

These examples are typical of many **ghost** sightings that are due to common "waking dreams," an experience that occurs when someone is just going to sleep or waking up and perceives ghosts, lights, or other strange imagery (Nickell 1995, 41, 46). Other apparitions are most likely to be seen when one is tired, daydreaming, performing routine chores, or is otherwise in a reverie or dissociative state (see e.g., Mackenzie 1982). This may help explain sightings such as one by Eleanor Roosevelt's secretary, who passed by the **Lincoln** Bedroom one day and was frightened to see the ghostly president sitting on the bed and pulling on his boots (Alexander 1998, 43; Jones 1996, 8).

Once the notion of a **ghost** is affixed to a place, almost anything-an unexplained noise, mechanical malfunction, misplaced object, or the like-can be added to the lore. For example, on one of my appearances on "The Michael **Reagan** Show," Mike told me an anecdote about his father and their dog, Rex. According to President **Reagan**, when passing the **Lincoln** Bedroom Rex would often bark but would refuse to enter the room (**Reagan** 1998; see also Caroli 1992, 39, and Alexander 1998, 45). Mike related the story as more of a novelty than as proof of a supernatural occurrence. (President Reagan's daughter, Patti Davis, once asked her father if he had ever seen Lincoln's **ghost**. "No," my father answered-a bit sadly, I thought. "I haven't seen him yet. But I do believe he's here" [Davis 1995].) Neither the Bushes nor, as far as they could tell, their dog Millie ever saw the **ghost** of **Lincoln**, or indeed any of the other historical specters who are occasionally reported (Alexander 1998, 45).

Not all of the reports of Lincoln's **ghost**, however, have featured apparitions. In earlier times there were frequent reports of sounds that were variously interpreted, some describing them as heavy footfalls (Cohen 1989, 10; Jones 1996, 8), others as knockings at the door, with Lincoln's **ghost** typically being thought responsible. Not only Queen Wilhelmina but also "Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Herbert Hoover and Harry Truman all said they heard mysterious rappings, often at their bedroom doors" (Scott and Norman 1991, 74). However, ghosthunter Hans Holzer (1995, 70) concedes: "President Truman, a skeptic, decided that the noises had to be due to 'natural' causes, such as the dangerous settling of the floors. He ordered the White House completely rebuilt, and perhaps this was a good thing: It would surely have

collapsed soon after, according to the architect, General Edgerton."

For all his greatness Abraham **Lincoln** was of course human. Among his foibles were a tendency to melancholy, a sense of fatalism, and a touch of superstition from his frontier upbringing. However, as this investigation demonstrates, neither his life nor his death offers proof of paranormal or supernatural occurrences-not his very human apprehensions of mortality, not his wife's sad seduction into spiritualism, and not the evidence, even if expressed as anecdotes of ghostly apparitions, that his great legacy lives on.

Acknowledgments

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Note

1. Among other implicitly paranormal claims relating to **Lincoln** are the "mysterious coincidences" that are often claimed between him and President John F. Kennedy. See Martin Gardner, *The Magic Numbers of Dr. Matrix* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1985) and Bruce Martin, "Coincidence: Remarkable or Random?" *Skeptical Inquirer* 22(5) (September/October 1998): 23-28.

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