

Lincoln's final journey

When General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia in early April of 1865, most Northerners considered the bloody "war between the states" all but over, and spontaneous celebrations broke out in several Northern cities. But then, in an instant, celebrations turned to mourning when President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theater in Washington D.C.

One of the consequences of that national tragedy was one of this country's first applications of risk management during the threat of a terrorist attack.

Immediately after the assassination, government officials hoped that the President would be buried in Washington D.C. But his wife, Mary Lincoln, disagreed and informed officials that she wanted her husband to be buried in the town that the Lincoln family had called home before Abraham became President: Springfield, Illinois.

The decision to transport the remains of the President to Springfield required that a new set of circumstances be addressed: 1) fighting had not yet completely ended in all areas of the country; 2) John Wilkes Booth, the Presidential assassin and the leader of a group of conspirators that attempted to murder other members of the Cabinet on the night Lincoln was shot, was still on the loose and the target of amanhunt

; and, 3) the journey itself would have to be made on a potentially hazardous collection of railroads and barges.

Government officials were concerned that a group of rebel troops or Confederate sympathizers might organize a terrorist attack on the funeral train and perhaps even try to steal the President's body. Secretary of War Edward Stanton realized that such an event would cause unimaginable embarrassment to the Union government and could even rekindle the flames of war.

Stanton assigned responsibility for the safety of the funeral train to General Daniel C. McCallum, the general manager of the United States Military Railroads, and he began to work with leading railroad officials to plan the logistics of the President's final journey.

In assessing the risk, the presidents of the various railroads thought the greatest threat of attack could come when the train was moving from city to city, rather than at the many funeral ceremonies planned in major cities along the route where thousands of federal troops would be in attendance.

They developed a logistical plan called the Special Order to regulate the transportation of the remains of President Lincoln. The order declared the funeral train and the railroads as military property, listed the route and the scheduled stops that the train would make, and established the operating and security procedures that would be put in place for the 20-day journey.

While the operating and security procedures to be followed were military orders issued from Washington, civilian railroad employees would be responsible for their practical implementation along the route. Each of the railroads, however, approached the issue of security a bit differently. Each of the timetables that

railroads used to communicate special operating instructions or procedures to employees contained different orders.

For example, some railroad timetables, like that of the Cleveland & Erie Railroad, contained some, but not all, of the operational security procedures of the original Special Order. And others, like that of the New York Central Railroad, did not contain any of the procedures from the Special Order.

Considering that each railroad would be under a national spotlight, the inconsistency of the operating and security instructions was surprising. This did not mean that security was lax, however. Railroad operation was, by its very nature, a dangerous business and as such, railroad employees were already strict practitioners of risk management. The typical railroad employee handbook of the time contained extensive information from operating instructions to reputation issues to baggage handling instructions. And as stated in the Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Transportation Department of the Pennsylvania Railroad for 1864, all railroad employees were reminded that "in all cases of doubt or uncertainty, take the safe course and run no risks."

So with that edict in mind, the Lincoln funeral train was able to complete its journey without incident and the President was safely laid to rest in Springfield. When forced by circumstance to operate under a terrorist threat, the railroads met the challenge.

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