Lincoln and the war that never ended

By Benjamin J. Dueholm
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Yesterday flags stood at half mast to mark the 150th anniversary of the death of Abraham Lincoln. It was, to borrow the man's own phrase, altogether fitting and proper that we should do this in recognition of our greatest president and his tragic end.

I'm one of those Lincoln admirers who takes his death as hard as if it had happened in my lifetime. The years have only made him a grander figure, a Shakespearean protagonist gone too soon. It does not help that he was replaced by the execrable Andrew Johnson. We are accustomed to thinking of Lincoln's assassination as the sorrowful abbreviation of his own story—of his own attempt to bring to fruition his great speeches promising a new birth of freedom and charity for all.

But this year, with renewed civil-rights activism emerging around the issue of police killings of African Americans, I found myself thinking more and more about Lincoln's assassin. John Wilkes Booth was, unsurprisingly, a violent white supremacist and a partisan of the Southern cause. Yet his killing of the president has rarely been labeled as what it was: an act of political terror. It was a signal moment in the war that followed the war—the hideous and ignoble battle to halt and, where possible, reverse the actual and potential gains to racial equality promised in the Civil War itself.

This war after the war began before Booth's fateful attack. You could date it to Nathan Bedford Forrest's massacre of captured black and white Union troops at Fort Pillow in 1864, an event that suggested ominously how freed slaves would be treated first in war and eventually in peace. It continued with Forrest's own post-war terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan. In South Carolina, the Klan's efforts were complemented by the work of Wade Hampton III, founder of the Red Shirts terror organization that violently wrested control of the state from biracial Reconstruction-era leadership. Statues of this terrorist leader still stand in the U.S. Capitol building and on the grounds of the South Carolina capitol.

The 12 years of organized terror that followed Lincoln's death didn't end with the full subordination of the freedmen to whites, either. That subordination would be reinforced by a structure of violence expressed in everything from official laws to paramilitary terrorism to random outbursts, for decade after decade. It's hard to say when it ended. It's hard to say it *has* ended, when one sees the images of a black man shot in the back by a white police officer only a short drive up the interstate from one of South Carolina's 47 different streets named for Wade Hampton, or when one reads the e-mails circulated in the Ferguson, Missouri police department, e-mails that would doubtless have prompted a chuckle from John Wilkes Booth.

In light of everything that followed, Booth's murder of Lincoln was not so much the dying spasm of the Confederate Lost Cause as it was the declaration of a new and shadowy war. That war's battle lines would eventually stretch as far as the southern California suburbs, the Chicago bungalow belt, and the racially cleansed "sundown towns" of the upper Midwest. It's a war that would likely have happened even if Lincoln had not sent his guard home that night at the theater, though it's possible that its contours and its longterm success would have been very different. But it's also a bigger tragedy than anything that befell a Shakespearean hero.