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DISUNION

Cry Havoc

By John Andrews and Dwight Pitcaithley February 19, 2011 6:57 pm

Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

[TAGS

]A century and a half ago, as Lincoln was preparing to assume the office to which he'd been elected in November 1860, Congress was vigorously debating the issues that were tearing a nation asunder. A sense of impending doom was palpable, with delegates from the Deep South convinced that the incoming administration was eager to deprive them of inalienable rights, and delegates from the North insisting that such fears were groundless.

Many of the elected officials who took part in these deliberations quoted Lord Byron, John Milton and other poets to buttress their arguments. The author who surfaced most frequently, however, was William Shakespeare, a source of acknowledged wisdom whose influence rivaled holy writ. Sen. Andrew Johnson of Tennessee exemplified this pattern when he asked those who were contemplating "revolution" to consider whether it is "not better to 'Bear those ills we have, / Than fly to others that we know not of,'" a quotation from the third act of "Hamlet" – and this from a man who never experienced a single day of formal education. Shakespeare's words not only permeated the Civil War-era political debates, but helped shape them as well.

The "Sweet Swan of Avon" was all the rage in 19th-century America. Indeed, as scholars like Esther Cloudman Dunn, Lawrence Levine, Charles H. Shattuck and Kim C. Sturgess have demonstrated, he had become, in effect, an American playwright, at home on the range and in frontier settlements as much as in the drawing rooms of Boston and Savannah. At a time when England was still regarded as an oppressive empire to be excoriated in endless Fourth of July addresses, Shakespeare found welcome as a writer who seemed to reflect New World values, a prophetic genius whose language, in the opinion of authorities like Noah Webster and Richard Grant White, was more faithfully preserved in the hills of Appalachia than in the houses of Parliament. His dramas were staples of popular entertainment, familiar even to semi-literate audiences, and passages from familiar texts were so devoutly recited in schools of the period that they could be burlesqued in the saloons of Gold Rush boomtowns long before Mark Twain sent them up in "Huckleberry Finn."

In his own love for the era's most prestigious repository of cultural treasures, Lincoln was typical of his fellow citizens. He often attended performances of Shakespeare during his tenure at the White House, and he kept associates up late discussing his favorite gems from "Richard II," the "Henry VI" trilogy and other works. In a famous letter to actor James Henry Hackett, he confided that "some of Shakespeare's plays I have never read, while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are 'Lear,' 'Richard III,' 'Henry VIII,' 'Hamlet' and especially 'Macbeth.' I think nothing equals 'Macbeth.'" Interestingly, that tragedy contains one of the earliest uses of the word "assassination," and on the same day that two generals were meeting at Appomattox Court House in April 1865 Lincoln was reflecting on a soliloquy in which the title character describes Duncan, the ruler he is about to slay, as a saintly figure "So clear in his great office, that his virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd against / The deep damnation of his taking off."

As one might expect in a society that prized sermons, lectures and debates as public entertainment, a good orator was expected to be conversant not only with the titles that Lincoln and others singled out for special praise, but with Shakespeare's more obscure work as well. It's anything but surprising, then, that excerpts from

more than a dozen of his classics made their way into the Congressional Globe during secession winter, a number of them several times over.

Sen. John A. Gurley of Ohio adapted a line from "The Tempest" in his assertion that "when the question comes up of fidelity to this Union, and when the government is in danger, we of the West will never stop to talk about names. We will overleap all party lines. We will, if need be, sink all party names 'Deeper than did plummet ever sound.' "

Speaking to the "mental madness" of the hour and responding to Democratic claims of Republican absolutism, Rep. Emory B. Pottle of New York quoted from the 1860 Chicago platform, reiterating that his party had no plans to interfere with slavery in the South but opposed any extension of it to the western territories. Drawing from the first act of "Othello," he insisted that "the very head and front of our offending / Hath this extent, no more." Meanwhile, Rep. Roscoe Conkling of New York noted: "The cotton statistics of the world are full of instructive meaning to those who base their calculations on the supposition that American slave-raised cotton is to be perpetually king. The figures point to a time when this restless monarch, goaded to new usurpations by the 'weird sisters' avarice, ambition and secession, may have reason to groan in the soliloquy of a guilty king: 'Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, / And put a barren scepter in my gripe, / Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand, / No son of mine succeeding" – lines from Lincoln's favorite play.

Rep. Edward J. Morris of Pennsylvania observed that "such has been the blighting effect of secession on our national reputation that it may be said of the Republic, as Anthony said of Caesar, in his funeral oration in the forum: 'But yesterday, the word of Caesar might / Have stood against the world; now lies he there, / And none so poor to do him reverence.'"

On the other side of the question, Sen. Louis T. Wigfall of Texas invoked some of the most inflammatory lines from "Hamlet": "I say that I would dissolve this Union . . . I would fracture it, splinter it into more fragments than gunpowder would blow glass, before I would live in a government in which I was not the equal of any other white man in the country. . . . 'That drop of blood that's calm proclaims us bastard; /

Cries “cuckold” to our father; brands the harlot / Even here, between the chaste unsmirched brows / Of our true mothers.’”

But the most ominous reference to Shakespeare appeared in remarks that Jefferson Davis delivered on Jan. 10, 1861. The previous day a special convention in his state had voted to follow South Carolina, which had withdrawn from the Union on Dec. 20. Warning that other jurisdictions also leaned toward secession, the senator observed that many of his colleagues were comparing themselves to Lucius Junius Brutus, a hero who had abolished monarchy and established the Roman republic in 509 B.C. This indomitable figure had become the role model for Marcus Junius Brutus in 44 B.C., and Davis assured his fellow senators that both men “would have brooked / Th’ eternal Devil to keep his state in Rome / As easily as a king.”

In a different age, politicians quoting Shakespeare might not have gotten far with voters; in Bard-mad 19th-century America, it was a sure way to win over a skeptical audience. As Davis’s words from “Julius Caesar” reverberated over the days ahead, one Southerner after another depicted Lincoln as a tyrant in waiting, hellbent on reimposing the despotism an earlier generation of patriots had sacrificed their lives to eradicate.

Shakespeare and the theater inadvertently defined the era in a different way as well. In the spring of 1865, for many in a Washington that had long yearned for something to celebrate, Appomattox signaled the end of a protracted and extraordinarily bloody conflict. But there was one portentous exception to the city’s jubilation: an implacable 26-year-old son of the actor Junius Brutus Booth.

A British tragedian who’d challenged Covent Garden’s most prominent star for theatrical hegemony before abandoning his wife and son to elope with a flower girl, the elder Booth had sailed to America in 1821 to launch a second career. He settled on a farm near Bel Air, Md., where he and Mary Ann Holmes tried to keep their domestic situation hidden while they reared a large family that would eventually include three scions who took up their progenitor’s calling. Of these the youngest and most passionate was John Wilkes, who bore the name of a London radical who’d

opposed George III and who had expressed unyielding support for a secessionist band of colonies on the western side of the Atlantic.

Like his father, John Wilkes Booth was a charismatic performer who portrayed Hamlet, Macbeth, Richard III, Romeo and other Shakespearean heroes. By the mid-1860s his older brother, Edwin, had already become an esteemed actor in cities throughout the North. A strong supporter of the Man from Illinois, he was one of Lincoln's favorite actors, and on one occasion he rescued the president's son Robert from being crushed by a train.

But of course the Booth whose destiny was to intersect most indelibly with that of our 16th commander in chief was Edwin's younger brother, who detested Lincoln and believed he was determined to reinstate monarchy. To prevent this calamity, and to try salvaging a cause that others considered lost after Confederate guns fell silent on April 9, he truncated a raucous comedy at Ford's Theatre on Good Friday, April 14, with a drama of his own devising that culminated with the Virginia motto: Sic Semper Tyrannis ("Thus Ever to Tyrants").

Five months earlier, in a November 1864 benefit that raised funds for a Shakespeare statue in Central Park, John Wilkes Booth had joined two of his siblings for a presentation of "Julius Caesar." Edwin had depicted Brutus and John had resurrected Mark Antony. But the most memorable lines of the evening belonged to Junius Brutus, their older brother, who was attired as Cassius. As the conspirators bathed their hands in a butchered protagonist's blood, it was Junius who asked "How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown?"

Twelve days after that his defining performance in the capital, as Lincoln's assassin lay fatally wounded on a farmhouse porch 60 miles south of Washington, the Union troops who'd apprehended him discovered the diary in which a desperate fugitive had complained of being 'hunted like a dog" for doing "what Brutus was honored for." As the sun rose and Booth drew his last breaths, they heard him whisper a final request: "Tell my mother I died for my country." With an appropriateness that could only have been anticipated by a visionary playwright, the

date of this culminating moment was April 26, 1865, the 301st anniversary of a little-noted christening at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon.

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