

One Very Dark Night

One very dark night in late February, a significant, albeit unsettling, series of events unfolded. On February 22, as President-elect Abraham Lincoln made a brief stop in Leaman Place, Pennsylvania, en route to Harrisburg, he was met by an enthusiastic crowd eager to hear from him. Although Lincoln's voice was hoarse, he managed to humorously introduce his wife, sparking laughter from the audience, which lightened the mood for a brief moment. This public appearance, being his last before his secretive journey to Washington, set the tone for heightened fears regarding his safety. The looming uncertainty surrounding his path, particularly through Baltimore, became an overwhelming source of anxiety, as hints of possible danger were shared by Secretary Hay. The tension surrounding the inauguration was tangible, with many speculating that it might be marred by a potential threat.

Meanwhile, in Washington, the atmosphere was equally charged with tension. Nearly seven hundred soldiers under the command of General Scott occupied the streets of the capital, armed and alert. While some doubted the necessity of such a heavy military presence, President Buchanan insisted on their deployment, fearing regret should anything happen without them. The nation's capital, bracing for Lincoln's arrival, buzzed with the looming sense of danger, as the political climate deteriorated and unrest spread. The military presence signaled that Washington, D.C., was preparing for what might be a very different kind of reception for the incoming president.

That Friday night, in the midst of these turbulent times, an alarming incident involving Republican congressman Charles H. Van Wyck, a vocal anti-slavery advocate, added to the growing sense of unease. Van Wyck, who had already incited considerable anger among the Southern constituents with his earlier remarks, particularly his labeling of Southern men as cowards, had been subject to numerous death threats. Armed for

protection, he remained resolute in his position, even as tensions flared further, and his anti-slavery stance continued to spark outrage among his critics. As he walked near the Capitol later that night, Van Wyck was ambushed by three assailants, one of whom stabbed him with a bowie knife. Miraculously, the blow was absorbed by his heavy overcoat and a folded Congressional Globe, sparing his life.

Despite the brutal attack, Van Wyck's determination and quick reflexes allowed him to fight back. After being struck unconscious, he managed to shoot one assailant and knock down another before collapsing. The attack, though horrifying, marked a disturbing escalation in violence, particularly against outspoken figures like Van Wyck. The New-York Times reported on the event as a warning sign, highlighting the dangerous climate developing in the nation. It raised significant concerns regarding the safety of those who were vocal in their opposition to slavery and pointed to the increasingly violent political environment. The attack on Van Wyck was not just a random act of aggression; it signaled the rising tensions and potential for conflict in a nation on the brink of war, where free speech and personal safety were being severely compromised.

In the aftermath, the political implications of the attack resonated deeply, stirring questions about the state of discourse in a divided country. The situation was not only reflective of the escalating violence but also of the broader divisions between North and South. As the country moved closer to a decisive and likely violent confrontation, the attack underscored how fragile the political climate had become. Van Wyck's survival became a symbol of resilience amidst the rising tide of hostility, but it also served as a stark reminder of the dangers faced by those standing firm in their beliefs during an era of increasing polarization and turmoil.