

Similarities In JFK,

Allan Nevins, famed historian and twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize, here compares and contrasts the dark conjecture, mystery and controversy surrounding the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln.

By ALLAN NEVINS
Written for The Associated Press

The murder of Abraham Lincoln was the most dramatic single occurrence in American history, and the murder of John F. Kennedy stands in close proximity to it.

It was inevitable in both instances that a shock so terrible should be followed by confusion and dark conjecture.

Both blows fell upon the land when sinister and healthful forces seemed closely balanced, creating a deep uneasiness, an apprehension of fate.

A dozen circumstances lifted the assassination of Lincoln to the highest plane of tragedy.

It took place at the close of the most terrible of our wars, when more than 600,000 new-made graves stared at the sky.

It occurred on Good Friday, when Northern sermons giving thanks for a victorious peace still echoed in many churches.

It was enacted in a theater before hundreds of horrified men and women, helpless in face of the gross negligence of the authorities in guarding the most precious life in the republic.

It altered the spirit of the people and the course of governmental action as the country faced the new tests of reconstruction.

Its one happy aspect was that it gave the nation a hero who would be more swiftly apotheosized than Washington, and become a greater rallying point of patriot fervor.

The murder of John F. Kenne-

dy was almost as stirringly dramatic.

It took place after the President had foiled a hostile attempt to place devastating weapons in Cuba, within range of our most populous cities.

It occurred just after he and the British leaders had won a momentous victory for peace in an agreement with Russia to terminate the atmospheric trial of nuclear bombs.

It was enacted as cheering crowds lined the streets of a city of nearly three-quarters of a million.

It sent across the world a shock that gathered force from the fact that Kennedy had fought for freedom in the Pacific, had travelled on friendly missions to a dozen European capitals, and was regarded everywhere as the most attractive leader of Democratic liberalism.

As in most crimes of sudden and unexpected violence — and political murders go back to Alcibiades and Caesar — the assassinations of Lincoln and Kennedy had elements of mystery that seemed to grow as they were given close study.

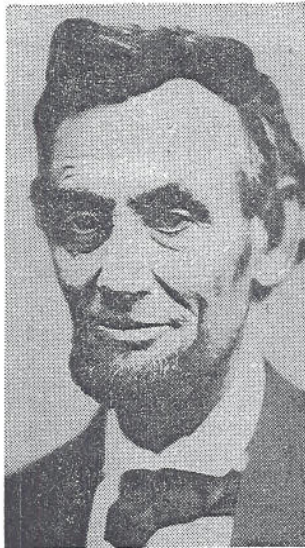
These inexplicable circumstances tempted men to invent weird hypotheses and offer fantastic answers. The guesses grouped themselves in both instances about three ideas.

First, it was supposed that so savage a deed must be the product of a conspiracy, and a conspiracy far grimmer than was visible on the surface.

In the second place, suspicious men surmised that behind this plot lurked powerful forces; some political faction at home, or foreign adversary overseas.

And in the third place, some over-subtle analysts were ready to conjecture that the man who pulled the trigger might be the catspaw of some traitor hidden within our own government.

In Lincoln's assassination the conspiracy was unquestionable — but what a contemptible little



ABRAHAM LINCOLN



JOHN WILKES BOOTH

gang of thugs they were!

John Surratt, the Confederate "runner" out of Baltimore who later ran away to Canada; George Atzerodt, the stupid, hulking wagon-maker; the towering and vicious-minded Confederate veteran Lewis Paine, who had killed and would kill again; the shrinking little druggist's clerk David E. Herold — not one of the 10 persons thought to be implicated ever commanded any respect except John Wilkes Booth.

He had the fanatic will to hold some of them in line; he subsidized them.

This actor of indifferent talents and extravagant demeanor had been a spectator at the hanging of John Brown but not a recruit in the Southern army. A dissolute, characterless monomaniac, he longed for notoriety when he could not achieve fame, and represented not principle but prejudice. The conspiracy of these "loose fish of secession sympathies," as Nicolay and Hay call them was really meaningless.

It was nevertheless in the existence of a real plot, however,

weak and squalid, that Lincoln's assassination differs most conspicuously from Kennedy's.

This plot had some semblance of motive behind it: The motive of frustrated rage in the defeat of the confederacy.

When President Kennedy died, it was natural that some people should leap at the idea that as John Wilkes Booth had accomplices, Lee Harvey Oswald must have had them.

It was natural that even after the Warren Commission had reported that Oswald was the sole assassin, with its reasons for that conclusion, a few Americans and a great many Europeans should cling to the theory of a conspiracy. For this the evidence seems flimsy indeed, yet the theory may long find some hesitant believers.

Even accepting it, with all its flaws and improbabilities, what can be said of the second idea of excessively suspicious analysts, that behind the collaboration of two men (nobody suggests more) stood some faction in home politics or some foreign foe?

When Lincoln was slain great

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Lincoln Deaths



JOHN F. KENNEDY



LEE HARVEY OSWALD

numbers of Americans uttered the preposterous exclamation, "Jefferson Davis!"

They had the hideous idea that the Confederacy must have controlled Booth's foul cabal.

This suggestion found formal support when, on May 10, 1865, the government indictment of the men obviously guilty of plotting Lincoln's death included a charge that they had "combined, confederated, and conspired" with Jefferson Davis, among other Richmond leaders, to slay the President.

For this discreditable accusation not a shred of evidence was offered.

The leaders of the Confederacy were high minded men, incapable of such thought or act. Yet a good many men did toy with the thought that slavery and secession might have clutched a last mad weapon.

Just so, the first news of Kennedy that sad November day in 1963 brought to many minds some dread names: racism, communism, extremism.

The happy fact in 1865 was that no suspicions of party of faction, of malice domestic or

foreign levy embodied in any real organization, proved tenable.

On the contrary, much of the sincerest mourning for Lincoln came from the South, and more than one Confederate leader joined John B. Gordon in declaring the assassination the worst possible calamity to that section.

A happy fact in 1963 was similarly that no possible accusation could be levelled against Communism or Fascism, against racism or political extremism.

When Kennedy saw the wild advertisement in a Dallas newspaper assailing him for alleged friendliness to Communism, he exclaimed to his wife: "We're in the nut country now!" — and it was sheer lunacy that explained the crime, so far as explanation was possible.

No nation, no party, and no responsible group can be held accountable for what a poet called "madness risen from hell."

Only long decades after Lincoln's assassination did a writer appear who dared hint, even obliquely, that a traitorous man hidden in the government had

connived at the act.

Otto Eisenschiml's volume, "In the Shadow of Lincoln's Death," seemed to bear that construction.

It appeared to suggest — it did not assert — that a leader of the radical Republicans, anxious that a more drastic Reconstruction be pursued than Lincoln favored, had smoothed the way for Booth's crime. Two chapters entitled "Stanton's Reign of Terror" and "The Real Stanton" were full of dark insinuations. No historian of standing whatever has supported the seeming implication of this work.

It is impossible to prevent the issuance of sensational books, and even the assassination of Kennedy has been followed by lurid volumes of deplorable character, reflecting on the government and the nation.

They will probably sink into well-merited oblivion, but their appearance is a disturbing fact.

The only really close resemblance between the murder of Lincoln and that of Kennedy lies in the fact that each revealed negligence on the part of the proper guardians of the President.

Of course it is impossible to give absolutely complete protection to the chief executive. Lincoln had to see thousands of friends and strangers in a city full of spies, rebel sympathizers, and desperadoes.

Kennedy had to expose himself to the same dangers that were fatal to Garfield and McKinley, and more.

But both should have had fuller safeguards — as man realized too late.

Just before he was assassinated Lincoln was troubled by a gang of brawlers on Pennsylvania Avenue as he walked from the White House to the War Department.

He told a White House guard: "You know, I believe there are men who want to take my life. And I believe they will do it."

The day of his murder he asked Stanton to let Thomas T. Eckert go with him and Mrs. Lincoln to the play.

"I have seen Eckert break five pokers, one after the other, over his arm. And I am thinking he would be the kind of man to go with me this evening."

Stanton said no, for he had important work for Eckert.

With a snap of the finger, says one writer, government officers could have posted a guard around the theater, army police back stage, detectives in the audience, and sentries in the corridors.

But the President's box was all unguarded. One policeman was supposed to stand watch over it, but at the critical hour this drunken wretch was absent from his post.

As for Kennedy, he repeatedly said that a determined assassin could always find a way, and that a sniper with a telescopic sight was hardly preventable.

But houses and offices within range might have been searched.

As Theodore Sorensen writes: "We can never be certain what prevented a more alert coordination of all the known facts on the Kennedy route and the potential Kennedy assassin."

Now that these two unforgettable assassinations have gone into history, their important lessons ought to be heeded.

One elementary lesson concerns vigilance and thoroughness in measures for the protection of the head of the Republic and the leader of its people.

Another important lesson is that, for the maintenance of a proper national spirit, the fullest possible light should be thrown upon these dread events at once — it was not until the middle 1930s that vital War Department records on Lincoln's murder were made public — and that accredited persons of judgment should furnish a full record devoid of malice, innuendo, or sensationalism.