

Flashback

To know nothing of what happened before you were born
is to remain ever a child—Cicero

Unfortunate Son

If exasperated sons of nutty mothers need a patron saint, why not call on poor reviled Robert T. Lincoln, son of Abraham and Mary?

The wild Bush girls, balletic Ron Reagan, awkward Chelsea: Posterity will little note nor long remember their foibles. Yet, as the sympathetic biographer of Robert T. Lincoln complains, “It seems to be an article of faith among those who admire Abraham Lincoln that his eldest son is to be criticized at every possible point.”

Not that he didn’t deserve it. He was a cold, snobbish lad grown into a money-grubbing corporate lawyer. “Robert T. Lincoln,” sneered a contemporary, “was a man of mediocre attainments, puffed up with pride almost to the exploding point by the brilliance of his parentage, who, left to his own devices, never would have risen above the ranks of the commonplace.”

The Lincoln home was famous for its lack of discipline. The children were uncontrollable, but Father Abraham “never reproved them or gave them a frown,” said his law partner William Herndon. In the Lincoln Legend, Willie and Tad are lovably mischievous imps, while Robert is off at school, absorbing the worst traits of the upper class.

The “Prince of Rails,” as Robert was dubbed, was the classic product of a twisted American tale. The father, wanting his son to have “everything that I never had,” removed the boy from those healthy and earthy influences that had given the old man his hardihood.

Robert was hopelessly pompous. When the Lincolns entertained the newlywed Tom Thumb and his miniature bride

at the White House, Robert stayed upstairs in his room, spitting, “No, mother, I do not propose to assist in entertaining Tom Thumb. My notions of duty, perhaps, are somewhat different from yours.”

Those notions of duty did not include dodging bullets in the war his father’s government was waging. Robert was a shirker, a Harvard gentleman who sat out the war until February 1865, when he was given a résumé-building captaincy.

After the war, Robert represented Eastern insurance companies and was eventually made president of the Pullman Company, maker of sleeping cars and breaker of strikes. As a “millionaire corporation lawyer and businessman of decidedly conservative views,” writes Robert Goff, “Robert T. Lincoln does not fit well into the Lincoln legend.”

Yet Pa had profitably represented railroads, and Son was very much the faithful Republican, serving as Secretary of War and Minister to Great Britain. His chief distinction, one newspaper reported, was in possessing the largest head in the Arthur cabinet. He was also honest, no common quality in the Gilded Age GOP.

Every quadrennium brought a modest Lincoln for President boomlet, but Robert scorned the office as a “gilded prison.” In his final years he retreated to Hildene, his secluded Vermont estate, which he called, somewhat pathetically, his “ancestral home.”

Robert might have lived out his life as a forgotten First Son had he not made the serious PR blunder of committing his mother to a nuthouse.

The deaths of her husband and three of

four sons had unhinged Mary Todd Lincoln, not exactly a pillar in the best of

times. A money-obsessed hypochondriac, she lived nomadically, consulted spiritualists, kept bonds sewn into her petticoat, and bought expensive clothing and jewelry which she refused to wear.

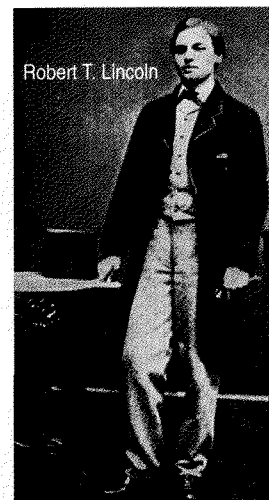
In March 1875, deluded that her hale son was deathly ill, Mary rushed to Chicago, where she wandered the halls of the Grand Pacific Hotel, partially clad, screaming at Robert, “You are going to murder me!”

Mother, meet Bedlam. Robert assembled a dream team of insanity declarers and had Mary packed off to a leafy sanitarium.

Mary was released within months, to Robert’s dismay, for he feared that she would resume her shopping sprees and seances and make “herself talked of by everybody.” Mary called Robert a “monster of mankind” whose concern was not for his mother’s sanity but her securities. The public sympathized with the grieving widow. Yes, she was an eccentric shrew, but the Fourth Commandment must be obeyed. Mary fled to Europe to escape her only surviving child.

William Herndon, who clashed with Robert on occasion, wrote, “He has the insane rage of his mother without the sense of his father. Robert Lincoln is ‘a wretch’ of a man.”

He wasn’t that bad. But for all his riches, he was forever dwarfed by the face on the penny. —Bill Kauffman

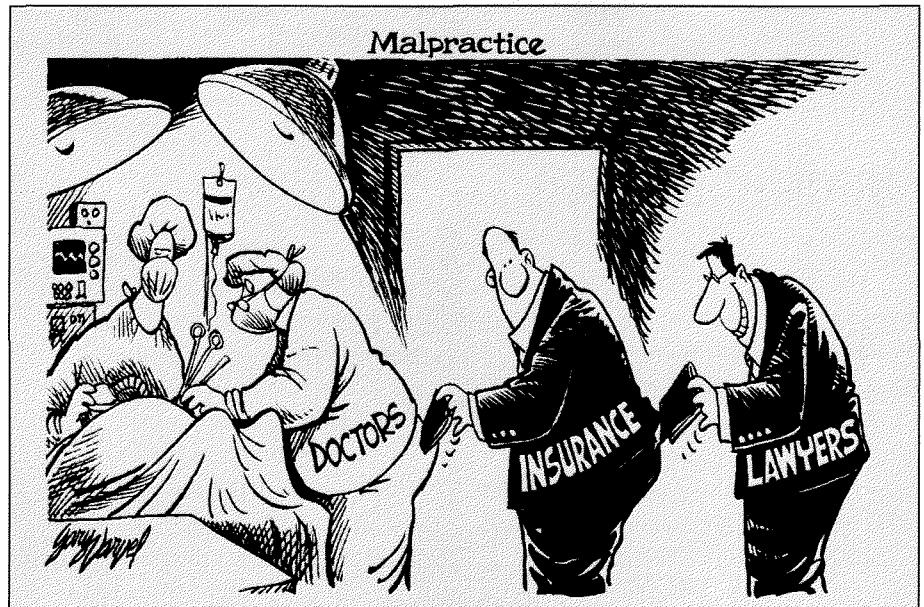


Liabile to Suffer

By Iain Murray

As a Briton, I am used to health service in crisis. Britain now spends only 6 percent of its gross domestic product on health care; America spends 13 percent. British hospital wards are forced to close regularly, doctors work such long hours they are often unable to think straight, and long-term care for chronic illnesses is of a pitifully low standard. All these are clearly marks of a health care system in crisis, and quite obviously the fault of a system of socialized medical care that demands, in the name of fairness, that only the state may pay for medical care. Americans who visit Britain and have to deal with the National Health Service are glad that the same system does not exist here.

Yet a version of it does. The result is that across large areas of the United States, the American health care system is also in crisis. A few examples should suffice to explain the magnitude of the problem. As Fox News reported in May 2002, "On May 6, most of the obstetricians in Las Vegas adopted a policy of rejecting newly pregnant women as patients, even if the woman was an existing patient." The same month, the *Washington Times* presented this warning: "You are driving through Mississippi and you develop a serious pain in your side. What do you do? If you are smart, you keep on driving until you reach the border." MSNBC reported early this year that "More than two dozen orthopedic, general and heart surgeons in West Virginia's Northern Panhandle began



30-day leaves of absence Wednesday or planned to begin leaves in the next few days." Even our sports teams are having trouble finding medical care, reported the *Miami Herald* this spring: "With malpractice rates skyrocketing, many doctors are hesitant to care for professional athletes."

The common theme is the American tort system for medical malpractice. When people feel they have been treated wrongly by a doctor, they sue to redress their grievances. Doctors are therefore concerned about their potential liabilities, which is why the issue is often described in terms of liability rather than tort. Many people are aware of the economic cost of the medical tort system. It has been estimated as costing America \$200 billion a year—roughly 2 percent of the nation's gross domestic product. Yet the tort defenders disdain such cold economic analyses. As Leo Boyle, president of the Association of Trial Lawyers of America, puts it, the tort system is all about fairness to the patient: "The negligence of bad doctors and the bad business decisions of insurance companies are not the fault of patients who are

mistreated. Yet it is injured patients who will be punished if insurers and doctors succeed in limiting justice to help solve their self-inflicted troubles."

This is a powerful argument that knocks down the economic argument in the minds of the American public. If American tort reform is to succeed, it can only do so by convincing voters that it is in the best interests of patients.

Many of the nation's experts on the issue met at a conference on "Liability and Public Health," organized by the AEI-Brookings Joint Center for Regulatory Studies and the nonpartisan legal reform body Common Good on March 4. The most interesting aspect was the focus on the clinical effects of the liability issue rather than the problem of insanely huge jury awards against physicians, which is so often the focus of the economic argument.

When doctors are afraid they will be sued, there are direct practical consequences. Vast increases in insurance premiums caused the Nevada obstetrician crisis; there was the spectacle of Mississippi doctors moving across the river to Louisiana to escape their state's tort system. Sometimes, however, the