

Program: Lincoln: His Views about Death, Ghosts, & Séances
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Lincoln – His views on Death, Ghosts, and Séances

Today's presenter was Dr Brian Dirck, Professor of History at Anderson University. Dr Dirck received his PhD in history from the University of Kansas and has taught for 20 years at Anderson. He did his doctoral dissertation on Lincoln and has continued to study Lincoln throughout his professional career. He has authored seven books on Lincoln. (Anecdotally, there are 15,000 books on Lincoln, more than any person with the exception of Jesus Christ.)

The summer of 1864 had the bloodiest battles and the most casualties of the Civil War. How was Lincoln able to lead the country in this time of crisis?

Lincoln had dealt with death several times. Ann Rutledge, his first romantic interest, died unexpectedly at the age of 22 in 1835. His son Eddie died in 1850 followed by the death of his son Willie in 1862. Lincoln was rumored to believe in ghosts as Spiritualism was very popular in Antebellum America.

But did he really believe in ghosts, spirits, and participate in séances? Growing up in Southern Indiana, he was taught to read and became a voracious reader. The painting "Cold, Sober Reason" depicted Lincoln reading by firelight becoming a self-educated young man. He brought a rational, cerebral and, skeptical approach. He rarely read fiction rather focusing on technical topics including math. Living in Illinois from age 21, he self-taught the course work for a law degree and passed the bar in 1837. His theme in a major speech was "Don't let emotion rule, (rather use) cold, hard reason".

His law partner, Billy Herndon (who had a more unscientific, metaphysical approach), described Lincoln as a "cold fish – thinks rather than feels".

In the Antebellum period before the Civil War, spiritualism was very popular. Connecting through séances with the dead was popularized by poets and nationally known Spiritualists. Thousands of séances were being held across the country at that time.

Did Lincoln participate? Before 1860 there is no hard evidence that he did. Lincoln, being a rational person, was very unlikely to be involved in spiritualism.

At the same time Spiritualism was raging. The Fox sisters were prime movers of the radical politics of Spiritualism which espoused abolition, free love, and feminism. They gained notoriety by claiming a connection with the dead. At the height of the Civil War, only 30% of relatives knew what happened to their missing loved ones who never returned. Spiritualism and séances offered a hope of reconnecting.

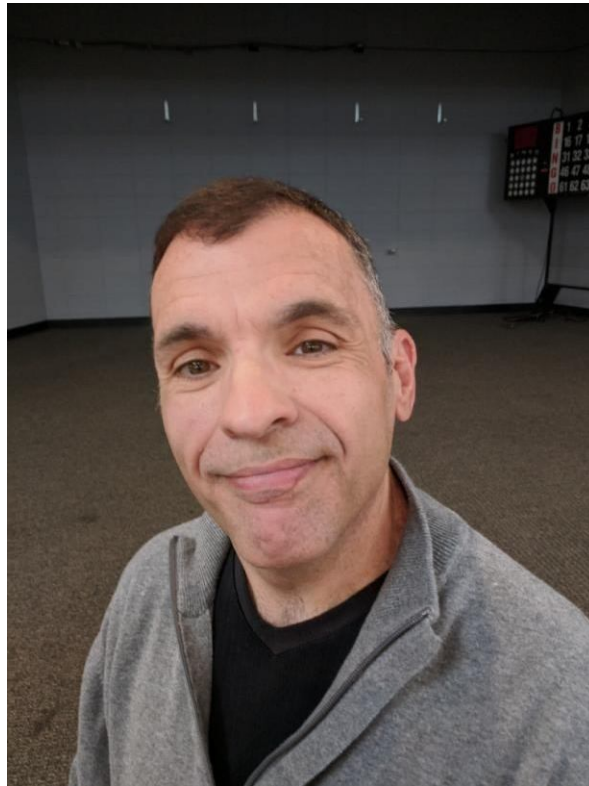
Lincoln received letters from Spiritualists urging him to use this approach to solve war issues/strategies. That is when unethical political rivals claimed Lincoln was a spiritualist and participated in séances.

It became personal when spiritualist Nettie Colburn claimed she participated in six séances in the Whitehouse during the Civil War. (This was later refuted when her dates were in conflict and there was no corroboration from many Whitehouse sources.)

Myths and Realities:

Despite claims from political rivals, no proof exists that Lincoln participated in séances or spiritualism. Indeed, it would be inconsistent with his lifelong approach of “Don’t let emotions rule, (rather use) “cold, sober reason.”

So how did he lead the country in the dire crisis of the Civil War? He most likely relied on “cold, sober reason”.



Dr. Brian Dirck