

LINCOLN'S MURDER: THE SIMPLE CONSPIRACY THEORY

By WILLIAM HANCHETT

Shortly after 10:00 P.M. on April 14, 1865, popular young actor John Wilkes Booth entered the presidential box at Ford's Theater in Washington D.C., and fired a one-half-inch metal ball from a pocket deringer into the back of President Abraham Lincoln's head. Elsewhere in the city, at approximately that same moment, U.S. Secretary of State William Seward — in bed, recovering from injuries suffered in a carriage accident — was being brutally assaulted. After forcing his way into the secretary's home, a man wielding a knife slashed Seward about the head and neck. The secretary's assailant was a former Confederate guerilla who called himself Lewis Paine.

Just a few days earlier, April 9, Confederate General Robert E. Lee signed a document surrendering his army at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. There were other Rebel armies still in the field, however, and the whereabouts of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his cabinet were unknown. As news of the shocking attacks on Lincoln and Seward swept across the country, most people jumped to the conclusion they were elements in a Confederate Government conspiracy against the United States.

Booth became the object of the biggest manhunt of the day and was killed by Federal troops on April 26. Within a short time Paine and seven others were arrested as being his fel-

low conspirators and accomplices.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising early evidence collected by the U.S. War Department supported the assumption there had been a conspiracy. Nor is it surprising a May proclamation made by Lincoln's successor President Andrew Johnson declared the assassination and near-assassination had been "incited, concerted, and procured" by

A gruesome souvenir. A noose used to hang one of the four individuals condemned for their part in the plot to kill Lincoln. Including Booth, a total of nine people were believed to be a part of the "simple conspiracy" to murder the President.

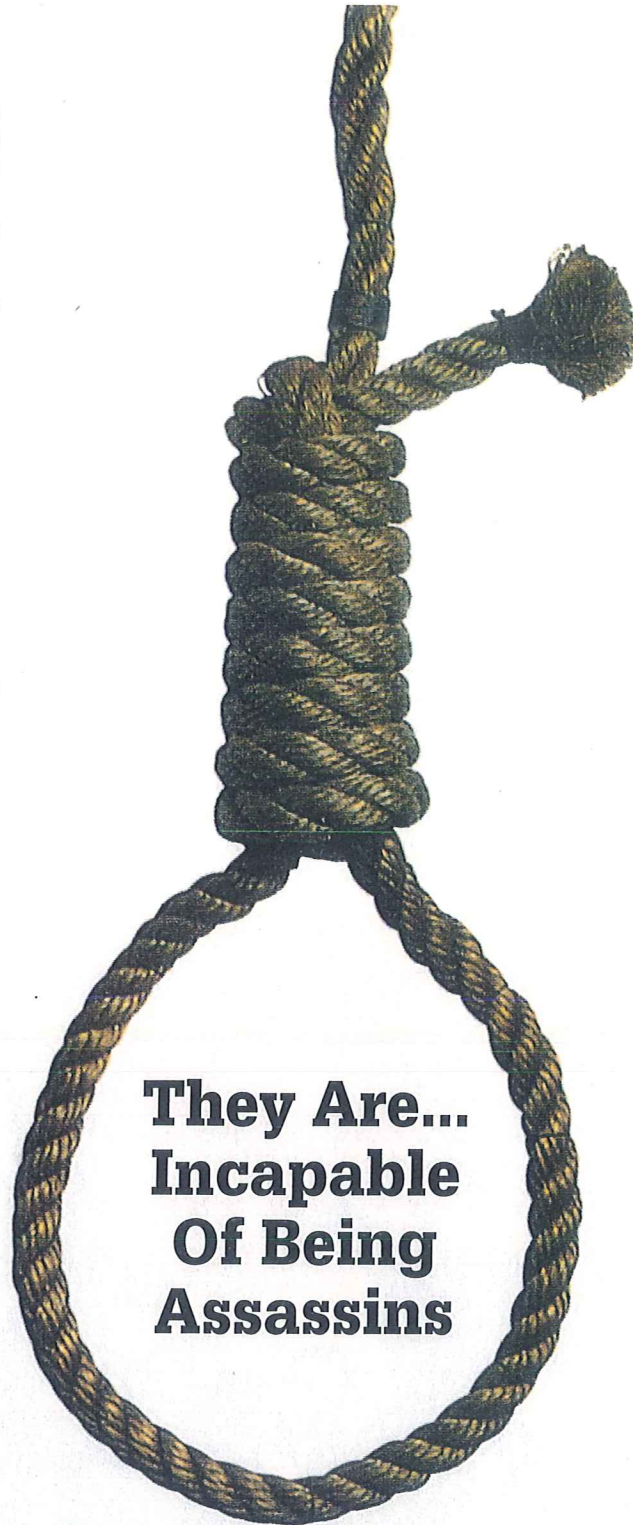
Confederate President Jefferson Davis and five Confederate officials in Canada — men whose mission had been the spreading of rebellion in the North. This was widely accepted by the public as confirmation of an awful truth.

Given the emotional impact of Lincoln's death, it is also not surprising that at the trial of Paine and the others accused of complicity much of the testimony presented against Davis and his Canadian agents proved to be perjured.

What is surprising is how quickly the falsity of some specific testimony persuaded the public to abandon the entire concept of a Confederate conspiracy and conclude without further questioning that Booth and his small group were alone responsible for Lincoln's murder. It is as if the people and their leaders, desperate for peace and internal harmony, deliberately chose to see the killing of Lincoln as the crime of an individual rather than as an act of war.

At that time, if Lincoln's murder had been interpreted as an act of war committed by the desperate Confederate Government — or at least with its knowledge — Northern hatred for the South could have been inflamed. This emotional response, in turn, might have led to the destruction of all prospects for early reunion and overpowering demands for vengeance. The very reason for which the war had been fought and won could have been invalidated.

Consequently, most chose to believe in a simple conspiracy. As a simple conspiracy organized by a fanatic, the assassination could be accepted without divisive political consequences and the American people could deal with the tragedy through acceptable channels. Accepting it as a civil crime allowed for social catharsis. There could be grief and eulogies for the victim, execration and ostracism for the assassin.



They Are... Incapable Of Being Assassins

The public's retreat from accepting the theory of the assassination as being part of a grand Confederate plot began immediately after the trial of Paine and the others in May and June. In the 1865 edition of his 1864 campaign biography of Lincoln, *New York Times* Publisher Henry J. Raymond stated the plot to kill "seems to have originated mainly, if not exclusively, with the man who played the leading part in its execution." The assassination, said Raymond, expressing a sentiment central to the simple conspiracy

theory, "had nothing to do with the Administration of Mr. Lincoln." It was the product of Booth's madness and malice.

In his 1866 work *American Conflict*, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, another powerful publisher, wrote that although all the conspirators had been Confederate partisans "Booth himself was, so far as has been shown, the projector and animating soul of the monstrous plot." And Thaddeus Stevens, a leader of the "Radical" Republican faction in the U.S. House of Representatives (a man one biographer called the "Scourge of the South") added what has long been accepted as the definitive exoneration of the Rebel leaders. "I know these men, sir," he said in May 1866. "They are gentlemen, and incapable of being assassins."

Skeptics there certainly were, but within a year or two of the assassination a powerful and durable public consensus emerged: most people believed Booth alone had plotted and carried out the murder of Lincoln and instigated the attempted murder of Seward. He had been assisted by the eight individuals tried, found guilty, and punished by the military commission. The assassination had been the result of a simple, not a grand, conspiracy.

After the public came to accept this, however, a related issue immediately arose. At the trial of the conspirators, War Department prosecutors ridiculed the claim of some defendants that for months before the assassination Booth had plotted the capture of the president.

Nonsense, the prosecutors insisted; murder had been Booth's object from the beginning. But by 1867 it was common knowledge that in this matter — as well as in its charges against Davis and the Canadian agents — the War Department was mistaken. Booth had plotted to capture Lincoln and hold him hostage for the release of

Confederate prisoners, and had decided to kill only at the last minute.

Had Confederate officials been party to this earlier conspiracy? They might not have been assassins, but had they conspired to become kidnapers? In the years following the war, evidence emerged to suggest they had.

In 1870 the *New York Times* reported Booth's close associate, John H. Surratt, a Confederate courier and spy who had evaded capture in 1865, gave a speech at New York City's Cooper Institute. There he said the kidnaping conspiracy had been "instigated by certain Confederates in order to bring about a fair exchange of prisoners."

In the early 1880s, popular journalist George Alfred Townsend interviewed people in southern Maryland who claimed knowledge of a plot to seize Lincoln in Washington. They stated he was to be rushed by relays of fast horses to a boat waiting on the Potomac River near Port Tobacco, 36 miles away. One man, a former

Confederate agent and spy, told Townsend that until the very end of the war a boat had been kept in readiness for this purpose, with rowers close at hand.

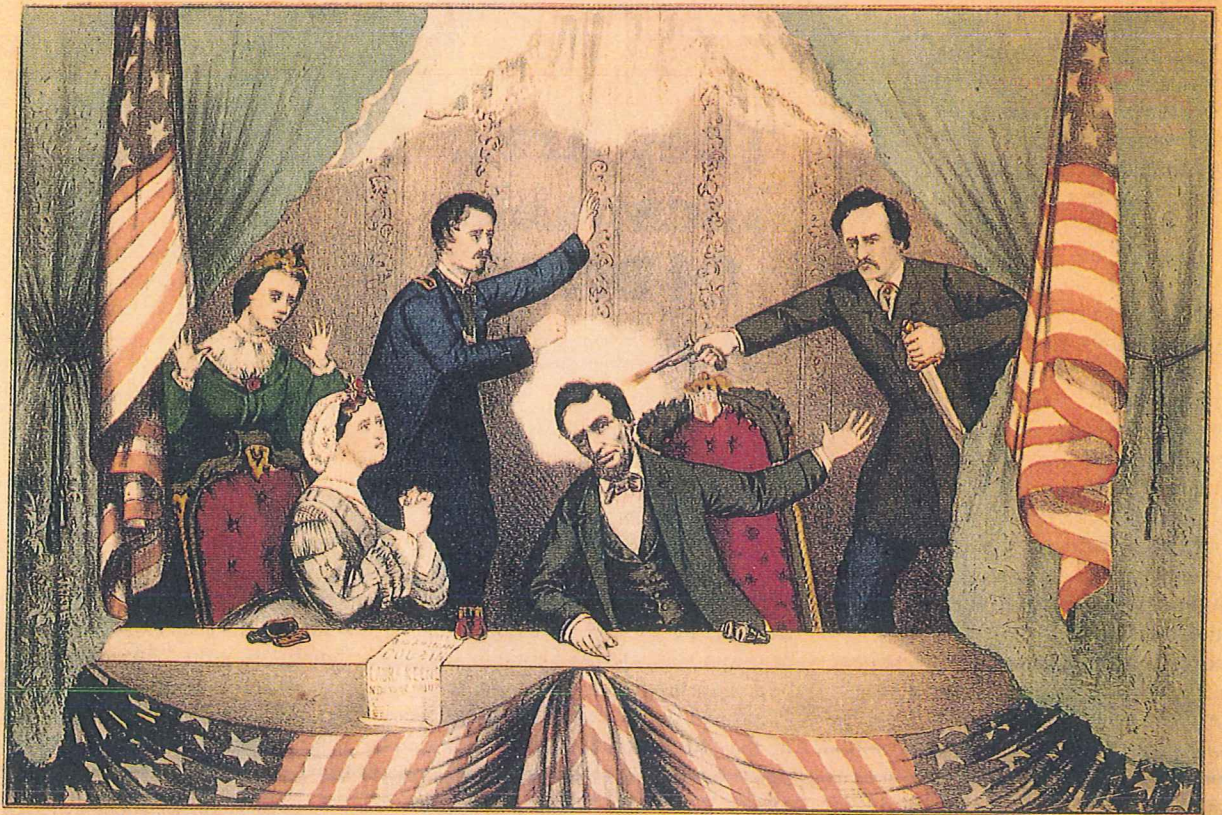
If only Booth and his convicted associates were involved in the kidnaping scheme, could the preparations for it have been so elaborate? Would so many people in southern Maryland have known about it?

John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Lincoln's private secretaries, conceded in their biography of the president they could not prove that well-financed agents in Canada had been parties to Booth's abduction scheme. But they noted Booth had "consorted" with these men in Montreal and, though the actor often boasted about the great amounts of money he had made in oil speculations, at the time he committed his crimes he was well-supplied with cash that could not be traced to his investments. They also pointed out that during his attempt to escape after the assassination Booth

had known exactly upon whom to call for help in southern Maryland and northern Virginia. These individuals' homes could have been stops along a Confederate underground route, or upon which Booth may have planned to travel with the kidnapped president.

There were perhaps many other plans to make Lincoln a prisoner of war. Former Confederate Brigadier General Bradley T. Johnson, commander of Confederate cavalry brigade, and Thomas N. Conrad, a Rebel agent and spy network leader who was frequently in and out of Washington D.C., both published accounts of the 1864 plans to capture Lincoln and both claimed to have had the approval and cooperation of the Confederate War Department. The demands of other military operations in the spring had prevented Johnson from carrying out his plan. Conrad abandoned his plan the fall because it was too dangerous.

The accounts of Surratt, Johnson and Conrad attracted no attention, possibly because they were buried in the



ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT A. LINCOLN,
April 14, 1865 at Ford's theater, Washington D.C.

A hand-tinted lithograph depicting John Wilkes Booth's assassination of Lincoln. The couple shown standing behind First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln are Major Henry Rathbone and his fiancée Miss Clara Harris, the President's theater companions on that eventful evening.

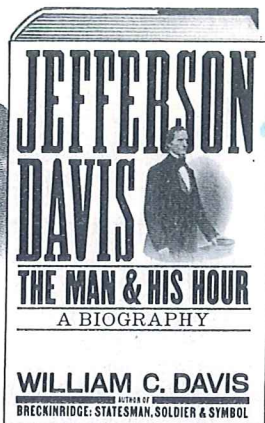
avalanche of postwar memoirs. But Townsend was a writer of national reputation; his conspiracy story was published in a major magazine, *Century*. The Nicolay and Hay biography was also published in *Century* in serial form, with the chapter dealing with Booth's contacts with Southern officials in Canada appearing in the January 1890 issue. (Published later in the year in ten volumes, Nicolay and Hays' biography of Lincoln enjoyed a large sale for so massive a work.)

One might imagine these and many similar revelations of ties between Booth and Confederate representatives in Richmond and Canada aroused public curiosity and stimulated the re-examination of old evidence and the search for new. But they did not. The spirit of the times forbade it; the interests of reunion made it imperative wartime hatreds and divisions be forgotten, not restudied. Investigation of the kidnapping plot, furthermore, ran the dread risk of proving Confederate leaders had been involved. If they had conspired in one act of violence against Lincoln, his kidnapping — an act that could easily have led to the President's death or injury — who could be sure any longer that, in the end, they had not also conspired to take his life? Consequently, proof of a Confederate conspiracy to kidnap Lincoln would be nearly as threatening to the reunion of North and South as proof of a Confederate conspiracy to assassinate him.

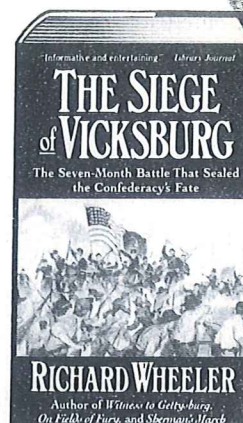
Not caring or daring to research the subject, Americans continued to choose to believe the plot to kidnap Lincoln, like the plot to kill him, had been a simple conspiracy originating with John Wilkes Booth alone. And no writer made it easier to believe this than David M. Dewitt, who published powerful and influential books on the assassination in 1895 and 1909.

The Democratic district attorney of Ulster County, New York, during the war and a Democratic member of Congress and the state legislature after it, Dewitt wrote history like a public prosecutor and a partisan politician. Booth he dismissed as a "home-staying" champion of the South whose "canine appetite" for fame led him to dream boyishly of capturing Lincoln. If, in Canada, he spoke at all to Confederate representatives about his plans, they likely dismissed both him and them as "too wild and impracticable." After the failure of his attempts

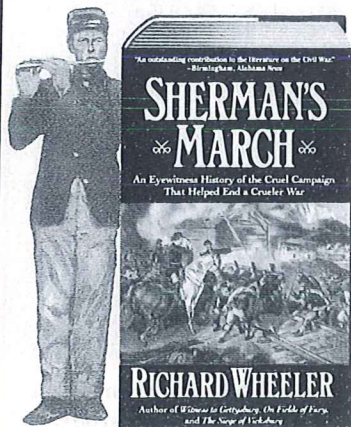
North and South from all points of view



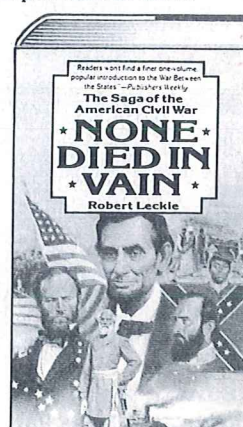
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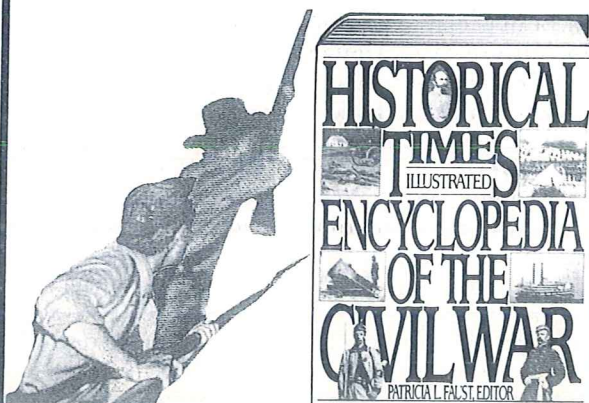
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to kidnap Lincoln, after Appomattox, Booth decided in the "first flush of his vengeful spirit" to murder not only the president but Secretary Seward and Vice President Andrew Johnson.

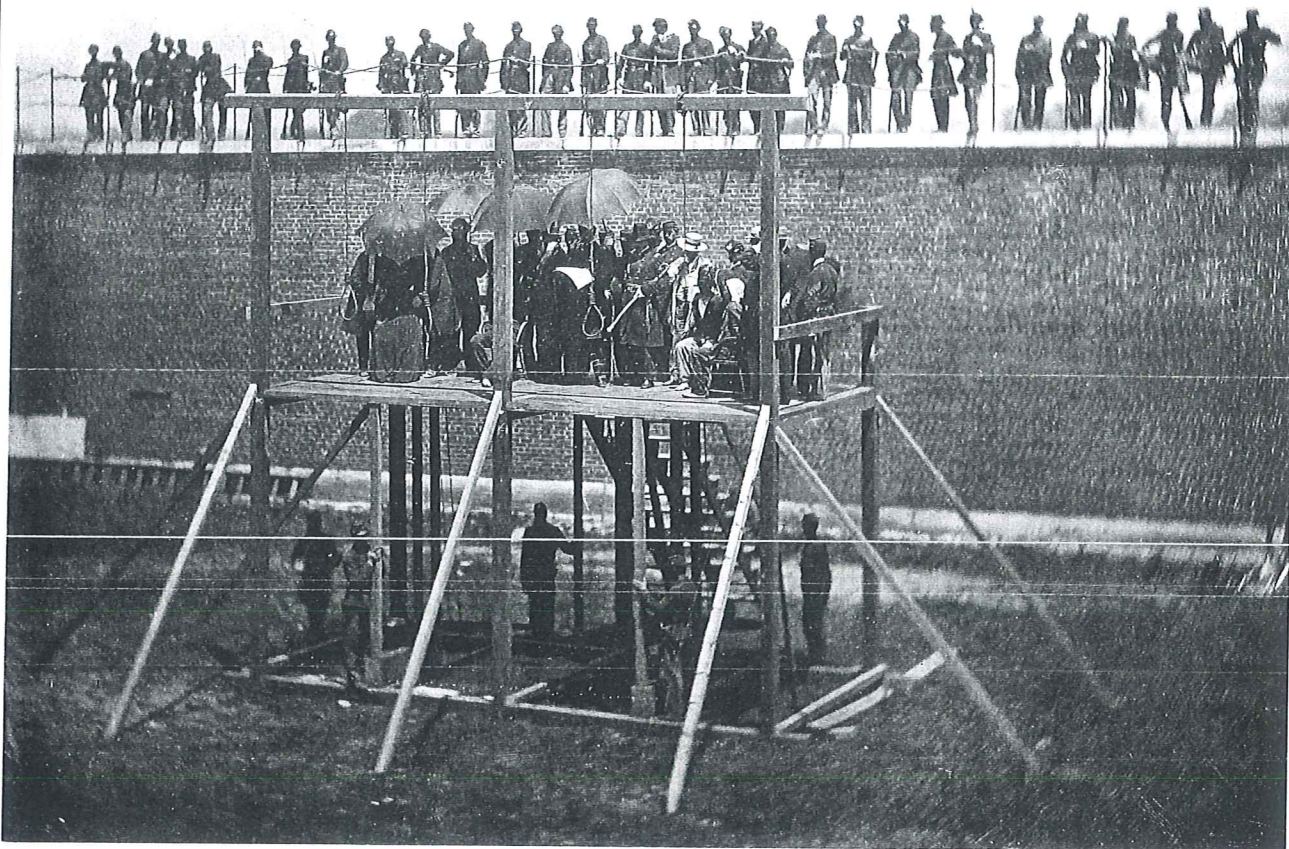
The excoriation of Booth was nothing new. What was new was Dewitt's portrayal of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton as, next to Booth, the chief villain in the assassination story. In charging Confederate leaders with re-

John H. Surratt (the man who spoke about the assassination in 1870 in a speech at the Cooper Institute) was at one time also believed to have been involved in a conspiracy to assassinate the President.

Along with the other alleged conspirators she was charged with "combining, confederating and conspiring together with [each other] to kill and murder Abraham Lincoln, the late

then at large. In the fury of his frustration, Stanton's "one supreme aim" was to put her to death. The hanging Mrs. Surratt, Dewitt solemnly concluded, was "the foulest blot on the history of the United States."

Emotional and often irrational as they were, Dewitt's views were so persuasively stated and harmonized smoothly with the anti-Radical Republican revision of Civil War hi-



Mary E. Surratt, seated on the gallows far to the left, waits on the hangman. To her right, the other condemned conspirators are: Lewis Paine, David Herold and George Atzerodt. Author David Dewitt claimed Secretary of War Stanton wanted to make certain Surratt hanged.

sponsibility for the murder and in denying the reality of Booth's kidnapping plot, Stanton deliberately and wickedly lied to the American people. He railroaded the conspirators to prison and the gallows with a kangaroo military court. Its judges were his hand-picked men. And, Dewitt claimed, Stanton tricked President Johnson into hanging an innocent woman.

In making this claim, Dewitt was referring to Mary E. Surratt. She had been a widow who ran a boarding house on H Street in Washington. Her home had supposedly been the scene of meetings between Booth and select accomplices. Her son, Rebel courier

President; Andrew Johnson, Vice President; William H. Seward, Secretary of State; Ulysses S. Grant, then in command of the Army of the United States." Convicted, she and Paine (who revealed his true last name to be Powell) and two others were hanged at Washington's Old Capitol Prison on July 7, 1865.

Mary Surratt was doomed, Dewitt claimed, because she had aroused Secretary Stanton's implacable hatred. Dewitt believed that in Stanton's eyes she was representative of the Southern women who had "unsexed" themselves by supporting the rebellion and because she was the mother of suspected conspirator John H. Surratt,

tory in progress at the time that the seemed not prejudiced at all, only judicious revelations of truth. Even in our own time, Dewitt has been accepted as an objective authority by writers who, apparently taking him at his word, believe he allowed the facts to speak for themselves.

Reunion and the idealization of Lincoln that so quickly turned the most controversial of all presidents into the nation's most beloved martyr caused Americans to forget the violent opposition to him that had existed in both sections during the war. Consequently, it was easy for people to deny Booth any rational motivation and to believe he had acted solely on

of madness and a desire for revenge. It was also easy to believe Dewitt's allegations against Stanton, for the reputations of all the Radical leaders were being revised in extreme and unflattering terms.

The simple conspiracy as Dewitt described it was so convincing no one seriously challenged it until 1937, when Chicago Civil War history enthusiast Otto Eisenschiml, carrying Dewitt's anti-Stanton thesis to its ultimate extreme, manufactured a case to show that Stanton himself had masterminded a War Department conspiracy against Lincoln. Although Eisenschiml's invention attracted an unfortunate number of supporters, it did not shake the confidence of informed individuals in Dewitt's simple conspiracy.

The most important consequence of the long domination of the simple conspiracy theory was that it removed the subject of Lincoln's death from the field of historical study. Since, as *New York Times* Publisher Raymond had put it, the assassination "had nothing to do" with Lincoln's administration, neither Civil War historians nor Lincoln biographers felt a need to analyze and explain it. Most ignored it, except to state it took place or to give it dramatic narrative description. Considering it merely the impulsive crime of an irresponsible fanatic, they treated it as unworthy of their attention.

By the 1930s, however, enough new material had been published about John Wilkes Booth to discredit forever the fundamental assumptions of the simple conspiracy. Books and articles about Booth's family life, personal character, and political views by such writers as Clara Laughlin, Francis Wilson, and Stanley Kimmel showed conclusively the assassin had by no means been the loathsome and depraved wretch of public imagination. They explained the assassination — tragic and deplorable though it was — did have something to do with the policies of Lincoln's administration, after all.

A memoir by Booth's sister Asia, completed before 1874 but not published until 1938, depicted the actor's views of Lincoln and the war as typical of those held by other Northern opponents. In attempting to crush slavery "by robbery, rapine, slaughter, and bought armies," Booth believed the vulgar Lincoln threatened white civi-

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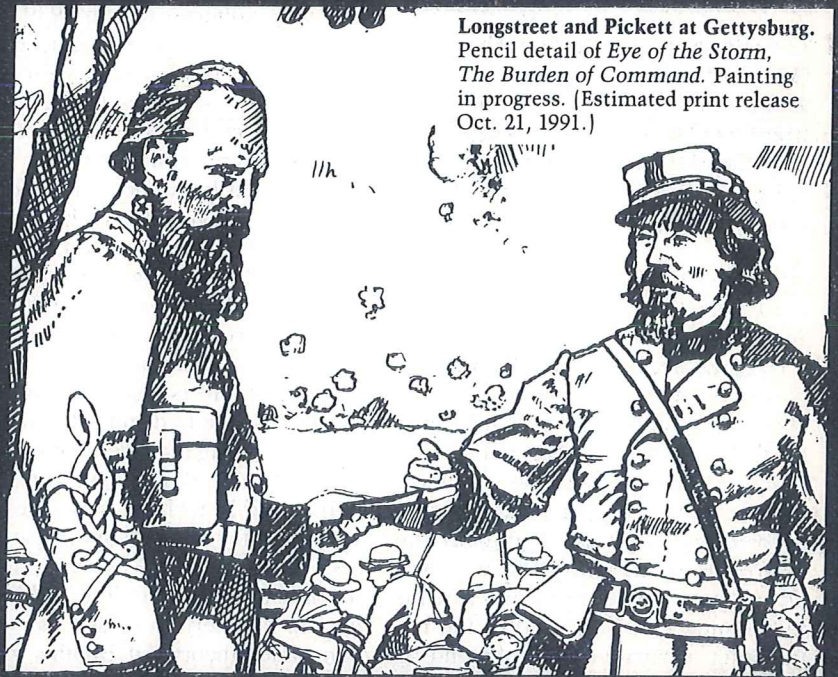


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lization; in disregarding civil liberties protected by the Constitution, he threatened republican government and would someday make himself king. No conventional "home-staying" Rebel sympathizer, Booth toured widely as a star, playing in every major Union city between Boston and New Orleans and in many minor ones,



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The supposed architect of the "simple conspiracy," actor John Wilkes Booth. Could any of his friends with Southern ties or any Rebel leader have recruited him to take part in a plot to murder the U.S. President?

and came into repeated contact with other opponents of the war and with Southern agents and blockade runners.

Her brother, believed by most people to be nothing more than a matinee idol, was a Confederate spy, Asia said. He had confided it to her and said he smuggled quinine and other medicine into the South (a claim substantiated by a document later found in the archives of the Confederate War Department). After the failure of his kidnapping conspiracy, after the humiliating occupation of Richmond by black Union soldiers, after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Booth still believed "something decisive & great," as he put it in his diary, would save the South. After all, there were still Confederate armies in the field.

After shooting Lincoln, John Booth leapt from the President's box to the stage and shouted the Virginia state motto "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" The motto, first suggested by patriot Thomas Jefferson, translated from the Latin as "So Always To Tyrants."

Twelve days later, mortally wounded and surrounded by his captors, he gasped, "Tell my mother I died for my country." In short, the historic Booth, unlike the folklore Booth, displayed patriotic fervor and was entitled to some of the respect later shown in both sections of the country for partisans of the other who had fought and died for what they believed.

Among the first authors to reflect this radical new perspective on Booth were Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg and New York writer and editor George S. Bryan, whose work *The Great American Myth* (1940, reprinted 1990) superseded Dewitt's and will likely remain the classic study of the assassination as a simple conspiracy. In addition to portraying Booth as a dedicated Southern patriot, both Sandburg and Bryan devoted many more than the customary number of pages to the bitterness of the opposition to Lincoln in the North and to the incitements to violence against him. If Booth had never heard the anti-Lincoln views being expressed by Rebels, Sandburg wrote in 1939, if he had allowed himself to be guided only by what he read in the *New York World*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Chicago Times*, "he would have felt himself correct and justified to go forth with a brass pocket pistol...." Noting that everywhere his travels took him Booth encountered intense hatred for Lincoln and the war, Bryan pointed out that pro-Confederate sentiments were especially strong in Booth's native Baltimore.

After demonstrating it was no longer possible to dismiss Booth as an irrational avenger of the South, neither Sandburg nor Bryan asked if it was still possible to hold him solely responsible for the kidnapping and assassination conspiracies. Not only did neither ask the question, both proceeded routinely to restate the simple conspiracy theory. Of Booth's visit to Canada in October 1864, at the time he was planning the capture of Lincoln, Sandburg declared (following Dewitt's reasoning) that the actor's consultations with the Confederate representatives convinced him he had "better play a lone hand, without help, approval, or funds from the Richmond Government." And Bryan, who said nothing about consultations, stating only that Booth had visited the Montreal hotel where the Southern agents stayed, seems to have con-

cluded Booth's principal reason for making the trip (and staying ten days) was to arrange for the shipment of his theatrical wardrobe through the blockade to Richmond. If the Confederacy had nothing to do with Booth's kidnapping conspiracy, it certainly had nothing to do with his conspiracy to assassinate.

In the generation after Sandburg and Bryan, no one contributed more prolifically or more richly to an understanding of the Civil War era than historian Allan Nevins. Breaking with the old tradition of political historians, Nevins not only discussed the assassination at length but described it as a political act, as "part of the fabric" of the times. It was "clearly a sequel of the war," he wrote in the final volume of his *War for the Union* (1971), a product of "its senseless hatreds, fears, and cruelties," and a fitting climax of the years of anger and butchery.... The killing of Lincoln was "not an isolated episode or a set eruption of violence upon a detached stage as in melodrama." It was, rather, an expression of the emotions and psychological tensions produced by the war and by the series of catastrophes that overwhelmed the South in the spring of 1865: Sherman's march through the Carolina and Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the fall of the Confederacy.



Mary Surratt. One her boarders, Lewis J. Weichmann, testified against her at her trial. He later wrote A True History of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the Conspiracy of 1865, airing his version of events.

After having described at length conditions in which grand conspiracies might be expected to flourish, Nevins abruptly and without explanation abandoned this line of reasoning and stated positively that no such conspiracy had killed Lincoln. "It is generally agreed today," he wrote, "that there was no plot made by President Jefferson Davis or anyone else in high position in the Confederacy to assassinate Lincoln, and that Booth and his array of miscreants acted on their own initiative."

Although Nevins admitted one of



Lewis Paine, also known as Lewis Powell. He was physically powerful. When he attacked Secretary of State Seward, he also wounded the secretary's son, his servant and two nurses when they tried to apprehend him.

the two principal Southern agents in Canada was "capable of infamous acts" and that the other was "by no means a man of elevated character," he stated with assurance that neither had conspired with Booth, of whose kidnapping plot, visit to Montreal, and political views Nevins he said nothing. Instead, echoing Thaddeus Stevens, Nevins he concluded "Jefferson Davis would have shrunk with horror from assassination, or indeed any lesser crime of violence."

Why should Davis have shrunk with

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THE ROAD TO GLORY

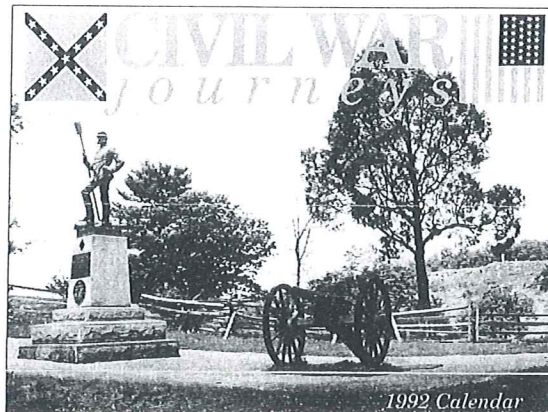
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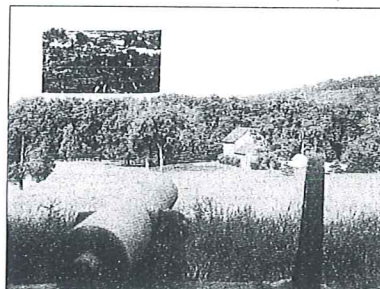
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Conspiracy

Continued from page 35

horror from an act of violence against Lincoln or any other Union leader? He did not shrink from spending violently the lives 250,000 Southern men, nor from leading Southern civilization to a violent death. If he were convinced the capture or death of the Yankee president, the commander-in-chief of the armies destroying the South, would stop the slaughter and save his country, why would he have been horrified?

Lincoln did not shrink with horror from the prospect of capturing Davis, with the attendant risk of resistance, injury and death. After a Union cavalry raid against Richmond in May 1863, he learned the city had been virtually undefended. Had the army already known this fact, he wrote to Union Major General Joseph Hooker, commander of the Army of the Potomac, "our men...could have safely gone in and burnt every thing & brought us Jeff. Davis."

Nine months later, Lincoln personally approved an ill-fated raid on Richmond commanded by Brigadier General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick — the same officer who could have broken into the city the previous spring — and Colonel Ulric Dahlgren. Early in March 1864 Kilpatrick reached Richmond's intermediate defenses but failed to press on against the undermanned defenders. Dahlgren, commanding a detached force that was supposed to enter the Rebel capital from the lightly guarded south, was

ambushed and killed. On his body were found papers stating his intention of burning the city and killing Jefferson Davis and his cabinet. Confederate General Robert E. Lee had the Dahlgren papers published so "that our people & the world may know the character of the war our enemies wage against us, & the unchristian & atrocious acts they plot & perpetrate."

If Davis, like Lee and others believed Lincoln had contemplated Davis' capture or death, why should Davis not have contemplated Lincoln's?

Perhaps he did. In February 1865 the Confederacy made a last desperate effort to end the war and win its independence through negotiation. But at a shipboard conference at Hampton Roads, near Fort Monroe, Virginia, Lincoln refused to make any concessions on the issues of reunion and emancipation. He gave the South the choice of fighting on against lengthening odds or submitting to total defeat. At a public meeting in Richmond upon the return of the Confederate negotiators, Davis denounced his ruthless antagonist as "His Majesty Abraham the First" and predicted that before the beginning of the summer the North would be begging the South for peace. Lincoln and Seward (the secretary had accompanied the president to the conference) had not realized, Davis exclaimed, that "they were talking to their masters!"

Two months later, after his government fled its capital in Richmond,



Members of the military tribunal or board of judges that tried Paine, Surratt and the others. Among them are David Hunter (seated second from left) and Lew Wallace (seated second from right).

Davis announced prospects for victory were brighter than ever. Freed from the necessity of defending specific places, the Confederate military could strike at will at the enemy's garrisons and communication lines. "Nothing is now needed to render our triumph certain," he told his people, "but the exhibition of our own unquenchable resolve. Let us but will it, and we are free."

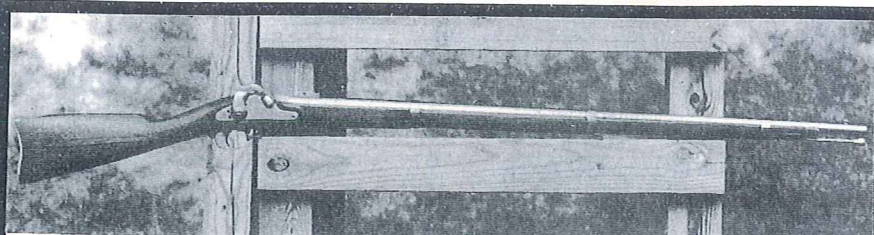
Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens thought Davis' statements at the time were "the emanation of a demented brain...." But later, after reading evidence presented at the conspiracy trial, he decided Davis might "have been relying on something I and the world generally knew nothing about." It was possible Davis had been counting on the success of some scheme planned in Canada, "either the uprising of the people of the North or the abduction of the heads of their Government." But, Stephens added, "I have no idea Mr. Davis ever countenanced assassination. No!"

It is significant Stephens did not believe Davis incapable of countenancing abduction.

The simple conspiracy theory is a superficial explanation of an event whose roots were deep in the Civil War. It ignores or glosses over too much that has been learned about John Wilkes Booth; about the ease and regularity of treasonable communication between individuals in the sections along a 2,000-mile border; about the spying and covert operations engaged in by both the Union and Confederate governments, especially the latter; about what human beings are capable of doing when their "unquenchable resolve" is called upon to serve a cause they believe will determine the fate of civilization.

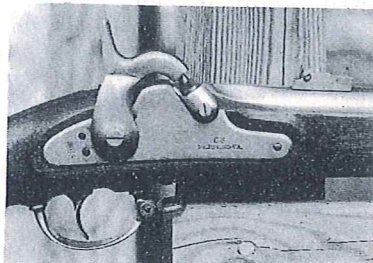
No matter if Booth acted at Ford's Theater in accordance with what he thought would be in the interests of his country or under its orders, there is much more to the hoistory of the assassination than is encompassed by the simple conspiracy. That theory enabled a closer and more rapid reunion of the North and South than would have been possible without it, but it has long outlived its usefulness. ■

William Hanchett of San Diego, California, a teacher of history for thirty-five years, is Professor of History Emeritus at San Diego State University and author of The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies (1983).



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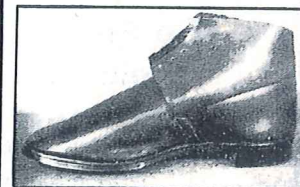
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