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## The 2016 Fortenbaugh Lecture: Individual Responses to Lincoln's Assassination

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# The 2016 Fortenbaugh Lecture: Individual Responses to Lincoln's Assassination

## **Abstract**

Every year on November 19th, the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, a distinguished scholar of the Civil War Era is invited to speak as part of the Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture and present an aspect of the Civil War in a format that the general public can understand. This year, the 55th annual Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture was delivered by Dr. Martha Hodes of New York University. Dr. Hodes' lecture was based on her book *Mourning Lincoln* and argued, based on personal primary sources from the immediate aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, that Americans' responses were by no means consistent. Not everyone mourned, nor was everyone totally focused on the assassination, partly because there were differing visions for the nation's future.

[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Gettysburg College, Civil War, Lincoln, assassination

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

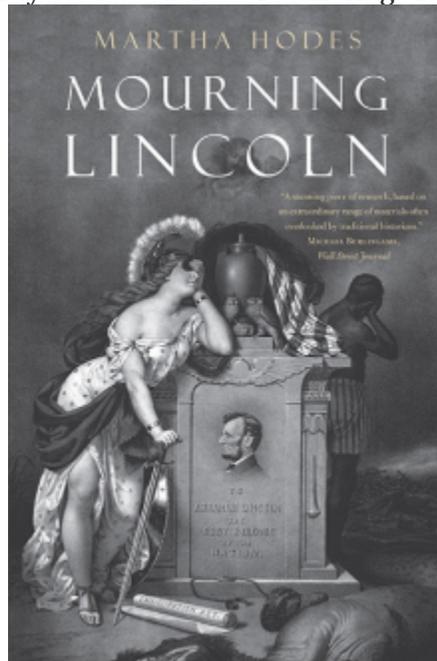
## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### The 2016 Fortenbaugh Lecture: Individual Responses to Lincoln's Assassination

By Hannah Christensen '17

Every year on November 19<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, a distinguished scholar of the Civil War Era is invited to speak as part of the Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture and present an aspect of the Civil War in a format that the general public can understand. This year, the 55<sup>th</sup> annual Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture was delivered by Dr. Martha Hodes of New York University. Dr. Hodes' lecture was based on her book *Mourning Lincoln* and argued, based on personal primary sources from the immediate aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, that Americans' responses were by no means consistent. Not everyone mourned, nor was everyone totally focused on the assassination, partly because there were differing visions for the nation's future.



Martha Hodes' book *Mourning Lincoln*. Photo courtesy of Yale University Press

At the beginning of her lecture, Dr. Hodes explained that she has always mentioned Lincoln's assassination in the course she teaches on the Civil War, but she did not become more interested in the event until after 9/11. She said it made her think about "how people respond to transformative events on the scale of everyday life." She began to wonder how individual people responded to such a

transformative event as Abraham Lincoln's assassination and came up with the idea of writing a book about it because no one had written about the assassination using individuals' own, private words.

In the process of researching, Hodes explained that these personal responses helped illuminate "the roots of a long aftermath" and a variety of other responses to the assassination. People at the time of the assassination would talk about a united response. They would claim that the whole nation was in mourning, when in reality—as Dr. Hodes explained—that was not true. Lincoln's fellow Republicans and African-Americans as a whole mourned his death, but white southerners and northern "copperheads" praised it. The aftermath of Lincoln's assassination was no time of unity.



Dr. Martha Hodes. Photo courtesy of nyu.edu

As Hodes explained it, Lincoln's assassination sparked a new round of questions: what would happen to the Emancipation Proclamation? What would Andrew Johnson do as president? What would happen next? Supporters of Lincoln were shocked and in a state of grief. Former slaves in particular thought the news was a lie. The rules of decorum and emotional control went out the window. African

Americans in particular feared for their futures; they did not want to go back to slavery. In addition to this grief and fear, Dr. Hodes explained, many—soldiers in particular—even wanted to go back to war.

White southerners, on the other hand, were thrilled. During the war, they had called Lincoln every name in the book, and now they were smiling with satisfaction. When they did grieve, it was over what they had lost in the war, not over Lincoln's death. However, many of these Confederate sympathizers kept their satisfaction to themselves and pretended to mourn in public because of occupying Union troops. Lincoln's old political opponents, the "copperheads," meanwhile, were pleased as well. Some had disliked Lincoln for ending slavery, while others just disliked him as a Republican. In general though, they laughed and celebrated, with the exception of a few who did mourn.

Many on both sides turned to faith for answers. They wondered how such an event could possibly be God's will, like their ministers told them. Those who mourned Lincoln also wondered who or what was to blame. Dr. Hodes explained that they definitely blamed John Wilkes Booth, but many also faulted Confederate leadership and even the institution of slavery itself.

In her lecture, Dr. Hodes also touched on what she referred to as "one of the findings that challenged me the most." Many held onto the idea that the world ground to a halt after Lincoln's assassination, but that was simply not true. The assassination did not interrupt everyday goings-on. Dr. Hodes explained that many of the sources she read had references to the assassination; Lincoln's funeral train from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois; and Lincoln's funeral squeezed in among more normal things like playing ball, enjoying time with a sweetheart, or even working in an account book. Dr. Hodes explained that this was partially due to a desire to find a way forward.

Dr. Hodes also explained that all of these reactions, from grief and fear to glee and confrontations with everyday life, were connected to visions for the nation's future. Lincoln's supporters saw a future of equality, while his opponents saw a future with continued African American subordination, where they themselves would regain their political rights. His supporters used him and his accomplishments to justify moving forward, while his opponents saw an opportunity to get what they wanted from Lincoln's successor. Dr. Hodes concluded her lecture by saying that, while the future had not been quite as bright as Lincoln's supporters had hoped, Lincoln's assassination had enabled them to "invoke his name in the quest for equality." She explained that the same still holds true today: people turn to the Civil War and its aftermath in order to make sense of our present and future.

Sweeping generalizations about historical events are rarely true when one looks closely at how people at the time saw things, but Dr. Hodes managed to accomplish this with Lincoln's assassination in her lecture (and her book). Instead of looking at public proclamations and accounts, she looks at individuals' words in the immediate aftermath of the event. By doing so, she points out something

very fascinating about the responses to Lincoln's assassination: there were competing visions of the nation's future through opposite responses to the event and "the persistence of everyday life." Dr. Hodes' lecture provided a closer look at a pivotal event in the nation's history and, as complicated as her research may have been, she made it easy to understand that there was no unanimity of response to Lincoln's assassination.

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