

Lincoln considered the best, but he was unappreciated | Star News

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Abraham Lincoln is often considered the best U.S. president in polls taken of historians, according to Dave Jones, a historian and frequent guest speaker at the Elk River Activity Center.

"But he was largely unappreciated by Americans at the time of his death," he said at a program last month called "The Lincoln Assassination: A Fragile Time."

Jones says studying the Civil War is like trying to take a drink from a fire hose, explaining, "there's so much history here, you could study it for a lifetime and still learn something new."

He said he was drawn to study Lincoln's assassination when he realized how the plot very nearly toppled our government.

"I was fascinated that we survived this event as a nation," he said. "Few civil wars have ended with reconciliation and re-unionization in the history of the world, and ours very nearly didn't, either. Our republic was held together by a hair's breadth."

Jones then introduced his audience to John Wilkes Booth, a famous Northern stage actor of the time with Southern sympathies who originally planned to kidnap Lincoln and ransom him for the release of captured Southern troops held in Northern concentration camps.

Booth hoped this would revitalize the Confederacy, but the day before the planned kidnapping Lincoln gave an impromptu speech suggesting he might offer voting rights to freed slaves.

Jones said this so infuriated Booth that he was heard to say of Lincoln, "That's the last speech he'll ever make." The kidnapping plot had turned to murder.

Emotions in the North and South during this time were raw with the results of the war. So far, the dead accounted for one-quarter of all military-aged males in the South and 2 percent of the total U.S. population, making it the worst war casualty-wise in U.S. history.

"None of the other members of Booth's plot were comfortable with murder," Jones said, "but Booth convinced them it was necessary and expanded the assassination to include Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward on the fateful night of April 14, 1865."

While Booth successfully assassinated President Lincoln, George Atzerodt, the man chosen to assassinate Johnson, lost his nerve and spent the night getting drunk while another man in the plot, Lewis Powell, succeeded only in severely wounding the secretary of state.

The vice president was so enraged by Lincoln's murder that he wanted revenge on the Confederacy. Jones said the assassination made reconstruction of the South much more painful and that in the years following Lincoln's death, many people in the North and South came to believe that the country's reconciliation might have been smoother had Lincoln overseen it.

"Had the other two assassins been successful, the U.S. government might have been decapitated," Jones concluded, "resulting in such chaos in the North that the country might have fallen apart because protocols for presidential succession beyond the president and vice president were limited. We narrowly escaped losing the Union."

Speaker Jones has addressed thousands

Jones recently added "The Lincoln Assassination: A Fragile Time" to the other historical topics on which he speaks widely, which include "JFK Assassination: The Mystery and Legend" and "Apollo: Why and How We Went to the Moon."

He has spoken to more than 5,000 people across the state and has been to Elk River numerous times, but he visited the Elk River Activity Center to discuss Lincoln for the first time.

To invite Dave Jones to speak on one of his historical topics at an event, center, or school, visit his website at www.djhistoricalpresentations.weebly.com.