

Joan Cummins: Every day at President Lincoln's Cottage, we engage with visitors in conversation on difficult topics, from slavery, to grief, to immigration. Visitors, young and old alike, come here from next door and from around the globe.

Callie Hawkins: And occasionally, we get asked a question on a tour that stops us in our tracks, one we wish we could spend a half hour answering. Some of these questions on their face were innocent or simple, but on a second look they contain a level of complexity that leaves us wanting to know more. Each episode we'll investigate a single real question a visitor has asked us here.

JC: At President Lincoln's Cottage, we're storytellers, historians, and truth seekers, so we called on people whose expertise could speak to all the facets of these questions.

CH: I'm Callie Hawkins

JC: And I'm Joan Cummins, this is Q & Abe. Come on down the rabbit hole with us.

CH: Let's take that half hour now.

JC: For this episode we're exploring the question "How could Lincoln sleep if slavery was happening?" I got asked this question by a second-grade student who was on a tour of the Cottage with her class. We were in the drawing room, having just discussed what slavery was, and she was sort of stumbling over her words, but she finally got this question out, and I answered her in the moment that mostly he couldn't, and that he would pace back and forth in the middle of the night while he was thinking.

CH: You know, one of the things that really intrigued me about this question to begin with is the importance our society has put on sleep - I mean my mom always made it seem like I would surely fail whatever big exam I had the next day if I didn't get a good night's sleep. So with all of these late and all-nighters, how did Lincoln function? That led us to the idea that perhaps he was practicing biphasic sleep, something that was popular in the centuries just before Lincoln, so we started there.

JC: Biphasic sleep gained prominence as a historical phenomenon due to the work of Roger Ekirch, whose work on early modern people's sleep and nighttime activity is in his book *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past*. His research indicates that before the advent of the Industrial Revolution, people in the fifteen hundreds through the seventeen hundreds or so went to bed at dark, slept for several hours, and then woke in the middle of the night to think, pray, talk, have sex, et cetera, and then slept for several more hours until dawn. This idea gained credence through Thomas Weir's study at the National Institutes of Health, which showed a similar sleep pattern developing among people whose exposure to light was limited to ten hours per day instead of a more typical sixteen. It's now been turned into a health craze where people trying game their sleep schedules into a biphasic or even poly phasic pattern to reach maximum productivity, which seems kind of dangerous and impractical to me...

CH: Yeah, ultimately it seems unlikely that Lincoln sleep was bi phasic in this way. He was living far enough after the period Ekirch studied, and though he spent his life without electric light, there's really

no evidence to indicate that he went to bed at dusk or experienced this middle of the night meditative period.

JC: So that part's off the table, we kind of got the time period wrong in this initial foray, so we went to speak to Jonathan White, a historian and author of *Midnight in America: Darkness Sleep and Dreams During the Civil War*, for some context on how Americans were sleeping during Lincoln's time.

CH: How were people sleeping during the Civil War anyway?

Jon White: Yeah, I think the Civil War was probably the most sleepless period in American history. You have soldiers who are off fighting and they have all sorts of things that are keeping them awake, whether it's the noises of camp, or being woken up in the middle of the night because there's a false alarm or real maybe a real alarm of an attack coming from enemy soldiers, there're all sorts of things that keep people awake. And then on the home front, you have families that are very concerned about their loved ones who are off away fighting, and so they too are often facing sleeplessness because of the anxiety of being involved in this gigantic Civil War.

CH: Not to mention, people's sleep or lack thereof was having a direct impact on the war. Jon also talked to us about the poor command decisions during the war that can be attributed to lack of sleep, including a famous blunder by Ambrose Burnside.

JW: One of the things that I've - that I did some looking into with this book, is what is the importance of sleep physiologically to human beings - and this is something that nineteenth century Americans didn't understand because they don't have the science behind it, and so there are a number of battlefield blunders that have been looked at for the last fifty years as blunders, and oftentimes it's seen as poor command decisions - which they were - but I think that one of the things that scholars need to do more paying attention to is the lack of sleep that officers were having during the war. And so Burnside is famous for having ordered up just a suicidal assault at Fredericksburg Virginia in December of 1862, and wave after wave of Union soldiers went against entrenched line where the Confederates are up on a hill behind a stone wall, and they're just mowed down, and it's just a terrible defeat for the Union. And one of the things that I think played into that was that Burnside was sleep deprived going into the battle, and so that probably had an effect on his judgment, and that's something that I think scholars should look into more.

JC: We had thought from the beginning, okay being sleep deprived isn't good and affects your ability to function, and it was fascinating to have a concrete example from the Civil War. Going forward though, we had science questions. We had to find out more about exactly how sleep deprivation affects a person medically. We reached out to Dr. Richard Waldhorn who works on sleep medicine at Georgetown University.

JC: If someone is experiencing disordered sleep, for whatever reason, however they got there, what effect does that have on their ability to make decisions or their judgment?

Richard Waldhorn: Yeah it can be, it can be profound. You know, people with chronic sleep deprivation, chronic insomnia, or chronic sleep disorder like sleep apnea or something that disturbs their sleep have difficulty with alertness during the day, difficulty with concentration, difficulty with things known as divided attention tasks. So, think about driving a car, right? That's the classic example of divided attention - you got to keep your eye on the road but you also have to look at the directional thing, you have to see your speedometer, and those become much more difficult in patients with sleep deprivation. So we actually see a higher rate of automobile accidents in patients with sleep apnea, almost as much as alcohol. So it can be it can be quite disturbing to function, so serious interference with those types of tasks... But more subtle ones, people have problems with, as you mentioned decision, making and complex analysis they complain, they say, you know, I just I used to be able to read a paragraph, read something in my work and retain it, but now I can't, I'm just much much more - there's a noticeable cognitive decline associated with, with sleep deprivation and sleep disorders.

CH: Interestingly enough, Jon White mentioned that soldiers who were court martialed for falling asleep on picket duty during the Civil War were often accused of being drunk, and he says it's possible that some of that was attributable to sleep deprivation instead.

JC: So what do we know directly about how Lincoln was sleeping? I went and combed through some primary sources to try and find out. As you might imagine, they consist of lots of little tiny mentions throughout a variety of things. Jon White said this was part of his research process too, that he was combining tiny fragments, which digitization and resources like Google Books make a lot more possible for historians now than even ten years ago, but at any rate, here's what we know about how Lincoln was sleeping. His aide John Hay says that he lay awake on the sofa in the Executive Office, that Lincoln rose early and that his sleep was "light and capricious," and sometimes Lincoln would walk the halls in the middle of the night. He also says that Lincoln "did not sleep very well but that he spent a good while in bed" and he went to bed around ten or eleven o'clock, except for some nights when he was up at the War Department until 1 AM waiting for news, and that generally Lincoln was up and dressed by eight in the morning or so during summers at the Cottage. Even Joshua Speed, Lincoln's best friend as a young man, said that Lincoln was "irregular in his habits of eating and sleeping" and that when Speed asked Lincoln when he slept, Lincoln said "just when everybody else is tired out." So it kind of seems to me like Lincoln had pretty restless sleep patterns, does it seem to you like Lincoln was getting enough sleep?

CH: No, not at all, and in fact some of my favorite stories that we tell about Lincoln of his time here at the Cottage are of him appearing in his pajamas. You know, we have the story of George Borrett who, ah, came out here of late in the evening when Mrs. Lincoln was already in the bed, and the, the valet told him that the president was getting ready for bed. Lincoln then greeted Mr. Borrett and company in his pajamas - we also see images, there's a painting I'm thinking about in particular of Lincoln in his pajamas, in his bedroom, but up working, and not sleeping. And then there are accounts of Lincoln - which might be apocryphal - but they are the accounts of him in the evening pacing at the cemetery. I actually spend a lot of time thinking about Lincoln out here at the Cottage awake, maybe dressed for bed, but not actually in the bed or sleeping.

JC: I think it's fascinating to think about the middle of the night as a time where your brain is really active or your brain is running over and over and over an idea, which is something that I pick up from

the primary sources, is that it's not that he wasn't going to bed it's that he was thinking instead, you know in his pajamas et cetera...

CH: Yeah and, and plus it's really interesting to me that there's this beautiful library here at the Cottage but all of the accounts suggest that he developed the Emancipation Proclamation in an upstairs bedroom, I definitely think that there's a connection there.

JC: So we seem agreed that Lincoln is not getting enough sleep.

CH: Yeah, and that made us wonder, what does enough sleep look like? So we posed that question to Dr Waldhorn.

RW: It depends on how you function in the daytime. So if you take four five alarm clocks to wake up and you're dragging around all morning and it takes - or it takes you hours to fall asleep at night, and in combination with that you are tired in the daytime, by definition you're not getting enough sleep. So the ideal amount of sleep is someone who wakes up right before the alarm goes off and falls asleep not immediately when their head hits the pillow, but not...

JC: An hour later...

RW: Not more than twenty minutes or so later. If you're out as soon as you head hits the pillow, you're probably sleep deprived.

JC: So I spent basically the next two weeks after talking to Dr. Waldhorn being like agh, great, awesome, I'm definitely not getting enough sleep I have never in my life gotten enough sleep, and it started to feel kind of impossible to reach that state were you always wake up well rested, where you sort of gently drift off and then, you know, wake up the next morning feeling awesome. What was it like for you to learn about some of the more clinical aspects of it?

CH: Yes so I have always been an early to bed early to rise kind of person and I every night can guarantee that I'm going to get eight hours of sleep, but no matter what, I never really feel rested. And I don't know why that is. I mean I've, I've never pulled an all-nighter, I don't know if it's that, I'm prone to dreams or nightmares you know I don't, I don't know but I can't remember the last time I woke up feeling rested.

JC: For me it takes like a full ten hours of sleep to wake up feeling that way and that's just totally impractical like I can't make that happen and also do anything exciting or do the work that I care about, so that's the piece of Lincoln's experience that makes sense to me, right?

CH: Yeah.

JC: You feel you have too many important things or interesting things to do to spend all your time trying to get to well rested.

CH: We ran the primary sources on Lincoln's sleep habits by Dr. Waldhorn, and trying to avoid diagnosing something across a hundred and fifty years of distance, we wondered if there was anything similar that he sees in his present day patients.

RW: So there's a lot there that is very reminiscent of common types of insomnia. Patients who complain of, of insomnia frequently say that their mind is racing, they're working on a problem, thinking about a new issue, and that behavior interferes with what is normally supposed to happen which is that your brain supposed to unwind.

JC: This isn't something I had actually thought about, but in looking into this we came across another sort of set of common knowledge about Lincoln and his sleep, and that was several specific dreams of Lincoln's that are famous, or infamous depending on how you look at them, and my co-producer Jenny asked Jon White about them.

Jenny Phillips: What are some of the most interesting dreams that you came across as far as Lincoln?

JW: Yea, so there's two very famous ones and they both involve his assassination, and the one I believe is true and the other one I believe is, is a made-up dream. Although I have not persuaded ah, all of my fellow Lincoln historians that it's made up. [laughter]

JP: I think I know which one you're going to be talking about and that is the most famous one –

JW: Yeah...

JP: As far as he had a premonition of his own death.

JW: So the one that I think is true he reported to his Cabinet on April 14, 1865 which of course is the day that he was shot. And so they got together for Cabinet meeting at the White House, and the Secretary of War was running late, and so they are just sitting there waiting for him to arrive, and as Lincoln often did he would tell stories, and so he says something along the lines of: I had this strange dream again last night, and judging from the past he said he thought it meant good news was coming soon. And he went on to explain that he'd had this dream before every major battle most of which were Union victories and so he thought good news was coming, hopefully word from Sherman's army in North Carolina. And someone says to Lincoln, well what was the nature of this dream? And Lincoln says I'm, I was on a ship heading toward an unknown shore. Now for Lincoln as he first described it, it was a positive dream. He believed good news was coming just like good news that come in the past after he'd had this dream. He'd had it before Gettysburg, after Vicksburg, these great Union victories, but Lincoln then was shot that night, and so as the dream continued to be told, it took a very dark turn. And so even today, if you've seen the Steven Spielberg movie Lincoln, it's one of the opening scenes, and the way Spielberg depicts it, is a very dark lonely experience...

JC: Spooky...

JW: That's right –

JP: A cryptic dream, right?

JW: That's right. And what's funny about it is, that's been an evolution. So it was originally a good, positive dream in the initial - and in the initial wake of Lincoln's assassination it was seen as sort of Lincoln has some sort of prophetic abilities, but then it turns dark. I believe that dream is true, because four people who were in the room told the story. And so we've got four different accounts of it. The funny aspect of the four different accounts is, each one of those four people puts themselves in the center of the conversation with Lincoln. [laughter] And then each one of them says, what was the nature of the dream? because they want to be connected to Lincoln in that moment. The other one, and this is the one I think, the other one you're thinking of, Lincoln allegedly had about a week or so, ten days before the assassination, where he was in the White House in his dream, and he heard all sorts of weeping, but he couldn't see anyone and he starts wandering through the White House, trying to find who's crying, doesn't see anyone, finally makes his way to the East Room and there he sees a catafalque with a coffin guarded by a soldier. And he goes up to the soldier and he says, who is dead in the White House? And the soldier says: the President, he's been shot by an assassin. And at that point there's this great burst of grief and now Lincoln can see all the people mourning in the White House and he wakes up and grabs his Bible and he just opens to random pages, and every passage he turns to is something about God sending visions or dreams to people, and so he's just really terrified by this dream. And it's an incredible story, but I don't think it's true, and the funny thing is this story has been told repeatedly in American history. Most of the major Lincoln scholars and biographers of the last hundred years have included it in their books, and so it's been everywhere. I think it's a fraud. So the source that most people cite is Lincoln's bodyguard Ward Hill Lamon. And Lamon's daughter published her father's memoirs in the 1890s after he died, and what she had done was she had gathered all of his newspaper articles telling about his experiences with Lincoln and put them into a book. So one of the beauties of being a historian today is we've got digital resources available, and you can comb through millions of pages of newspapers and books in a matter of minutes or hours in a way that would have just been impossible a generation ago. And so I started to search for words out of this dream, and I searched in newspaper databases and on Google Books, and I found reports of this dream from 1874, that's the earliest I found, and I haven't actually searched since about 2015, I should probably search again and see if anything else comes up, but I found reports from 1874 where - very short newspaper accounts of this dream then in 1880, a literary magazine in Massachusetts published a much longer account of this dream, and the only people involved were Lincoln and Mary Lincoln and one or two of his boys. So then in 1881, the story circulates more broadly in the newspapers. Ward Hill Lamon publishes it in 1887 in a newspaper, and he puts himself in the center of the story with Lincoln. This is what I think happened: I think that someone made it up in the 1870s, an anonymous literary writer thought, this is a good story, embellished it a little bit in 1880. Ward Lamon read it in the newspapers in 1881, said, this is a great story! I'd look really good in this!, published it, his daughter picked it up put it in the memoir, and then historians have been citing it ever since. So it, it makes for a great story, and I think a lot of people want to believe it's true because it makes us think, again, Lincoln has some sort of supernatural abilities, that he's prophesied his own death a week before it happens but I don't think it's a real dream.

CH: This got me thinking about how important primary sources are and also how you can't only rely on those, you have to have context too.

JC: We went back to think more deeply about our original question, and decided something was missing. There was something in the visitor's initial inquiry that was about not just how could he sleep, but how could he sleep or rest when something so terrible was happening. To help us contextualize that, we went to talk to Bonnie Martin, a licensed professional counselor who works with survivors of modern slavery, about that aspect of the question.

JC: Lincoln was not a survivor of trafficking himself, but what do you know or what is the work out there about how seeing that, or trying to work against - work to stop something like that, affects people?

Bonnie Martin: I mean I think, from what I've read of Lincoln, uh, he didn't sleep very well, and he was a very relational person, who had very deep beliefs and the spirituality side that valued human life. And so when you are someone who is witnessing - or responsible for a war - so let's just start there. Let's just start that Lincoln saw the need for our nation to go to war over something so morally reprehensible to him, and found it important enough, it so you, so you can feel this tension for Lincoln, that he cares so deeply about this issue and about the human beings who are in slavery, and at the same time he cared so deeply about the young men he was sending to war. He was in a no-win situation, people are going to die.

JC: Either way.

BM: Either way. And so you have this moral crisis where you have to sacrifice some in order to save a whole, and for him to even be somewhere like Lincoln's Cottage and watching the Civil War vets come home wounded or watching the burials happening, it - he was front and center. He was not removed. And there were so many writings, even pictures, that were coming out, you know where you could see the lashings, and the chains, and you know, the end of the, the purchasing and the buying, and the separation of families, like, as the abolitionists put to the forefront for a nation, this is what's happening, Lincoln's getting that information. And then as he is the commander in chief, he's sending off troops and they're coming back broken and wounded and dying or dead, and he's got all of that that he's carrying as well, and I would think that, that hyperarousal for him. And more in his mind, because he's not in slavery himself, and he's not on the battlefield himself, but he's carrying all of it at a, what we call like a psycho social level, where he is the one who is bearing the weight at his core, and hoping that it's going to come out with united nation. And a, and a free people. But he didn't know, and I would think that would keep them awake a lot! Because there was no guarantees, ever, and there was a lot of criticism, he was under a ton of criticism, and he was I think, I believe, just following his own moral compass. Which, ah, there's a term in the psychological field, as we study trauma, a kind of form of trauma called moral injury, where it's not just a car accident, or a fire, or an assault, but it is an event that happens where we're failing to prevent, or bearing witness to, inhumane acts, which result in the pain, suffering, or death of others.

JC: And what kind of impact does that kind of moral injury have on people's like -

BM: Yeah -

JC: Systems –

BM: Right –

JC: their daily...

JP: Yea, could you talk about the physical, the mental, and emotional impact?

BM: Let's talk about the physical, is very similar to somebody who has PTSD, and that is there, there are three domains that we look at when our body just gets flooded with stress that we cannot manage. One is kind of re-experiencing of the trauma, which would be nightmares. And many, many people re-experience their trauma in their sleep state. Which would stop somebody from sleeping, or not wanting to go to sleep, because if I lay my head to bed at night, I'm going to start dreaming about the thing, the intense suffering that I know is happening. There's, okay so there's the re-experiencing, there's a form of like, numbness that happens where you just stop finding pleasurable things that you used to find pleasurable, and you start disconnecting from life the way you used to do it, and then the last one is this, is a hyper arousal where you can, your body it no matter how tired it is, cannot find the place it needs to go in order for deep sleep to happen. And so there's a lot of just restlessness, so you can be exhausted, but the mind is racing, and the body itself, adrenaline is at higher levels, cortisol is at higher levels, and sleeplessness is absolutely a factor.

JC: That last one seems the most resonant to me with what we know about Lincoln's experience in that he's sort of like up in the middle of the night thinking and thinking and thinking and thinking and thinking...

BM: Couldn't turn it off. Right. The body's in a state of heightened arousal. And it's not just physical, it can be mental, and so, and so then the emotional aspects of moral injury in particular is that you can start feeling shame and guilt, a loss of trust in yourself and others, in government, you know, there can be just deep spiritual conflicts about the entire meaning of life when you're faced with something so profound as slavery, as a civil war, and I imagine that he was experiencing all of those things in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep.

CH: As we were unpacking all of this we ask each of our guests how they would have answered the visitor, and you can see how what Bonnie Martin described would lead to Dr. Waldhorn's answer, which was basically that he's amazed Lincoln slept at all, with the stress and everything.

JC: Jon White had something interesting to add.

JW: It's a great question, and it's a really hard question, and I think that part of what we have to realize is that Lincoln and his generation were a different time from ours, and so I think for Lincoln I, I think he was tortured at night by this question of civil war, and by the, the question of slavery, but he, he was able to ultimately craft a plan that enabled him to be successful in restoring the Union and freeing the slaves, even if it meant having the Union be his number one priority. Which for us today, we often look at and we say, Hey aren't those moral, isn't that a little backwards? Like, today we, how many of us

wake up in the morning and we're like, well I'm sure glad I live in the Union, that the Union was preserved - like, we just don't think that way. We would look, we look at the Civil War and we see clearly the moral issue was slavery, why didn't Lincoln see it that way? But I think if we can step back and put ourselves into his context, we can begin to realize that there really was a wisdom to the approach that he took. And the other thing I'd say, and this should make us uncomfortable in, in the 21st century is, we - it's easy to look at people in earlier times and see what their blinders were, right? It's hard to look at ourselves and see, what are our blinders? We have no idea what people will judge us for in a hundred fifty years, and an example I often use with my students is, there is more slavery in the world today than at any point in the history of the world, and if you enjoy commercial chocolate, or an iPhone, or designer clothes, you are benefiting from slavery, from child slavery, from adult slavery, somewhere in the world. And so it's, it's really easy for us to say, how could they have got it so wrong in the 1860s?, without looking at the plank in our own eyes and realizing that we too are living in a world with that same evil. And it's not in our face in the way that it, it was in the 1860s in people's faces, but it still is very real. And I think if we want to be really cognizant of these kinds of issues, we need to think about how we can try to bring about changes today as well.

JC: So the next question is, how can any of us sleep when slavery is happening?

CH: That's a hard one, Joan...

JC: I mean, my initial reaction when Jon White first asked us was like, well, if I don't sleep, I'm definitely not getting anything done, including whatever I might be doing to work on ending slavery, right? This sort of, very practical about it.

CH: You know, I know the, the times right now that I'm not sleeping, this is one of the things on my mind. You know, where we're getting close to our Students Opposing Slavery International Summit here at President Lincoln's Cottage and you know, I'd, I will wake up at night thinking about how can, you know, how can we plan the best experience for these high school students so that they have the greatest amount of resources to take back to their home communities, so that we can impress upon them the seriousness of this issue? You know I - and I'll admit, I kind of spiral sometimes, but it is one of the things on my mind and it's, it's a little bit overwhelming.

JC: Yeah I think I go back and forth between feeling like I have to forget about how big of a problem it is in order to be able to go to sleep and wake up slightly more rested and do something about it, and the feeling that I need to make everyone, all the time, more aware of the depth and the breadth of this issue. And that's true for me both about slavery in the present and slavery in the past.

CH: Yeah... yeah, I mean it - because it's, it's something, because for so long I feel like it is, it has been so easy to ignore slavery, past and present.

JC: Right. So I don't want anyone to ignore it, but I also know that if I spend all night not sleeping, I will be less effective -

CH: Yeah -

JC: - in working to combat it.

CH: Yeah, you can't do anything about it. It goes back to my mom... I feel like we could keep going and, and talking about this, and what occurs to me is that there might not be a single answer to this question. But, Bonnie had great insight into what asking it in the first place meant.

BM: I think not question comes from someone who is incredibly empathetic. That this child is saying, I - if I knew somebody was suffering, I couldn't sleep and I think that that's, that's what empathy does, empathy allows you to step into somebody's shoes, to the extent that you um, you will act to make changes when you know that somebody's suffering, and ah, and that's why I think Lincoln was the same way. So how could Lincoln sleep when slavery was happening? First of all I don't think he did, [laughter] and then secondly, if he did sleep, it was probably at those moments were his body just completely gave out. Because the body can only go so long –

JC: Yeah!

BM: - without having any sleep at all, so I'm sure he did get some sleep, but... cause I wouldn't be able to sleep, and that's what that student was saying, I wouldn't be able to sleep if I knew slavery was happening - who could sleep? And so I'm grateful for students like this one, because that means there's a future fighter for injustice.

JC: That's what we hope for when people visit the Cottage today, that they have the chance to reflect on the same things Lincoln was reflecting on. For me delving into this question has given me a new perspective on the incredible scope of Lincoln's work despite his stress and sleep deprivation, and another way to imagine him as human. I know what it's like to get less sleep than you know you should because you're working on something that's important to you.

CH: And as a listener, we want to encourage you to think about: what problems in the world do you care about solving? What are you willing to lose sleep in service of?

JC: This episode was produced by me, Joan Cummins, and Callie Hawkins, with assistance from Jenny Phillips. Music for Q & Abe was written, performed, and is copyrighted by Clancy Newman.

CH: Q & Abe is possible thanks to generous supporters of President Lincoln's Cottage. To support this podcast and other programming, visit lincolncottage.org.

JC: To the brave second-grader who asked the question behind this episode, we admire your unwillingness to compromise on slavery.

CH: Comments? Questions? Write to us at podcast@lincolncottage.org.

JC: President Lincoln's Cottage is a home for brave ideas. Stay curious!