

# One Very Dark Night

On February 22, Lincoln made a stop in Leaman Place, Pennsylvania, en route to Harrisburg, where a large crowd awaited him. Despite being too hoarse to speak, he humorously introduced his wife, triggering laughter from the audience. This last public appearance prior to Lincoln's secretive journey toward Washington heightened anxieties about his safety, especially regarding potential danger in Baltimore, which Secretary Hay ominously hinted at. The atmosphere was heavy with tension as people worried about the inauguration just days away.

In Washington, General Scott's soldiers, numbering nearly seven hundred, occupied the streets, armed and ready, which created an atmosphere of impending danger. While some questioned the necessity of troop deployments, President Buchanan insisted on maintaining them for protection, fearing he might regret inaction should anything happen.

As that Friday night unfolded, a significant incident took place involving Charles H. Van Wyck, a Republican congressman from New York, known for his staunch anti-slavery stance. He had already drawn the ire of Southern constituents due to a previous speech where he labeled them as cowards — a claim that triggered numerous death threats. Armed for protection, Van Wyck continued to speak out against slavery on the day Lincoln traveled to Harrisburg.

Later that night, as Van Wyck walked through a dark neighborhood near the Capitol, he was attacked by three men, one of whom stabbed him with a bowie knife. Fortunately, his heavy overcoat and a folded copy of the Congressional Globe absorbed the blow, preventing it from being fatal. In a surprising turn of events, Van Wyck fought back, managing to shoot one assailant and knock down another before being struck unconscious.

Despite the brutality of the attack, Van Wyck survived, and its political implications stirred questions over the growing violence against Republicans. The New-York Times characterized the incident as a harbinger of ominous developments facing those in the political arena, especially regarding free speech and safety for outspoken figures in a nation teetering toward conflict.