

Episode 113: A Place Worse Than Hell

Week of December 2 – 8, 1862

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“If there is a worse place than hell,” Lincoln told a visitor in December 1862, “I am in it.” The fall state and congressional elections had not gone well. Radical Republicans, angered that the President had remained loyal to McClellan so long, failed to campaign wholeheartedly, leaving the field to the Democrats, who accused the administration of incompetence on the battlefield and of unconstitutional abuse of its power, both in curbing dissent and in daring to speak of freeing slaves.

Asked for his reaction to all this bad news, Lincoln said he felt like the boy who stubbed his toe – he was too big to cry, and it hurt too much to laugh.

“The fact is that the country is done for unless something is done at once.....” said Senator Zachariah Chandler. “The President is a weak man, too weak for the occasion, and those fool or traitor generals are wasting time and yet more precious blood in indecisive battles and delays.” Rumors circulated that Lincoln would resign in favor of Vice President Hannibal Hamlin, and that McClellan would somehow be recalled to Washington to assume dictatorial power.

This attack on his leadership by men of his own party at such a critical time deeply distressed Lincoln: “We are now on the brink of destruction,” he told an aide. “It appears to me that the Almighty is against us.”

Generally the public press supported the President. The Washington Chronicle saw “a perfect balance of thoroughly sound faculties, great calmness of temper, firmness of purpose, supreme moral principle and intense patriotism”.

The Buffalo Express praised Lincoln for his “remarkable moderation and freedom from passionate bitterness”. But the Liverpool (England) Post observed “no great leader in such a contest ever stood so little chance of being the subject of hero worship as Abraham Lincoln. His long arms and legs, his grotesque figure, made him too easy to caricature and ridicule. But, his inner qualities – faithfulness, honesty, resolution, insight, humour, and courage – go a long way to make a hero.”

The Civil War historian, Shelby Foote says of Lincoln: A very mysterious man. He’s got so many sides to him. The curious thing about Lincoln to me is that he could remove himself from himself, as if he were looking at himself. It’s a very strange, very eerie thing and highly intelligent. Such a simple thing to say, but Lincoln’s been so smothered with stories of his compassion that people forget what a highly intelligent man he was. And almost everything he did was calculated for effect. He knew exactly how to do it.

My favorite story that Lincoln told was he described a Union general out in front of his troops on horseback. And they were having a review and the horse got to kicking and prancing and jerking around, and somehow or another, the horse got his rear foot hooked in the stirrup and the general looked down at this ridiculous situation and said to the horse, “If you’re going to get on, I’ll get off.”

His literary skill is almost unbelievable. Many Americans were ashamed of his style, which someone said “had the bark on.” He wrote American and people thought American was a language all right. It could be used for vaudeville skits or jokes, but they didn’t think it belonged in state papers. And what Lincoln wrote was American, same kind of American that Mark Twain was to write later.