

Gideon Welles

“The Giant Sufferer”

Diary, April 14–21, 1865

A former journalist from Connecticut whom President Lincoln sometimes called “Father Neptune,” the extravagantly bearded and ludicrously bewigged Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles (1802–1878) had successfully presided over the wartime expansion and modernization of the naval service. By April 1865 Welles and Seward were the only members of Lincoln’s original cabinet remaining in the administration, serving along with Stanton and Hugh McCulloch (secretary of the treasury), James Speed (attorney general), William Dennison (postmaster general), and John P. Usher (secretary of the interior). Welles recorded in his diary his recollections of the assassination and its immediate aftermath, culminating in the departure from Washington of the funeral train that would carry Lincoln’s body back to Illinois.

I had retired to bed about half-past ten on the evening of the 14th of April, and was just getting asleep when my wife said some one was at our door. Sitting up in bed I heard some one twice call to John, my son whose sleeping room was directly over the front door. I arose at once and raised a window, when my messenger James called to me that Mr. Lincoln the President had been shot, and that Secretary Seward and his son, Assistant Secretary Frederick Seward, were assassinated. James was much alarmed and excited. I told him his story was very incoherent and improbable, that he was associating men who were not together and liable to attack at the same time. Where, I inquired, was the President when shot? James said he was at Ford’s Theatre on 10th Street. Well, said I Secretary Seward is an invalid in bed in his house on 15th Street. James said he had been there, stopped in at the house to make inquiry before alarming me.

I immediately dressed myself, and against the earnest remonstrance and appeals of my wife went directly to Mr. Seward’s. James accompanied me. As we were crossing 15th Street, I saw four or five men in earnest consultation under the lamp on the corner by St. John’s Church. Before I had got half across the street, the lamp was suddenly extinguished and the knot of persons rapidly dispersed. For a moment and but a moment I was disconcerted to find myself in darkness but recollecting that it was late and about time for the moon to rise, I proceeded on, not having lost

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five steps, merely making a pause without stopping. Hurrying forward into 15th Street I found it pretty full of people especially near the residence of Secretary Seward, where there were very many soldiers as well as citizens already gathered.

Entering the house I found the lower hall and office full of persons, and among them most of the foreign legations, all anxiously inquiring what truth there was in the horrible rumors afloat. I replied that my object in calling was to ascertain the facts. Proceeding through the hall to the stairs, I found one, and I think two of the servants there checking the crowd. They were frightened and seemed relieved to see me. I hastily asked what truth there was in the story that an assassin or assassins had entered the house and assaulted the Secretary. I was assured that it was true, and that Mr. Frederick was also badly injured. They wished me to go up, but no others. At the head of the first stairs I met the elder Mrs. Seward or her sister I think who desired me to proceed up. On reaching the third story I met Mrs. Frederick Seward who, although evidently distressed, was, under the circumstances exceedingly composed. I inquired for the Secretary's room which she pointed out—the southwest room. As I entered, I met Miss Fanny Seward with whom I exchanged a single word, and proceeded to the foot of the bed. Dr. Verdi and I think two others were there. The bed was saturated with blood. The Secretary was lying on his back, the upper part of his head covered by a cloth, which extended down over his eyes. His mouth was open, the lower jaw dropping down. I exchanged a few words in a whisper with Dr. V. Secretary Stanton who came almost simultaneously with me spoke in a louder tone. We almost immediately withdrew and went into the adjoining front room, where lay Frederick Seward upon his right side. His eyes were open but he did not move them, nor a limb, nor did he speak. Doctor White told me he was unconscious and more dangerously injured than his father.

As we descended the stairs, I asked Stanton what he had heard in regard to the President that was reliable. He said the President was shot at Ford's Theatre, that he had seen a man who was present and witnessed the occurrence. I remarked that I would go immediately to the White House. Stanton told me the President was not there but was down at the theatre. Then, said I let us go immediately there. He said that was his intention, and asked me, if I had not a carriage, to go with him.

In the lower hall we met General Meigs, whom he requested to take

charge of the house, and to clear out all who did not belong there. General Meigs requested Stanton not to go down to 10th Street, others remonstrated against his going. Stanton I thought hesitated. I remarked that I should go immediately, and I thought it his duty also. He said he should certainly go, but the remonstrants increased and gathered round him. I remarked that we were wasting time, and pressing through the crowd entered the carriage and urged Stanton, who was detained after he had placed his foot on the step. I was impatient. Stanton, as soon as he had seated himself, said the carriage was not his. I said that was no objection. He invited Meigs to go with us, and Judge Cartter of the Supreme Court mounted with the driver. At this moment Major Eckert rode up on horseback and protested vehemently against Stanton's going to 10th Street—said he had just come from there, that there were thousands of people of all sorts there and he considered it very unsafe for the Secretary of War to expose himself. I replied that I knew not where he would be safe, and the duty of both of us was to attend the President immediately. Stanton concurred. Meigs called to some soldiers to go with us, and there was one on each side of the carriage. The streets were full of people. Not only the sidewalk but the carriage-way was to some extent occupied, all or nearly all hurrying towards 10th Street. When we entered that street we found it pretty closely packed.

The President had been carried across the street from the theatre, to the house of a Mr. Peterson. We entered by ascending a flight of steps above the basement and passing through a long hall to the rear the President lay extended on a bed breathing heavily. Several surgeons were present, at least six, I should think more. Among them I was glad to observe Dr. Hall, who, however soon left. I inquired of one of the Surgeons Dr. H., I think, the true condition of the President and was told he was dead to all intents, although he might live three hours or perhaps even longer.

The giant sufferer lay extended diagonally across the bed which was not long enough for him. He had been stripped of his clothes. His large arms, which were occasionally exposed were of a size which one would scarce have expected from his spare appearance. His slow, full respiration lifted the clothes. His features were calm and striking. I had never seen them appear to better advantage than for the first hour, perhaps, that I was there. After that his right eye began to swell and became discolored.

Senator Sumner was there, I think, when I entered. If not he came

in soon after, as did Speaker Colfax, Mr. Secretary McCulloch and the other members of the Cabinet, with the exception of Mr. Seward. A double guard was stationed at the door and on the sidewalk, to repress the crowd which was excited and anxious.

The room was small and overcrowded. The surgeons and members of the Cabinet were as many as should have been in the room, but there were many more, and the hall and other rooms in the front or main house were full. One of them was occupied by Mrs. Lincoln and her attendants. Mrs. Dixon and Mrs. Kinney came about twelve o'clock. About once an hour Mrs. Lincoln would repair to the bedside of her dying husband and remain until overcome by her emotion.

A door which opened upon a porch or gallery, and the windows were kept open for fresh air. The night was dark, cloudy and damp, and about six it began to rain. I remained until then without sitting or leaving, when, there being a vacant chair at the foot of the bed, I occupied for nearly two hours, listening to the heavy groans, and witnessing the wasting life of the good and great man who was expiring before me.

About 6 A.M. a fainting sickness came over me and for the first time after entering the room, a little past eleven, I left it and the house, and took a short walk in the open air. It was a dark and gloomy morning, and rain set in before I returned to the house, some fifteen minutes. Large groups of people were gathered every few rods, all anxious and solicitous. Some one stepped forward as I passed, to inquire into the condition of the President, and to ask if there was no hope. Intense grief exhibited itself on every countenance when I replied that the President could survive but a short time. The colored people especially—and there were at this time more of them perhaps than of whites—were painfully affected.

Returning to the house, I seated myself in the back parlor where the Attorney-General and others had been engaged in taking evidence concerning the assassination. Stanton, and Speed, and Usher were there, the latter asleep on the bed—there were three or four others also in the room. While I did not feel inclined to sleep as did many, I was somewhat indisposed and had been for several days—the excitement and atmosphere from the crowded rooms oppressed me physically.

A little before seven, I went into the room where the dying President was rapidly drawing near the closing moments. His wife soon after made her last visit to him. The death struggle had begun. Robert, his son

stood at the head of the bed and bore himself well, but on two occasions gave way to overpowering grief and sobbed aloud, turning his head and leaning on the shoulder of Senator Sumner. The respiration became suspended at intervals, and at length entirely ceased at twenty-two minutes past seven.

A prayer followed from Dr. Gurley; and the Cabinet, with the exception of Mr. Seward and Mr. McCulloch immediately thereafter assembled in the back parlor, from which all other persons were excluded, and signed a letter which had been prepared by Attorney-General Speed to the Vice President, informing him of the event, and that the government devolved upon him.

Mr. Stanton proposed that Mr. Speed, as the law officer, should communicate the letter to Mr. Johnson with some other member of the Cabinet. Mr. Dennison named me. I saw that it disconcerted Stanton, who had expected and intended to be the man and to have Speed associated with him. As I was disinclined to any effort for myself personally I named Mr. McCulloch as the first in order after the Secretary of State.

I arranged with Speed with whom I rode home for a Cabinet meeting at twelve meridian at the room of the Secretary of the Treasury, in order that the government should experience no detriment, and that prompt and necessary action might be taken to assist the new Chief Magistrate in promoting the public tranquillity. We accordingly met at noon. Mr. Speed reported that the President had taken the oath which was administered by the Chief Justice, and had expressed a desire that affairs should proceed without interruption. Some discussion took place as to the propriety of an inaugural address, but the general impression was that it would be inexpedient. I was most decidedly of that opinion.

President Johnson, who was invited to be present, deported himself with gentlemanly and dignified courtesy, and on the subject of an inaugural was of the opinion that his acts would best disclose his policy. In all essentials it would be the same as that of the late President. He desired the members of the Cabinet to go forward with their duties without any interruption. Mr. Hunter, Chief Clerk of the State Department was designated to act *ad interim* as Secretary of State. I suggested Mr. Speed, but I saw it was not acceptable in certain quarters. Stanton especially expressed a hope that Hunter should be assigned to the duty.

A room for the President as an office was proposed, and Mr.

McCulloch offered the adjoining room. I named the State Department as appropriate and proper until there was a Secretary of State, or so long as the President wished, but objections arose at once. The papers of Mr. Seward would be disturbed—it would be better here, etc., etc. Stanton I saw had a purpose.

On returning to my house the morning of Saturday, I found Mrs. Welles who had been confined to the house from indisposition for a week had been twice sent for by Mrs. Lincoln and had yielded, and imprudently gone, although the weather was inclement. She remained at the Executive Mansion through the day.

For myself, wearied, shocked, exhausted but not inclined to sleep, the day passed off strangely.

On Sunday the 16th the President and Cabinet met by agreement at 10 A.M. at the Treasury. The President was half an hour behind time. Stanton was more than an hour later and brought with him papers, and had many suggestions relative to our measures before the Cabinet at our last meeting with President Lincoln. The general policy of treating the Rebels and the Rebel States was fully discussed. President Johnson is not disposed to treat treason lightly, and the chief Rebels he would punish with exemplary severity.

Stanton has divided his original plan and made the reestablishing of State government applicable to North Carolina, leaving Virginia which has a loyal government and governor, to arrange that matter of election to which I had excepted, but elaborating it for North Carolina and the other States.

Being at the War Department Sunday evening, I was detained conversing with Stanton and finally Senator Sumner came in. He was soon followed by Gooch and Dawes from Massachusetts and some two or three others—general officers also came in. Stanton took from his table in answer to an inquiry from some one, his document which had been submitted to the Cabinet and which was still a Cabinet measure.

It was evident the gentlemen were there by appointment and that I came as an intruder. Stanton did not know how to get rid of me and they supposed I was there by arrangement; I felt embarrassed and was very glad after he had read to them his first programme for Virginia, and had got about half through with the other, when a line was brought me at this time by the messenger, giving me an opportunity to leave.

On Monday the 17th I was actively engaged in bringing forward business issuing orders, and arranging for the funeral solemnities of President Lincoln. Secretary Seward and his son continue in a low condition, and Mr. Fred Seward's life is precarious.

Tuesday, 18. Details in regard to the funeral, which takes place on the 19th, occupied general attention and little else was done at the Cabinet meeting. From every part of the country comes lamentation. Every house, almost, has some drapery, especially the homes of the poor. Profuse exhibition is displayed on the public buildings and the houses of the wealthy, but the little black ribbon or strip of black cloth from the hovel of the poor negro or the impoverished white is more touching.

I have tried to write something consecutively since the horrid transactions of Friday night, but I have no heart for it, and the jottings down are mere mementos of a period, which I will try to fill up when more composed, and I have some leisure or time for the task.

Sad and painful, wearied and irksome, the few preceding incoherent pages have been written for future use, for they are fresh in my mind and may pass away with me but cannot ever be forgotten by me.

The funeral on Wednesday the 19th was imposing and sorrowful. All felt the solemnity, and sorrowed as if they had lost one of their own household. By voluntary action business was everywhere suspended, and the people crowded the streets.

The Cabinet met by arrangement in the room occupied by the President at the Treasury. We left a few minutes before meridian so as to be in the East Room at precisely twelve o'clock, being the last to enter. Others will give the details.

I rode with Stanton in the procession to the Capitol. The front of the procession reached the Capitol, it was said, before we started, and there were as many, or more who followed us. A brief prayer was made by Mr. Gurley in the rotunda, where we left the remains of the good and great man we loved so well. Returning, I left Stanton who was nervous and full of orders as usual, and I took in my carriage President Johnson and Preston King, their carriage having been crowded out of place. Coming down Pennsylvania Avenue after this long detention we met the marching procession in broad platoons all the way to the Kirkwood House on Twelfth Street.

There were no truer mourners when all were sad, than the poor

colored people who crowded the streets, joined the procession and exhibited their feelings and anxiety for the man whom they regarded as a benefactor and father. Women, as well as men, with their little children thronged the streets covering it and trouble and distress depicted on their countenances and in their bearing. The vacant holiday expression had given way to real grief. Seward, I am told sat up in bed and viewed the procession and hearse of the President, and I know his emotion. Stanton who rode with me was uneasy & left the carriage four or five times.

On the morning of Friday the 21st I went by appointment or agreement to the Capitol at 6 A.M. Stanton had agreed to call for me before six and take me in his carriage, the object being to have but few present when the remains were taken from the rotunda where they had lain in state through Thursday, and were visited and seen by many thousands. As I knew Stanton to be uncertain and in some respects unreliable, I ordered my own carriage and I wished also to take my sons with me to the last opportunity they or I would have to manifest our respect and love for the man who had been the steady and abiding friend of their father. Stanton, as I expected, was late, and then informed me he had not, as he agreed, informed Governor Dennison of our purpose. He said he had to go for another friend, and wished me to take up Governor D. Not until I had got to his house was I aware of Stanton's neglect. It was then about six. Governor D. sent me word he would be ready in three minutes. I think he was not five. Stanton I perceived did not tell me the truth about another visitor. He moved in great state himself being escorted by the cavalry corps which usually attended the President.

We reached the Capitol and entered the rotunda just as Mr. Gurley was commencing an earnest and impressive prayer. When it was concluded, the remains were removed and taken to the depot where a car and train were prepared for the commencement of the long and circuitous journey to his last earthly resting place in Springfield, in the great prairies of the West. We were, as we had intended, an hour in advance of the time, and thus avoided the crowd which before the train departed thronged the roads and depot.