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Commentary on "The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies"

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The assumption that "great events have great causes" is one to which historians might not subscribe but which seems to be widely held among the public. A corollary to this assumption might be stated as follows: great events that are also horrible or traumatic must be the result of a conspiracy. Not a simple conspiracy, but a grand conspiracy a conspiracy involving people of power or wealth, a conspiracy whose consequences affect the lives of millions and alter the course of history.

Assassinations and wars provide the most fertile ground for theories of grand conspiracy. All of us are probably familiar, at least in a general way, with some of the many grand conspiracy theories that have been advanced to explain the Kennedy assassination. A number of such theories have also popped up to explain those other two traumatic assassinations of the 1960s, of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. But it was the events of a century earlier, the Civil War and the assassination of Lincoln, that have proven most traumatic and consequential in American history and that have probably spawned the greatest number of conspiracy theories. First there was the slave power conspiracy. Secession was seen as a grand conspiracy of fire eaters, the men whom historian Lee Benson some years ago labeled "Southern Bolsheviks." Then we have had the grand Copperhead conspiracy to undermine the Northern war effort, and its subsidiary theory, the Northwest conspiracy to detach the Midwestern states from the Union and ally them with the South. Then of course there was the grand conspiracy theory that Jefferson Davis and other Confederate leaders engineered Lincoln's assassination. John A. Logan, the Union wartime general and postwar Radical Republican, neatly packaged all of these theories along with a few others for good measure.

in a book about the Civil War appropriately entitled *The Great Conspiracy*.

But Logan and his fellow Radicals did not escape the tarbrush of conspiracy theories themselves. Indeed, even among serious historians until quite recently the Radicals were viewed as the most conspiratorial of all great conspirators in the Civil War era. For Charles Beard and others, they were the front men for Northern industrialists who wanted to cripple the power of Southern agrarians in the interest of fostering Northern industrial domination. For James G. Randall and the early T. Harry Williams, among others, the Radicals constituted a cabal of Jacobins conspiring to undermine Lincoln's generous policies toward the South. For a whole host of historians, the Radicals were responsible for driving the South into secession in 1861 and preventing a sane reconstruction of the Union after 1865, all in the interest of promoting their own political power and the domination of Northern industrial capitalism. And then there is the most persistent of the modern conspiracy theories of Lincoln's assassination—that it was engineered by Secretary of War Stanton on behalf of a clique of Radicals who wanted the soft-hearted president out of the way so they could reconstruct the South in their own harsh manner.

Within the Confederacy there were plenty of cabals and intrigues: Joe Brown and the Georgians against Jefferson Davis on the issues of states' rights and civil liberties; West Virginia and east Tennessee Unionists against secession; the antiwar Heroes of America in North Carolina; and so on. But somehow none of these seems to have achieved the status of a grand conspiracy like those of the Copperheads or Radicals in the North. And of course we have no grand conspiracy theories of the assassination of Jefferson Davis—for what would seem to be an obvious reason. But for those of you who might be disappointed about this, cheer up—one is on the way. The second volume in novelist John Jakes's trilogy on the sectional conflict was published with the title *Love and War*. If you think that title means that all's fair and anything goes, you are right. The melodramatic plot includes a substantial conspiracy by Confederate insiders to assassinate Davis. Sound enticing? You have not heard the best yet. ABC created an eighteen-hour television miniseries based on this and the preceding novel in the trilogy, *North and South*. The original script produced by Warner Brothers for ABC made the assassination conspiracy even more central to the plot and added to it a scheme to establish a

Southwest Confederacy west of the Mississippi stretching to California. Since millions of viewers probably acquired their notions of Civil War history from this television melodrama, we are indebted to ABC's nay-saying historical consultant for saving us from a new video-enshrined assassination theory.

Perhaps a Davis assassination conspiracy would have been welcome diversion from the troublesome plague of Lincoln conspiracies. Using William Hanchett's superb study of these conspiracy theories as a guide, I have counted about a dozen that we might dignify with the label of grand conspiracy—as distinguished from the simple conspiracy of Booth and his small-time hangers-on that actually happened. First there was the theory of a Confederate conspiracy to kill Lincoln. This had several variants and sometimes has included Northern Copperheads—whose alleged role became in some interpretations a separate though related theory. Third, the notion developed that Andrew Johnson was somehow involved, perhaps as the prime mover. Fourth was the persistent idea that the man killed in the burning barn was not Booth, and that the War Department—for any of several attributed reasons—conspired to cover up that fact. Then there has been the long-running theory of a Catholic conspiracy, put forth in dozens of books and articles during the past century. There has also been a theory that a consortium of international bankers headed by the Rothschilds plotted the assassination to weaken the United States for their takeover of its economy. Another theory attributed the dark deed to domestic bankers and businessmen who wanted to get rid of an obstacle to their exploitation of the South—or perhaps for some other reason. Then there is the idea that Secret Service Chief Lafayette Baker was involved in any of several ways, perhaps in conjunction with Stanton and leading Radicals, perhaps not. And of course there is the most popular conspiracy interpretation—the Stanton theory. This has developed an almost infinite number of variants since Eisenschiml's day, including attribution of participation in the plot at one level or another by Secretary of State Seward, Lincoln's friend and bodyguard Ward Hill Lamon, and yes, Mary Lincoln herself—who presumably did it for the insurance. David Balsiger and Charles Sellier's notorious book and movie, *The Lincoln Conspiracy*, manage without blushing to incorporate most of these theories into one superconspiracy interpretation, which, they tell us breathlessly, is based on discoveries of shocking new evidence that enables them to

tell all to an anxiously waiting world. These entrepreneurs add quite a few new twists of their own to old theories in a manner that implicates dozens of prominent officials and businessmen in both North and South in several concurrent plots to assassinate Lincoln. They also favor us with the revelation that one group of backers of the original kidnapping plot were Maryland planters and Dr. Samuel Mudd, who resented Lincoln's suppression of civil liberties in Maryland and thought kidnapping was just the thing to stop it.

I do not need to belabor the obvious point that these theories are false as well as ludicrous. William Hanchett and other scholars have exposed them as well and thoroughly as it can be done. The question I want to focus on is not the truth or falsity of these theories, but rather what has made them so popular among so many people. The myths of a people can tell us a great deal about their culture. Conspiracy theories are a form of myth. A promising frontier of research might lie in a study of these conspiracy theories for clues to popular and political culture during the years since the assassination. Some of you are probably familiar with David Donald's intriguing essay "Getting Right with Lincoln," in which he shows how all manner of political leaders, reformers, radicals, and reactionaries since 1865 have found it useful or necessary to cite Lincoln on behalf of their particular positions. Lincoln has become a touchstone for just about any question one can think of; quoting Lincoln became as important as quoting the Bible; it has been important to "get right" with Lincoln. I have had personal experience of this. A few Februaries back I gave a Lincoln's Birthday talk to the Lincoln Club of Wilmington, Delaware. Afterward a reporter for a local radio station interviewed me. The first question he asked was: "If Lincoln were alive today, what position would he take on abortion and the budget deficit?"

If Lincoln's life and thought are a touchstone for questions of politics and morals today, the manner of his death can also become a touchstone for the darker, negative aspects of popular culture. The Catholic conspiracy theory of the assassination, for example, might furnish material to the historian to measure and analyze anti-Catholic sentiment among groups that believed the theory. The Confederate conspiracy theory reflected anti-Southern sentiment growing out of a bitter and all-consuming war. The relationship between the Andrew Johnson conspiracy theory and Reconstruction politics is obvious. An analysis of the international banker and Rothschild theory might tell

us what the author of this theory and his intended audience thought about bankers, especially Jewish bankers. The Stanton/Radical theory is rich with ambivalence and irony when used for its insights on popular attitudes from the 1930s to the 1960s. This theory became popular among some liberals of the New Deal era who saw the Radical Republicans as a front for big business and were willing to believe that they murdered Lincoln. On the other hand, the theory found favor with some Southerners and conservatives and racists who saw the Radicals as self-righteous Jacobins out to destroy the South and equalize the races. The possibilities are endless. What was CBS's motivation in putting on the television docudrama in 1972 called *They've Killed Lincoln*? Who went to the movie or read the book *The Lincoln Conspiracy* in 1977? Was there a pattern? If so, what does it tell us about popular culture? There are some hints and suggestions of the interrelations between conspiracy theories and popular culture in Hanchett's book. One of the most fascinating is his reference to the rise of something of a Booth cult among certain young people in the 1970s, who called themselves Boothies. This has been the subject of an article in the *Journal of American Culture*; this is the kind of work I would like to see more of; this is the sort of thing I am suggesting as a new frontier of research on the Lincoln assassination grand conspiracy theories.