

"As the territory may be said to be its body, and its material activities its blood, so patriotism may be said to be the vital breath of a nation. When patriotism dies, the nation dies, and its resources as well as its territory go to other peoples with stronger vitality."

— John G. Nicolay

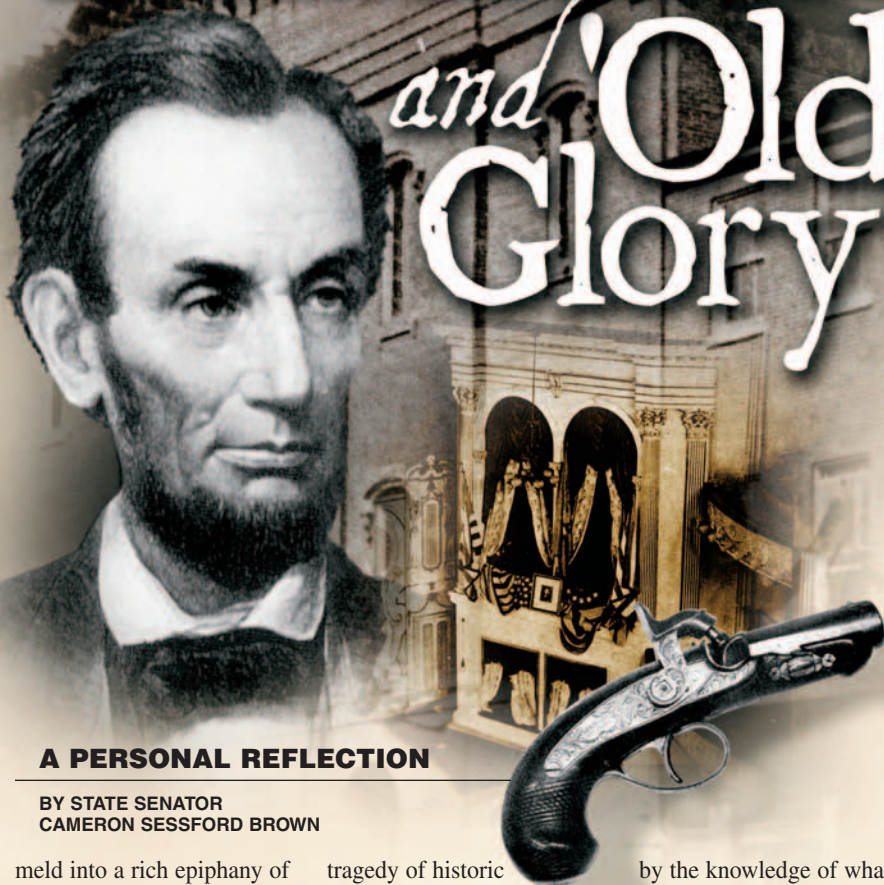
Abraham Lincoln, *The Stars and Stripes*, and our national anthem are woven into the rich tapestry of American patriotism. They are the fabric and poetry of our liberty. They inspire us to breathe deep that "vital breath" of our nation.

On the ceiling in the Michigan Senate Chamber, above my desk on the Senate floor, is the coat of arms of the state of Virginia. Both House and Senate Chambers in the Capitol Building in Lansing have decorative ceiling plates depicting the coats of arms of all fifty states. The Virginia state motto never fails to catch my eye. Translated from the Latin, it reads: *Thus Always to Tyrants*.

Looking up at the Senate ceiling in the Michigan Capitol takes me back to a spring night in my senior year of high school. My mother purchased tickets for my sister and me to attend a production of the Broadway musical *Godspell* at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., across the Potomac River from where we lived in Northern Virginia. We had balcony seats opposite the presidential box where President Lincoln was shot. It was there that a defiant John Wilkes Booth invoked the words of the Virginia motto as he made his dramatic escape after assassinating the President.

The play *Godspell* is a modern-day adaptation of the *Gospel According to St. Matthew* complete with an inner-city setting for the Passion scene. The show title is *Old English* for the word gospel, meaning *good news*. The connection between the play my sister and I were watching and the Good Friday martyrdom of our 16th president was not lost on me, and the empty box looming across the open space of the theatre could not escape my gaze. The bunting that draped the box seat where Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln once sat created a colorful backdrop of red, white and blue that stirred the most patriotic feelings of the heart. The sad history of this national shrine, the timeless message of the play, and the portent of my own pending graduation all seemed to

Abraham Lincoln and 'Old Glory'



A PERSONAL REFLECTION

BY STATE SENATOR
CAMERON SESSFORD BROWN

meld into a rich epiphany of things spiritual and deeply patriotic. Past, present and future had an unexpected nexus that night in our nation's capital, and I will never forget the enchantment of that memorable evening.

My experience at Ford's Theatre so many years ago is my window on that horrific event in 1865 when America placed a painful punctuation on the plague of civil war that for four years had robbed our nation of peace and 600,000 lives...

The date was April 14th. It was Good Friday. My great-great-great uncle, Joseph Sessford, my father's namesake, was in the ticket office at Ford's Theatre helping with the ticket collection for that night's performance. The special



JOSEPH SESSFORD

guest that evening would be the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln; the performance, *My American Cousin*; the surprise visitor, actor John Wilkes Booth.

Joseph Sessford knew the performers who would be on stage that night. He even knew the one actor who would steal center stage, the consequence of whose evil act would close the curtains at Ford's Theatre for a century. While Joseph knew the actors listed on the program for that evening, he could never have imagined the unfolding of events that would make him a witness to one of the most despicable crimes of all time.

Shortly after 10 P.M., during the second scene of the third act, a dramatic comedy turned into an unspeakable

tragedy of historic proportions. Amidst the laughter and applause of an unsuspecting audience, a pistol was fired inside the president's box mortally wounding the President of the United States. In the ticket office downstairs, Joseph Sessford heard the shot and ran to the window that faced the stage. There he saw John Wilkes Booth brandishing a long knife, shouting the Latin phrase "*Sic Semper Tyrannis*," the state motto of Virginia, and then he saw the actor hastily exit the stage. Joseph was dumbfounded by Booth's "performance."

What Joseph Sessford had not seen was the drama that took place in the presidential box just moments before when Booth entered the box and fired a derringer fatally shooting the President. Major Henry Rathbone, the President's military escort, tried to subdue the assassin, but Booth lunged at Rathbone with his knife inflicting a wound the length of the major's upper arm. Booth then leapt from the balustrade onto the stage, catching his boot spur on a flag decorating the presidential box. He fell with the balance of his weight on one foot breaking the small bone just above his left ankle. It was then that he spoke the words of the Virginia motto and fled.

Shouts that the President had been shot rang out from the president's box. Chaos and panic flooded the theatre hall below. Washington Mayor Richard Wallace helped escort the horrified audience of 1,700 outside, begging everyone to leave quickly and quietly. Shocked

by the knowledge of what had happened, Joseph now made sense of Booth's bizarre stage presence.

As smoke from the actor's derringer drifted from the shadows of the upper gallery, the emergency response got underway. Army surgeon Charles A. Leale was one of the first to attend to the wounded President. Among others, he would be joined by stage manager Thomas Gourlay and Laura Keane, star of the night's performance. They found the President with his head fallen forward, eyes closed, his body held upright in his chair by a frantic and distraught Mrs. Lincoln. The President was placed on the floor and examined by Dr. Leale. The prognosis was grim. A wound to the back of Mr. Lincoln's head was the entry point for a bullet now lodged in the President's brain.

Returning Mr. Lincoln to the White House would be too risky. He could not survive the rigors of travel. Unresponsive, the President lay stretched out on the box floor without a cushion for his head. In an act that had more symbolism than he could have sensed at the moment, Thomas Gourlay reached for a flag in the presidential box and gathered it under the President's head. A crimson stain now mingled with the crimson stripes of the 36-star flag, creating a poignant, yet fitting embrace for the nation's 16th president who for so long presided over the shedding of so much blood. Abraham Lincoln's moving elegy at Gettysburg now took on a prophetic cast that would add *The Great Emancipator* him-

self to the roster of the dead as he "gave the last full measure of devotion" with the blood of a martyr on the fabric of our democracy.

The dark hours of the night gave way to the light of a new day. At 7:22 A.M. on April 15th, the end came. In a small bedroom in the house of William Petersen, across the street from Ford's Theatre, Abraham Lincoln breathed his last, a final victim of the Union cause he so ardently championed.

Plans commenced to move the President's body from the Petersen house to the White House. During the long vigil of the previous night, doctors had removed the President's clothes. In death, Mr. Lincoln's modesty would be preserved by no more suitable a shroud than the very emblem of the Republic itself. The President's body would be conveyed to the White House wrapped in the American flag.

Like so many stories about *The Stars and Stripes*, this story evokes an impassioned respect for America's banner of liberty- "*Old Glory*," star spangled in a field of blue, and striped red and white. Devotion to the American ideals of liberty and justice that our flag represents was the hallmark of the life of Abraham Lincoln. His legacy rests secure on the testament of his ultimate sacrifice symbolized by the vivid brilliance and clarity of colors that gave him comfort in the last hours of his exemplary life and clothed him in death.

*"What is that which the breeze,
o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half
conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the
morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected now
shines on the stream:
'Tis the star-spangled banner!
O long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and
the home of the brave."**

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* Excerpt from second stanza of
The Star Spangled Banner.



Senator
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Township, is
a member of
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Appropriations Committee where he is Chairman of the State Police/Military and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee, Chairman of the Agriculture Subcommittee, and Vice-Chairman of the Judiciary/Corrections Subcommittee. He earned a Master of Public Administration degree from Western Michigan University, and has a BA in History from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He also attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA.