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Introduction

Abraham Lincoln remains one of this nation's most beloved and revered presidents. His elevation to iconic status came quickly after he was killed prematurely by John Wilkes Booth in April 1865. The man known variously as the Great Emancipator, the Savior of the Union, and Father Abraham did not live to see the end of the war that preserved the nation he held so dear.

It is—and has been—hard to separate the “real” Lincoln from the deified image most historians and biographers have crafted since his death in 1865. Essayist Edmund Wilson once wrote, “There has undoubtedly been written about him more romantic and sentimental rubbish than any other American figure, with the possible exception of Edgar Allen Poe.”¹ Other scholars have noted that Lincoln will forever be separated from history by the circumstances of his assassination. Even Lincoln's most even-handed biographers, such as David Donald, have portrayed a man destined for greatness. How refreshing it is—and how different—to view Lincoln through the eyes of a bright, sophisticated sixteen-year-old girl. Julia Taft Bayne's *Tad Lincoln's Father* is a delightful, albeit sentimentalized, look at President and Mrs. Lincoln and their beloved sons, Willie and Tad, during the early years of Lincoln's presidency. The picture we see is of doting parents who refuse to let secession and a bloody civil war interfere with their sons' childhood.

Julia Taft Bayne was the vivacious daughter of Judge Horatio N.

1. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 115.

Taft, who had managed to have President James Buchanan appoint him chief of the U.S. Patent Office. Although Taft was a native New Yorker and had served the Empire State in a number of official positions, he quickly became friends with other members of the very pro-Southern Buchanan administration. Perhaps Taft was a doughface, a term used to describe Northerners who had strong Southern leanings and often pro-slavery sentiments. The Tafts did have two black servants, slaves who had been leased from their owner in Virginia, who, according to Julia, had nothing but disdain for the abolitionists. And Julia Taft makes mention of the numerous Southern senators who begged her father to cast his lot with the South once secession loomed on the horizon. Taft's position within the Patent Office and his friendship with Buchanan and other luminaries assured the family of a high profile within the nation's capital.

Julia relished her encounters with President Buchanan and his official hostess, Harriet Lane, his niece. She admitted they probably did not know her name, but her attendance at the prestigious Madame Smith's French School gave her a type of status other young girls may have lacked. Indeed, Julia Taft frequently darted through the White House grounds on her way to and from school. Often she had the good fortune to bump into the president and Miss Lane. They conversed with her in French and obviously saw nothing unusual about the fact young Julia used the White House as a shortcut to school and home. For Julia Taft, James Buchanan was the perfect gentleman every chief executive should be. Obviously she regretted the change in administrations when Abraham Lincoln became President on March 4, 1861.

Yet Julia Taft would quickly find herself again a guest of the president after Lincoln was inaugurated. Shortly after those festivities, Julia and her younger brothers, Horatio Nelson Jr., known as Bud, and Halsey Cook Taft, called Holly, were invited to the White House to play with Willie and Tad Lincoln. Mary Lincoln, who had met Julia's parents, knew that the Taft boys, at twelve and eight, were almost the same ages as her two sons. Having left their playmates behind in Springfield, Illinois, the young Lincoln boys were lonely for fun. Thus began the frequent visits of Bud, Holly, and Julia to the White House, visits that lasted until Willie's death in 1862.

Julia Taft Bayne's book, published more than sixty years after her initial meeting with Lincoln, does have elements of nostalgia and perhaps even embellishment. Still, the book is a charming depiction of Lincoln as father, an image often overlooked by scholars who focus on Lincoln as the war president. Julia herself makes no apologies for the picture she paints of the sixteenth president. As she says early in her work, "The Lincoln I knew and who lives in my memory with photographic distinctness has not the qualities of the Civil War President as presented in history." Those portrayals, as Julia acknowledges, are "heroic," if not saintly, and perpetuate the Lincoln legend. To Julia Taft, Abraham Lincoln was a tall, avuncular man who delighted in messing her curls, calling her "Jewly," and teasing her about being a "fibbertigibbet."

The Washington DC of 1861 was a decidedly rough and unfinished town that seemed to many observers Southern in tone and orientation. With a population of about sixty thousand, the nation's capital seemed, despite the increase in inhabitants, little different from the city John Adams moved to in 1797 when he became the first president to live in the White House. Locals decried the stench that hung like a thick pall over the city every summer. Located on the Potomac flats and situated near a sewage dump, the Executive Mansion was not immune from the smells nor the diseases—typhoid, smallpox, and malaria—that invaded the capital on a regular basis. European visitors found the White House a large, unremarkable building that seemed ill-suited to house the leader of the young republic. Americans, however, delighted in the open nature of the President's house. The doors were never locked, and visitors could be found wandering about at all hours, even in the first family's private quarters. It was the "people's house," and as Julia Taft demonstrates throughout the pages of her memoir, the average citizen availed himself of the opportunity to visit the president. It was not unusual for Lincoln to find himself besieged by office-seekers as he made his way to his bedroom, only to find more tourists admiring the curtains in his study. This marked lack of security may shock and perhaps amuse those of us familiar with twenty-first-century concerns. It would take repeated death threats to get the president even an armed guard on the front lawn.

Julia Taft hints at the great redecorating Mary Lincoln would undertake during Lincoln's first term. Determined to make her mark on

Washington society and the presidency, Mary Lincoln embarked upon an ambitious plan to refit and refurbish what had become a rather shabby residence. Frequent shopping sprees to New York helped her realize her goal. New carpets, rich wallpaper, and luxurious upholstery, not to mention new china and crystal, transformed the Executive Mansion into a beautiful showpiece, but at an exorbitantly high cost to the Lincolns and Congress. Visitors to the Lincolns' levees could not help but notice the changes Mary Lincoln's rich taste effected. Again attesting to the lack of security, many visitors, official and otherwise, left the White House with "souvenirs": pieces of drapery or carpet snipped while the first couple was either not present or observing.

Mary Lincoln's fondness for shopping also caught Julia's attention. On one occasion, Mrs. Lincoln discovered that the bonnet strings of Mrs. Taft's hat were the deep color of purple she desired. Mary Lincoln politely demanded to have them. Non-plussed, Mrs. Taft agreed, though she was less than pleased. To Julia, this demonstrated that Mary Lincoln always received what she wanted regardless of what others might want or think. This was the Mary Lincoln Washington matrons deplored as coarse and unladylike, more accustomed to the frontier than refined Washington society; this was the woman they gossiped about and pilloried at every chance.

That side of Mary Lincoln, the harsh, uncompromising woman who was disliked by the capital's elite ladies, appears only once in Taft's book. Instead, Julia Taft portrays a first lady decidedly different from the often shrewish matron Lincoln's biographers have described. Julia Taft states several times that she and Mary Lincoln formed a deep and affectionate friendship and that the president's wife allowed young Julia to speak up and have opinions that even Julia's mother would not allow. Julia notes, as have other scholars, that the Lincolns adored their sons but always wished to have a daughter. One gets the sense while reading of Julia's visits to the White House that she became for the Lincolns that missing daughter, or at the very least, a much loved niece.

To be sure, Abraham and Mary Lincoln were devoted parents. Relatives and visitors alike commented upon the wild and often unruly natures of Willie and Tad. Apparently, neither son was ever disciplined, a point that often enraged cabinet members, whose meetings were

interrupted by Willie and Tad bursting into the room beating on drums. Many of the boys' antics tried Julia's patience, apparent where she notes editorially that young people were supposed to act thus and so, and the Lincoln boys never did. Readers gain a delightful look at a White House where children were put first: as Julia Taft notes, "If there was any motto or slogan of the White House during the early years of the Lincolns' occupancy it was this: 'Let the children have a good time.'" And they did. The Taft and Lincoln boys staged a circus and charged five cents admission; they built forts and played soldiers; they were often found frolicking with Tad's goats, Nako and Nannie, or with the dogs or pony that well-wishers gave them. Mischief often involved the president. As Julia recalls, she entered the study to find the four youngsters pinning down the president and begging her to help keep him down. On another occasion, Julia Taft recounts that Tad's doll, dressed in the gaudy uniform of a Zouave, was repeatedly executed for being asleep on watch. After the firing squad, he was accorded a military burial, much to the annoyance of the White House gardener, who found his flower beds dug up. Further misadventures in the garden were briefly averted when Tad garnered a pardon for the chronically negligent doll from his father. Julia Taft, while mortified that Tad would interrupt his father for such a silly request, benefited from the outcome: Tad gave her the pardon "papers" the president had signed. Such gaiety and high jinks must have helped to ease the increasingly heavy burdens Lincoln bore as the war continued and the pressures mounted.

The war that defined Lincoln's presidency appears at times in Julia Taft's book, but it never takes center stage. In a sense, it is strange she does not talk more about the war and the strain it placed on the president. We learn that after the firing on Fort Sumter, Washington was relatively undefended. Occasionally, Julia Taft mentions that her father and several of his friends believed Lincoln was destined for greatness, obviously more a reflection of the passage of time than of the reality in 1861. Lincoln's struggles with his cabinet, especially with Secretary of War Simon Cameron and later Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, are not mentioned, nor is Lincoln's frustration with Gen. George B. McClellan and his failure to use the brilliant army he had created to

attack the rebels. When the war does intrude into Julia Taft's memoir, her passages about it are simple and straightforward. She describes the arrival of the Sixth Massachusetts in Washington after its bloody visit to Baltimore, but again we notice she has a privileged vantage point to see it: she watches the review for the president from a window in the White House. Julia Taft also entertains the reader with accounts of her family and their socializing with members of the Seventh New York and of her visits to federal camps near the capital. Her reminiscences, while they speak of seeing wounded men, lack the drama and suffering other primary accounts convey. Perhaps Julia Taft, at sixteen, was unaware how horrific the war was becoming; maybe both her parents and the Lincolns tried to keep the devastating reality of things away from their young and certainly impressionable children. Regardless, the war, while it consumed Lincoln and his advisors, appears to have been kept as far from the young people as possible.

The Tafts' relationship with the Lincolns helped keep the Taft family in Washington and gainfully employed. After Judge Taft lost his job at the Patent Office, Lincoln intervened to get him placed in another position, so the family could remain in the capital. Throughout the period, Tad and Willie were frequent visitors at the Tafts' residence. Too, Bud and Holly would stay at the White House when Mary Lincoln was away on one of her many shopping excursions. The Lincoln boys also frequented the Tafts' Fourth Street Presbyterian Church (instead of New York Avenue Presbyterian, where the elder Lincolns worshipped), where all four boys attended Sunday school together. Finally, Tad and Willie and Bud and Holly were all tutored by the same teacher, usually at the White House. Thanks to the closeness of the family relationship, Julia had the opportunity to visit the White House whenever her brothers did. On several occasions that allowed her to meet many distinguished individuals, including the inventor of the *USS Monitor*, John Ericsson.

Some of Julia's accounts do not entirely agree with the historical record. For example, she relates that Lincoln visited General McClellan and took Bud and Willie with him. Bud told Julia that McClellan was out when they arrived, but they waited for his return. According to Bud, McClellan returned home, ignored the president and his young charges,

and went to bed. Lincoln did visit McClellan on a fairly regular basis, if only to get the hesitant army commander to attack. But he usually took his secretary, John Hay, and the secretary of state, William H. Seward, not the irrepressible Bud and Willie. Julia Taft also relates that Lincoln appointed her as “assistant surgeon” to the Twenty-seventh New York regiment. Given the strictures against women serving even as nurses, especially young girls of sixteen, one wonders just what Julia did. She later remarks she served more as a secretary than a nurse and that the formidable Dorothea Dix, who chose Union nurses based on a strict policy, refused to consider Julia Taft for a position. Still, the arrival of wounded in ever-growing numbers found Julia pressed into service at her half brother’s hospital, tending to the casualties. Here, one sees that Julia Taft’s experiences were almost too real for the young girl. The blood and smells made her quite ill.

Perhaps the most poignant elements of Julia Taft’s book relate to her descriptions of Abraham Lincoln. We are presented with a very human individual, always willing to chat and listen to the young people gathered about him. Initially Julia was shy of the tall president and acknowledged that she shrank from his kisses. But over time, a warm and loving relationship bloomed between Lincoln and the teenager. Julia is quick to point out how well-behaved and polite she was, and her comments on how her deportment varies from the time she penned her book (probably the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the book was initially published) again highlight a more genteel and formal time. But through her eyes, Lincoln is a husband and a father, devoted to his family and ever willing to make time for them.

Julia Taft also benefited from the Lincolns’ library. A voracious reader who was forbidden to read novels at home, she found a refuge at the White House. Often while she read, she was joined by Lincoln, whom she describes as stretching his long frame on a chair in the study while he peruses the family Bible. Although not a terribly religious man, at least in the way of organized religion, the president was an avid reader and preferred Biblical stories. Over time, his close reading would be reflected in his speeches, most notably in those given at the Gettysburg cemetery dedication in November 1863 and at his second inaugural in March 1865.

Julia Taft's memoir also portrays a president and first lady who, while always available for their children, made a point of visiting and tending to the thousands of wounded Union soldiers that inundated the federal capital with distressing regularity. They would journey to hospitals, taking with them delicacies from the White House kitchen, to help ease the loneliness and pain of numerous federal soldiers. Mary Lincoln in particular liked to write notes to the young men's mothers to assure them of good care or of a proper burial. Such personal concern obviously touched Julia Taft and again underscored the humanity and goodness of the president and his wife.

The Taft children's idyllic life at the White House came to an abrupt end in February 1862. The capital, always prey to epidemics, was again ravaged by typhoid. During that winter, both Tad and Willie Lincoln became ill. According to Julia Taft, Willie called out for Bud, and the young Taft boy stayed at Willie's side throughout his long battle with the disease. Determined that a long-planned social event meant to alleviate some of Washington's gloom would take place, Mary and Abraham Lincoln spent the evening of February 5, 1862, alternately meeting guests and sitting with their seriously ill son. On February 20, Willie succumbed to typhoid fever. The president and his wife were grief-stricken. Mary Lincoln became almost incapacitated and grew so hysterical there were concerns for her sanity. As evidence of the depth of her mourning, Mary Lincoln asked that Bud and Holly Taft not attend the funeral, for they reminded her too much of the favorite son she had lost.

After Willie died, Julia, Bud, and Holly Taft were no longer invited to the White House. Apparently, their relationship with Willie Lincoln stirred up too many painful memories for Mrs. Lincoln. Soon the Taft children left Washington to attend school in the North. Julia Taft saw Mary Lincoln one more time, in 1864, at a White House reception. She was, according to her memory, warmly received, but that would be the last time Julia Taft would visit the Executive Mansion.

The Taft-Lincoln friendship experienced one last chapter. Julia Taft's half brother was a surgeon who happened to be in Ford's Theatre enjoying the play *Our American Cousin* the night Lincoln was assassinated. Once again, a Taft was close to the Lincolns during a trying, tragic

time. Dr. Charles Taft accompanied the mortally wounded president to the house across the street, where he was taken after John Wilkes Booth shot him in the head. Dr. Taft stayed with the president all night and into the next morning of April 15, 1865, when Lincoln finally died. Julia Taft's father made a point of visiting Mary Lincoln before she left Washington. While paying his respects to the widow, Mary Lincoln gave him an ornate funeral badge sent from France as a memento. That badge, along with photographs Lincoln himself had given to Julia, remained treasures of the time the Taft children visited and played with the Lincoln boys.

Tad Lincoln's Father does not purport to be an accurate or scholarly account of the first two years the Lincolns spent in the White House. Julia Taft freely admits that her book is written from happy memories, with "no attempt at historical exactitude." Several of her vignettes do not ring true, and her portrait of her family's black servants smacks of the stereotypical jolly sambos. Her talk of being a crack shot, one honored by Berdan's sharpshooters, also seems a bit embellished with the benefit of hindsight. Nonetheless, there is no sense in the book that Julia Taft was trying to revise or re-make history. Instead, she reminisces about a delightful time in her young life when she was allowed the good fortune of being friends with the president and his family. Her recollections of egg rolling on the White House lawn on Easter Monday and of helping Mary Lincoln try on new frocks speak of a less complicated era when the Executive Mansion was always open and ordinary Americans could meet their president. It is noteworthy that the events she describes took place against the backdrop of the bloodiest war America ever fought. Julia Taft's book allows us to see one of the nation's most revered and admired presidents in a new light. We can see Abraham Lincoln in the place he loved most, his home, with the people dearest to him, his wife and young sons.