

Jr., "The Lincoln Administration and Arbitrary Arrests: A Reconsideration," *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 5 (1983): 7-24.

10. *Boston Evening Transcript*, June 23, 1865, p. 2.

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12. Louis Weichmann to Henry L. Burnett, May 5, 1865, in Record Book, file W, p. 102, National Archives.

13. *San Francisco Alta Californian*, July 20, 1865, p. 2.

14. James May to Andrew Johnson, Sept. 6, 1873, in Andrew Johnson Papers, Library of Congress, microcopy, roll 37.

15. August V. Kautz, *Daily Journal*, June 21, 1865, in Kautz Papers.

16. *New York Tribune*, May 30, 1865, p. 1.

17. *New York Tribune*, Apr. 23, 1883, pp. 1, 4; Apr. 24, 1883, pp. 1,4; Apr. 25, 1883, p. 1; Apr. 26, 1883, pp. 1, 8.

18. *New York Weekly World*, July 10, 1867, p. 2.

19. *Baltimore Sun*, July 24, 1867, p. 4.

20. Richard Nelson Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for Our Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 48-49.

## Conspiracies, Myths, and the Will to Believe: The Importance of Context

### Commentary on "Beware the People Weeping"

JAMES W. CLARKE

As a social scientist interested in historical subjects, I have become very aware of the disturbing ahistorical quality of much social science. It would be easy to conclude, as some have, that this defect is largely symptomatic of the advances in statistical methodologies that characterize the thrust of much of the research for the past three or four decades in the social sciences. But the problem is just as apparent in many nonstatistical studies that either ignore or fail to consider systematically and empirically the context of behavior and events. Nowhere is the problem more apparent than in psychological and psychiatric research that until recently has focused almost solely on personality and dispositional variables as if such characteristics exist in a contextual vacuum. It can also be observed, ironically it would seem, even in some psychohistorical work.

Professor Turner, both in his excellent book and the paper drawn from it presented here, has skillfully exposed the difficulties in the most widely known conspiratorial explanations of the Lincoln assassination.<sup>1</sup> It is apparent that intellectual dishonesty inspired by politics, greed, or slothfulness characterizes a number of those theories. But the real weakness in other honest but unconvincing efforts is the failure to evaluate persons and events in the political context of the nation's only civil war and first presidential assassination and the aftermath of both events. He concludes that "unfortunately, historians have acted as if the assassination occurred in a vacuum and have spent a great deal of time discussing erroneous and irrelevant issues. They have been extremely critical of events that transpired in 1865 and

have felt little need to investigate *how* and *why* people reacted the way they did [my emphasis].”<sup>2</sup>

While I share this conclusion, I am compelled to point out that Professor Turner appears to make the same mistake he condemns in the research of others in his own assessment of President Lincoln’s assassin, John Wilkes Booth, whom he describes as “a deranged gunman.” He implies that the failure to accept this view of Booth appears to be based on some seemingly neurotic compulsion within the body politic to believe in conspiracies. In his words: “There seems to be (as suggested by the 1969 Report of the President’s Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence) some sort of psychological phenomenon that causes people to see conspiracies behind nearly all assassinations. Somehow it is more satisfying to believe that a president died as the victim of a cause rather than at the hands of a deranged gunman.”<sup>3</sup>

If the public tends to “see” conspiracies, authorities and the media seem to possess a comparable tendency to “see” mental impairment and irrationality behind these acts with the same disregard, or selective use, of empirical evidence. It would be difficult to find a better example of such problems than the poorly researched and contextually barren study cited above. Unfortunately, the report of the President’s Commission is typical of most of the literature on presidential assassinations.

Like the actions of his contemporaries (Edwin Stanton and Jefferson Davis, for example), John Wilkes Booth’s motives and behavior must be evaluated in the appropriate political context—a time of raging emotions and unprecedented turmoil. Instead, our understanding of this assassination has been based on a number of incorrect assumptions about both victim and assassin that are now part of our national mythology, the most important of which is the assumption that Lincoln was the revered leader in life that he became in death. Given this assumption it follows that only a profoundly evil, deranged person could have killed a president so noble and good. Consequently, generations of scholars and writers have used evidence naively or selectively to deify Lincoln and vilify Booth and, as Professor Turner has argued, those thought to have conspired with Booth. To this extent, our public understanding of this event is simplistic and incomplete.

Lincoln’s reputation is securely and positively established. It would not diminish that reputation to state that his virtues were not ac-

knowledged to the same extent in life as they have been in death. Nor would it detract from that reputation to recognize that Booth’s virtues in life have been ignored or denied while his vices and eccentricities have been magnified or fabricated. The result is an ideologically inspired explanation of this sad event designed to deny the real partisan motives of the assassin and to misrepresent an era. Why?

The answer has to do with the political context of nineteenth-century America and the legitimate concerns of some at that time about whether this diverse new nation could survive as a democracy. Such doubts were chronic as the nation drifted toward civil war and, of course, became acute as that war raged. Moreover, as we know, there were particularly grave and bluntly stated concerns at the highest levels of government and society about President Lincoln’s ability to lead the nation through this crisis.

But having survived the crisis, in large part, because of the president’s sound judgment and strong leadership, it became necessary to rescue his reputation after his death from the ignominious end to which it had been consigned by his many critics throughout most of his administration. Thus, the Lincoln legend was born as his funeral train slowly wound its way back to Springfield. Qualities for which he had been ridiculed throughout his public life—such as his impoverished rural background and his lack of formal education and manners—were reevaluated and relabeled as basic elements in a new image of the rail-splitting frontiersman who came to epitomize the virtues of hard work, pragmatism, and, of course, honesty so central to America’s mythical image of itself. Lincoln’s success became in a very real sense America’s success, so that now along with Washington and Jefferson, his presence dominates—both literally and figuratively—our nation’s capital and history.

By the same token, it was necessary to reevaluate the life of his assassin; to strip from him any endearing qualities and talents that explained the affection and esteem he enjoyed in life; to emphasize his frailties and eccentricities when no real vices were known; and to attribute to him that most contemptible of motives, jealousy, which had reached insane proportions. For only a madman could have killed a president so without fault.

But to do this Booth had to be removed, consciously or unconsciously, from the politics of his day. Because within that context his act was not an insane departure from normality; rather, it was simply



an extension of the bloody violence that characterized this period of history and over which his now sainted but once unpopular and widely hated victim had presided. Unfortunately, such distortion of political reality and personal motives was to establish a pattern of politically inspired—as opposed to empirically based—interpretations of these recurring violent events.

In his classic essay “The Will to Believe,” William James observed that “as a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use.”<sup>4</sup> We replace them with interpretations based more on convenience or tradition than fact. And so national myths are conceived; traditions are established and subsequently amplified as occasion demands until a worldview emerges as so-called conventional wisdom.

The Lincoln assassination marks the beginning of a number of myths that reveal much about our hopes and fears as a nation. One of those fears—so pronounced in 1865—is that this great democratic experiment of ours might fail; that the freedom we cherish might be lost through domestic turmoil and ideological subversion, or even through foreign invasion by an enemy sensing internal weakness. And that fear is expressed, in part, in the way we interpret and explain the assassinations of our political leaders. Thus Booth has become deranged in the popular mind—if not his own—since his death. And sixteen years later when President Garfield died at the hands of the truly deranged Charles Guiteau, this assessment was offered: “The royal world abroad, whose peoples have their own assassins to contend with, must not be furnished reason to conclude that, in [democratic] America, the assassin is moved by the same impulses which control the assassin under monarchical forms of government.” To do so, it was explained, would question the “vaunted stability of our government in the estimation of the outside world.”<sup>5</sup>

We may assume that the tradition of insane presidential assassins was firmly established in 1901 when anarchist beliefs were officially labeled “delusions” by the psychiatrists who analyzed President McKinley’s assassin. As one of them wrote: “Such a monstrous conception and impulse as the wanton murder of the President of the United States, arising in the mind of so insignificant a citizen, without his being either insane or degenerate could be nothing short of a miracle. . . . To assume that he was sane, is to assume that he did a sane act.”<sup>6</sup> So in this manner we explained away the destabilizing political threat represented by the socialist-labor movement.

In similar fashion, Sirhan Sirhan’s Arab nationalism was dismissed as paranoia by the doctors who attended him. And James Earl Ray’s calculated contract killing of Martin Luther King, Jr., has been explained by his most recent biographer as displaced oedipal rage in terms reminiscent of those applied earlier to John Wilkes Booth. And once again, the truth is subverted to sustain the myth.

All this is not to suggest or endorse, heaven forbid, the rationality of assassination in America. Indeed, most assassins and would-be assassins were emotionally disturbed (but sane) persons. It is simply to underscore and extend, perhaps, the issue Professor Turner has raised in his book and paper. It would seem that as scholars, rather than mythmakers—whether the myths have to do with conspiracies or mental derangement—we can do better than we have in assessing and explaining these dark events in the nation’s history.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Reed Turner, *Beware the People Weeping: Public Opinion and the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
3. *Ibid.*
4. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 10.
5. Quoted in James W. Clarke, *American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 6.
6. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 41.