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On Myth in an Assassination

IN VIEW OF the rising doubt of the findings of the Warren Commission in the assassination of President Kennedy, we might explore a curious and possibly significant angle in the Lincoln assassination.

No analogy is intended, for many who saw the murder knew John Wilkes Booth by sight. But as the seeds of myth seemed to be working in the Kennedy case, so did a full-grown myth arise in the Lincoln case. It was largely the fault of Secretary of War Stanton.

Booth was the lesser member of a distinguished theatrical family. He was violently pro-Confederate, and in the last months of the war he may have been unhinged.

He conceived a plan to abduct the President and Cabinet and deliver them to Richmond, whereupon he would save the Confederacy and become a supreme hero. He concocted a ramshackle conspiracy, and most of the others were downright retarded.

Not until Lee's surrender, and all hope gone, did Booth shift to murder.

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BOOTH HIRED A HORSE and tethered it in the alley behind Ford's Theater. He had the run of the theater, and the crazy luck to find the Presidential box temporarily unguarded.

When he jumped from the box to the stage, he broke an ankle, but he did not shout "Sic semper tyrannis!" (so always with tyrants). First fragment of the myth.

He made a clean getaway, but only a witling named Herold met him at a bridge rendezvous as planned. Booth bluffed his way across the Potomac, and went to the farm of a notorious rebel named Cox, who had him hidden in a pine thicket for six days while 10,000 Union cavalymen combed the countryside. He found a Dr. Mudd to set his ankle, and rode a few miles to the Garret farm. But Garret was a chary host and had his son hide the fugitives in a small tobacco warehouse. Almost immediately trooper squads rode up, and soon learned their suspect was in the barn.

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STANTON, A DOMINEERING, suspicious and crotchety man, wanted Booth taken alive, so a Colonel Conger commanding the troopers parlied most of the night.

At dawn they fired the barn and Booth emerged, shot in the neck. Conger and another officer quarreled over whether Booth had shot himself, or was shot by a kooky soldier named Boston Corbett. Booth died in an hour, and his body was taken to a gunboat on the Potomac.

Here Stanton's delusions took over. He fancied a vast conspiracy, Booth as an agent of Jefferson Davis. He limited to nine those who viewed the body, but these included Booth's dentist, a doctor who had removed a tumor from Booth's neck earlier, and some who knew Booth had "JWB" tattooed on the back of his hand. He was buried in a secret grave.

Straightaway, some wild-eyed newspapers said he had escaped, and at least half the overwrought Union believed it. There were grotesque rumors Vice President Andrew Jackson headed the conspiracy, and Stanton half believed that.

Decades later a Tennessee man wrote a book saying a John St. Helen, who resembled Booth and had committed suicide in Oklahoma, was Booth. By 1900 a considerable segment of Americans believed this nonsense, or at least perversely accepted Booth's escape as the bizarre solution of a dread few days.

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