

# TARGET: ABE LINCOLN

*For the Confederate Secret Service, It May Have Been the Ultimate Clandestine Operation*

By William A. Tidwell



IN THE YEARS after the assassination of President Lincoln, the world gradually came to accept the view that a deranged John Wilkes Booth and a small group of associates whom he had gathered in Washington were solely responsible for the murder.

But my colleagues and I believe a more logical theory—one never explicitly stated or examined

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until now—is that Booth was part of an elaborate operation by the Confederate Secret Service.

The federal government tried immediately after the assassination to prove that the Confederate leadership and their agents in Canada were responsible. But the case collapsed in a chaos of missing Confederate records, questionable and perjured testimony and the absence of Booth, who was killed by his pursuers on April 16, 1865, before he could clarify his motives and actions for history.

But we believe that Union investigators were on the right track. We arrived at this conclusion by studying thousands of documents over a 10-year period and applying the modern analytical tools of the intelligence trade. Our evidence is largely circumstantial. Basically, we are trying to tell our story by putting together many small pieces of information, each well-documented. Our theory, described and supported in much greater detail in our book, is as follows:

The Confederate leaders first hoped to capture

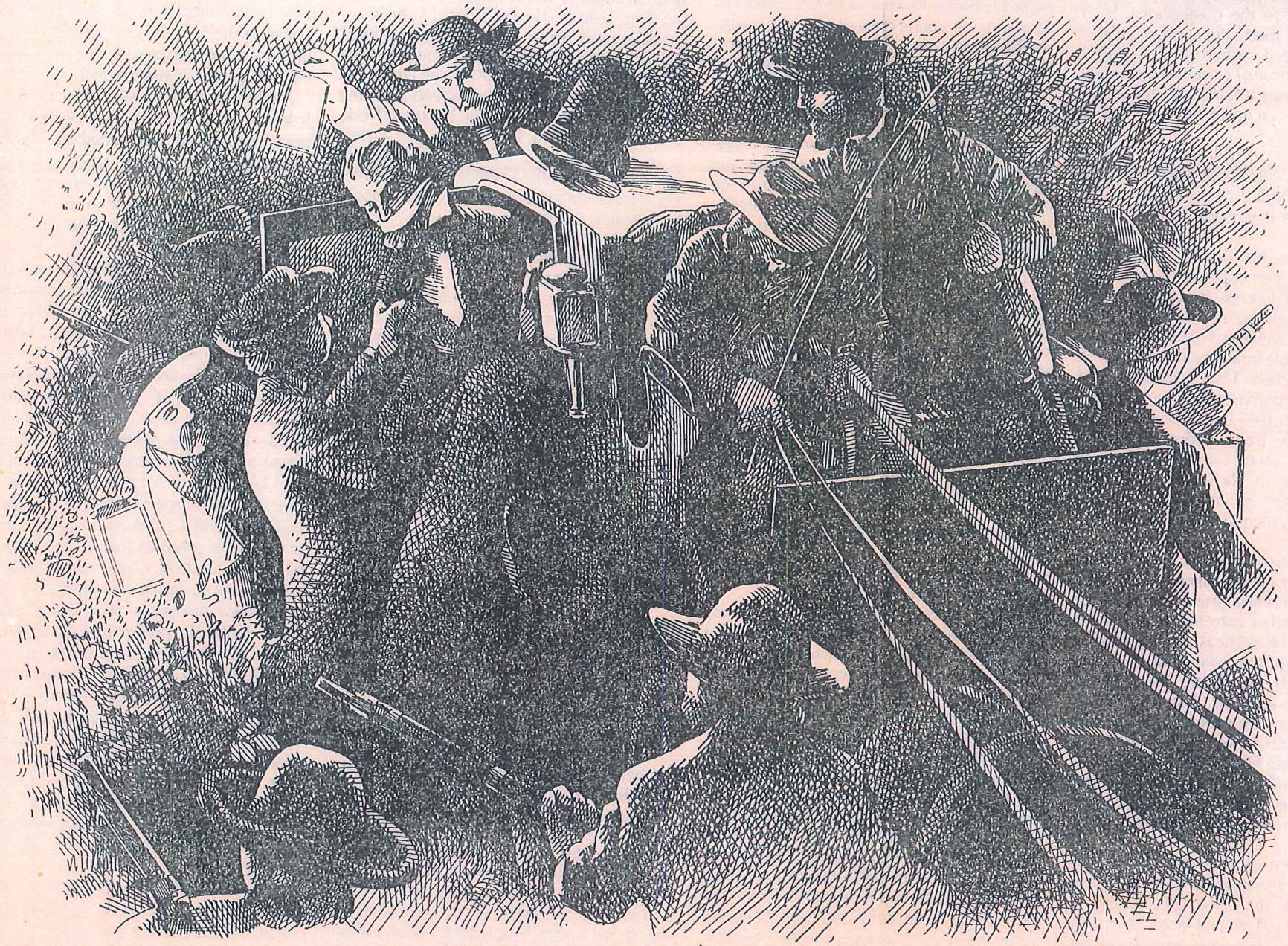
President Lincoln as a hostage and negotiating card. When that failed they decided to blow up the White House and kill the Union's leaders to disrupt command and control of the federal forces. But events in April 1865 moved so fast that Booth thought he could still save the South by killing Lincoln even though Robert E. Lee's surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia had virtually ended the war.

Our research shows that the Confederacy had considerable ability in sophisticated clandestine operations, that its leaders began to investigate the possibility of taking Lincoln hostage as early as 1864 and that this idea came to play a role in Confederate plans for the spring campaign of 1865—eventually evolving into a full-scale operation against Union leaders to create disruption and confusion to the advantage of Confederate arms.

Our examination begins with the fact that Booth, in the course of his flight until he was killed at the

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## LINCOLN, From C1

Garrett farm in Caroline County, Va., was helped by a number of different people. They generally have been treated as unrelated individuals who provided coincidental assistance to Booth. Yet almost all had strong pro-Confederate sympathies and were involved in the main Confederate underground network leading into the North or other clandestine Confederate operations.

The injured Booth and his companion David Herold received arms and liquor from John Lloyd, the manager of Surratt's tavern, a well-known way station for Confederate agents, in what is now Clinton, Md. Samuel Mudd, who set Booth's broken leg, was an ardent pro-Confederate reported to have previously aided Walter Bowie, a famous Confederate agent. Samuel Cox, who hid Booth and Herold, had been involved in pro-secession activity in Maryland. Thomas Jones, who fed Booth and Herold for several days and eventually put them into a boat to cross the Potomac River, was the principal agent for the Confederate Signal Corps' "mail" system north of the Potomac. Thomas Harbin, who met Booth and Herold in Virginia, was an agent of the Confederate War Department's Secret Service and worked with Booth in planning the capture of Lincoln. Booth and Herold spent a night in the cabin of William Lucas, a free black, on the Virginia plantation of Dr. Richard Stuart, who had given the fugitives a meal and knew about Signal Corps operations in the area. Many others had similar connections.

It would violate nearly every principle of good security to allow individuals connected with a clandestine organization to associate themselves with an activity unless it was approved by the organization. We can only assume that the Confederate government's clandestine organization felt an official responsibility to help Booth escape. But this raises other questions: How was Confederate clandestine activity organized? What did it do? What was Booth's relationship? What objective would the Confederates have had in mind in working with Booth? What kind of operation would advance Confederate objectives and also require Booth's assistance?

For two months after it succeeded in April 1861, Virginia operated independently of the Confederacy. Gov. John Letcher was advised in military matters by Gen. Lee, then commander of the Virginia army, and a special military council. We learned from state records that Letcher controlled a separate Secret Service fund and that the council devoted considerable effort to helping the pro-secession element in Maryland. This effort included the shipment of weapons to Maryland, the organization of military units made up of

Maryland men and establishment of an underground line into Maryland for messages and agents—the forerunner of the clandestine line that helped Booth. Virginia agents also set up an espionage organization in Washington under the well-connected Rose Greenhow. In June 1861, Virginia's elaborate clandestine operations were transferred to Confederate control.

The Confederate government appears to have developed two distinct secret services—one in the War Department and one in the State Department. For a time, at least, the War Department Secret Service seems to have operated with or under the Signal Corps. While the Signal Corps provided communication services to troops in the field, it also operated a courier and agent network behind enemy lines. It was a sophisticated, technical, intelligence-related organization controlled directly by President Jefferson Davis.

By 1864, the Army of Northern Virginia under Lee had developed an impressive intelligence capability using cavalry scouts who could operate on their own behind enemy lines. The Confederacy also encouraged irregular warfare by both guerrilla bands (armed "civilians" who gather for raids and then disperse) and by partisans (regular soldiers operating in small units) under Col. John S. Mosby.

These operations were accompanied by innovations in related fields. Both the army and navy developed organizations to build and emplace mines on land and under water. Special-service companies were organized to conduct sabotage. The Confederates gave secret help to antiwar elements in the North and encouraged them to revolt. They attempted to free Confederate prisoners of war, tried biological warfare, burned boats on the Mississippi, hoped to burn New York

City and raided St. Albans, Vt. The operations seldom achieved tactical success, but they tied up large numbers of federal troops and spread alarm in the North.

Evidence of capabilities, of course, is not evidence of an official Confederate operation against Lincoln. But there was in fact an assassination, and investigators quickly established that Booth and his associates had spent several months planning to capture Lincoln and take him to the Confederacy. Such operations require much time, effort, money and other specialized resources. It is highly unlikely that an individual citizen would decide on his own to organize a few associates to kidnap a president—even under the conditions of the 1860s.

Once we had developed our hypothesis that there was a Confederate plan to capture Lincoln, our next logical step was to look for evidence of events that might fit into such a

planning sequence.

First, a motive had to be ascertained. Though many southerners made no secret of their desire to kill Lincoln, it appeared to us that the so-called Dahlgren's raid against Richmond of February and March 1864 could have persuaded the Confederate government itself to consider such action. The Confederates had evidence—papers purportedly found on Capt. Ulric Dahlgren's body—that Lincoln had explicitly ordered the Union raiders to kill Jefferson Davis and other Confederate leaders and to lay waste to Richmond. If Lincoln wanted to attack the person of President Davis, they reasoned, then Lincoln was a fair target for retaliation.

Retaliatory measures might have ranged from assassination at one emotional extreme to a trial for war crimes against the people of the South at the other extreme. A trial in absentia would not be particularly satisfying or effective as a bargaining chip. But if Lincoln were a captive in the South, the situation would be radically different. The Confederacy could negotiate directly with him, use him as an asset in negotiations with Union leaders in Washington or bring him to trial.

What events took place after the Dahlgren raid that might be evidence of a plan against Lincoln? There are enough to suggest a pattern.

First, Confederate agents stepped up their efforts to encourage antiwar factions in the North to organize and revolt. Senior political figures, energetic agents and large allocations of Secret Service funds were assigned to undercover activity.

At about the same time, a Confederate cavalry element began to plan a raid into Maryland and the District of Columbia to capture Lincoln at his summer residence at the Soldier's Home, then north of the city. This plan came to nothing, but in late June 1864 Gen. Jubal Early led an army into Maryland with a view to capturing Washington and, with it, Lincoln. This effort also failed.

Then in late July and August, a series of events unfolded that clearly seem to be related:

- On July 26, Booth met in a Boston hotel with four men; their identity has not been established, but one was in Canada—the staging ground for many Confederate intelligence operations—before and later. Booth's sister, in a private manuscript published in 1938, wrote that Booth was already a Confederate agent, and the Boston meeting may have been an effort to recruit him for an action assignment.
- On Aug. 9, Capt. Thomas Nelson Conrad, chaplain of the 3rd Virginia Cavalry and a cavalry scout, was ordered to Richmond. He would become a key agent in the Lincoln operation, for which staff work had probably begun in July.

- Also in August, one of the best young Confederate engineer officers, Lt. B. Lewis Blackford, was ordered to map Virginia's Stafford County and large sections of Prince William and Fauquier counties—areas in which mili-

tary action might be necessary if a raiding party with a captive Lincoln was threatened with hot pursuit. (At that point in the planning, it would still have been an open question whether the raiders should escape north and west of Washington to cross the Potomac and exit southward through Mosby territory or go southeasterly from Washington through southern Maryland near the established Signal Corps courier route.)

- Sometime during Sept. 12-15, Capt. Conrad met in Richmond with the secretary of war. Lee also was in Richmond and presumably also saw the secretary of war. There apparently were discussions with Conrad of a plan to capture Lincoln.

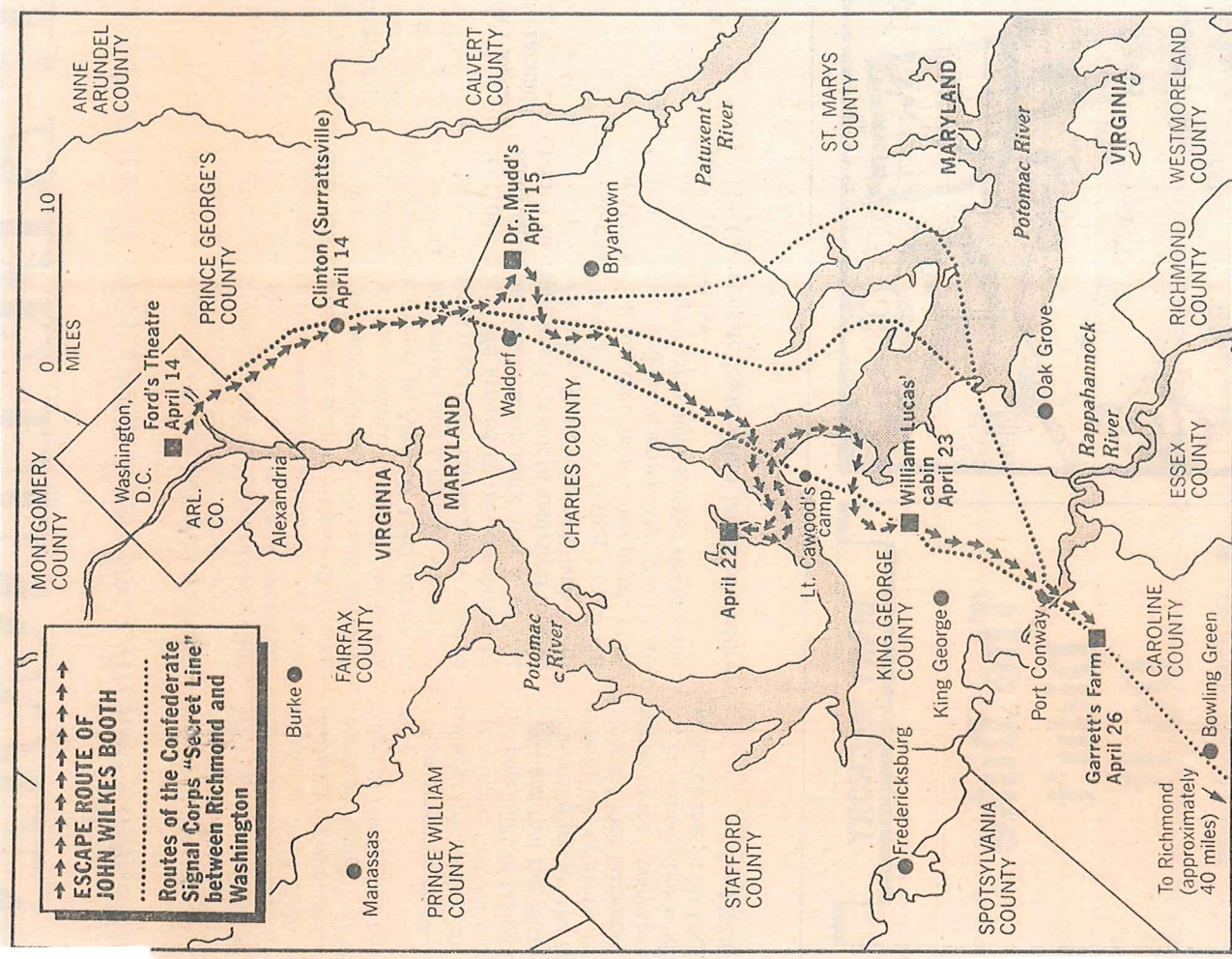
- Sometime in September 1864, either George N. Sanders, a Confederate agent in Canada, or his son and assistant, Lewis Sand-

ers, appears to have made a secret trip to Richmond. Sanders had been associated with European democratic radicals in the 1850s and had advocated assassination of tyrants.

- On Sept. 15, the secretary of war ordered Mosby and Lt. Charles Cawood, commander of a Signal Corps camp in King George County, Va., to cooperate with Capt. Conrad on a forthcoming secret mission into Washington.

- On Sept. 17, Conrad left Richmond for the Northern Neck of Virginia, a no-man's land between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers, with a party of Secret Service and Signal Corps personnel.

- In late September, Mosby sent 25 partisans under Lt. Walter Bowie, one of Lee's principal agents, on an unprecedented raid into southern Maryland—possibly to test the feasibility of moving a small armed unit through that



area. Exiting west of the District of Columbia, the party ran into trouble near Rockville and Bowie was killed.

■ By late September, Conrad was in Washington, observing Lincoln's movements and ascertaining the best location to seize him and the best route to follow with him as a captive. Booth began in September to recruit a team to help him capture Lincoln.

■ In late September, Kensey Johns Stewart, an Episcopal minister related by marriage to the Lee family, left Canada on a trip into the Confederacy. He had served as a chaplain in a clandestine Confederate unit and was involved in some secret activity with other Confederate agents in Canada. In October he reached Baltimore, traveled through southern Maryland and crossed the Potomac in a makeshift boat at the spot that Booth later planned to use as the crossing with a captive Lincoln. He later went to Richmond, conferred with Davis, visited Lee and returned to Canada after having been allocated \$20,000 in Secret Service funds by Davis.

■ In mid-October, Booth went to Montreal, where he met Confederate agents.

■ On Oct. 20, Brig. Gen. G.W.C. "Custis" Lee, Robert E. Lee's oldest son, was promoted to major general and given command of an ad hoc "synthetic" division—made up of reserve units and other troops from a quiet part of the Richmond defenses—used later to provide security for Booth's planned escape route.

■ Early in November, Lt. Blackford, the engineer, was ordered to Richmond for a meeting. As a result, he stopped mapping the area originally assigned and began mapping King William County, indicating that the planned escape route had been changed. Instead of exiting northwest from Washington and going south through territory controlled by Mosby, the route on which Bowie had been killed, the raiders would exit through southern Maryland. Lt. Cawood was in Richmond at this time and could have participated in the meeting.

■ On Nov. 5, the Confederate War Department established a fund in the Treasury De-

partment of \$250,000 to pay officers and soldiers passing through Richmond on furlough—enough to cover the salaries of about 1,500 men for six months. No similar fund had been established before. We believe this fund, and Custis Lee's promotion to major general to head an ad hoc division, were both related to providing a stand-by covert security force to repel Union pursuers along Booth's escape route through the Northern Neck. To accomplish this, men from regiments recruited from the Northern Neck were sent home "on furlough," and several companies of Mosby's men were sent to the Northern Neck to live in private homes.

■ In November, Booth returned to Washington from Canada. He and Conrad were there simultaneously for several days before Conrad left to report his findings to Richmond. Then Booth went into southern Maryland and began to organize an escape route through that area and across the Potomac to the Northern Neck.

■ In December, Col. Edwin Gray Lee, a cousin of Robert E. Lee, was sent to Canada to take over some of the Confederate undercover work from commissioners Jacob Thompson and Clement C. Clay.

■ In January, Booth's associates were procuring boats in southern Maryland to take Lincoln across the Potomac.

■ Also in January, Conrad and Mosby were in Richmond for conferences, and Conrad was given additional Secret Service funds approved personally by Davis. The secretary of war personally drafted an order transferring operational control over a number of Signal Corps soldiers in the Northern Neck to the secretary of state for secret duty. Booth's associate John Harrison Surratt was in Richmond during this period. These actions may have reflected the final planning of the Lincoln operation.

■ On about the first of February, the Confederates adopted the phrase "Come Retribution" as the key for their top cipher system, reflecting some new policy decision and a tightening of security.

**T**hus it is clear that the Confederates had the knowledge, the institutions, and the precedent of previous operations to enable them to mount a secret operation to capture Lincoln. It is also clear that they took action in 1864 and 1865 that could have been associated with planning for such an operation. But how would such a plan have fitted into the Confederate concept of ending the war?

Based on an article in a Richmond newspaper on Aug. 8, 1864, we believe the planners had begun that early to analyze the military situation around Richmond and Petersburg, where Grant was slowly constructing the Army of Northern Virginia. If the Confederates stayed and fought Grant, they risked military defeat. If they abandoned Richmond, it might be widely interpreted abroad and by many at home as a death blow.

In early February, Lee assumed command

of all Confederate armies and soon spent several days in Richmond in serious discussions with President Davis and Gen. John C. Breckinridge, the new secretary of war. It appears that these discussions ended with a general agreement: Lee was to lead his army out of Richmond, join Confederate forces in North Carolina and use the combined armies to fight either Grant or Gen. William T. Sherman coming up from South Carolina—which ever presented the better opportunity.

But Davis apparently saw one last hope: The capture of Lincoln might make it unnecessary to evacuate Richmond, or it might inject enough confusion into the command process in Washington to help the Confederate armies in the field. He discouraged early evacuation lest it cause panic among the population and antagonism among Confederate leaders.

We believe from a coded letter from a Confederate agent found among Booth's possessions that during this period he was being pressured to act against Lincoln. But Booth had to find the right opportunity and organize his people to take advantage of it. Furthermore, Booth's helpers were not trained, disciplined operatives.

Finally, on March 17, Booth thought that an opportunity had arisen. He was told that Lincoln was supposed to visit the Campbell Military Hospital north of Washington. Booth and his group waited along the road for Lincoln's carriage, but the president did not appear.

In Richmond, time was growing short. The evacuation had to occur by the middle of April—before the ground dried enough for Grant to renew his attack. The value of a captive Lincoln as a bargaining chip was about over. The only aspect of the Lincoln operation that could aid Confederate military strategy now was its potential impact on Union command and control: Confusion in Washington might cause confusion in the field. For the first time, there now was a clear, logical reason to kill or disable the president of the Union.

The Confederate government appears to have decided on precisely that action. On April 1, a small team including Thomas F. (Frank) Harney, an explosives expert, was sent to Mosby to be infiltrated into Washington. Mosby organized a special task force and sent it on its mission. On April 10, unaware that Lee had surrendered his army at Appomattox the day before, the force was surprised by Union cavalry near Burke, Va., and Harney was captured.

Five days earlier, word had reached Lincoln that Confederate explosive experts had left Richmond with lethal plans directed at him. Lincoln refused to take the report seriously. "I cannot bring myself to believe that any human being lives who would do me harm."

If Booth learned of Harney's capture on April 11 or 12, he would have been faced with a difficult situation. His last instructions probably directed him to see that the White House and senior Union officials were blown up about the middle of April; now the explosives expert he needed was not available. But although Lee had surrendered, the number of troops with him was so small that Booth—like many southerners—probably did not believe at first that the entire Army of Northern Virginia had laid down its arms. Booth would have known that other Confederate armies were still active and probably could not bring himself, any more than Jefferson Davis at this stage, to recognize that the Confederacy was a lost cause. If a few key Union officials could be killed, it might approximate the impact of blowing up the White House.

Booth seems to have decided to do the best he could to carry out his mission with his band in Washington. At about 10 o'clock on the night of April 14, Booth shot the president in his box at Ford's Theater. At the same time, Lewis Thornton Powell attacked Secretary of State William Seward. But George Atzerodt got drunk instead of carrying out his assignment to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson.

Immediately after the war, many Confederate officials and senior military men, fearful of retaliation and unaware of details of Booth's operation, vehemently disclaimed any Confederate involvement in the assassination. Confederate agents still at large in Canada also did their best to help divest the South of apparent responsibility. At the same time, there appears to have been tacit recognition by many people in the North that proving southern responsibility could have a disastrous impact on the prospects for a reunited America. The idea of a deranged Booth satisfied both parties as a compromise explanation to minimize the political consequences of the assassination. Modern America can be thankful that the explanation was believed.