

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Lincoln Assassination

By Edward Steers, Jr.

In 1948, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. conducted a poll asking fifty-five of his colleagues to rate the presidents of the United States in terms of their greatness. Forty-six years later (1996) the New York Times Magazine asked his son, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., to repeat the canvas as a comparison to his father's earlier poll. While there are significant differences in both polls concerning several of our presidents, one result stood out above the rest; Abraham Lincoln was the winner in both polls attesting to his place among historians as our greatest president and greatest American.¹ In the period between these two bookend polls several canvasses have been made not only among historians, but the general public as well, and in each poll Lincoln emerged in first place. The reasons for this choice are numerous, but principal among them are the belief that he saved the Union and freed the slaves. Ironically, these two reasons also resulted in his death at the hand of an assassin.

Lincoln's elevation to the level of an American icon is ironic in many ways for his revered place in American culture was not always the case. During the four years and five weeks of his presidency he was considered both inept and tyrannical by a significant number of his fellow Americans including members of his own party. His election as president in November 1860 is unique in the annals of American presidential elections. He won the presidency against three other opponents polling less than forty percent of the popular vote, the smallest percentage of any winning candidate in the country's history.² Despite his low popular vote, however, Lincoln won 59 per cent of the 304 electoral votes, easily defeating his opponents.

The image of Lincoln today is not the Lincoln of 1860 proving once again that time often smoothes the sharp edges of history. There is little disagreement with the fact that he was unpopular with a significant part of the population during

¹ For an excellent article discussing these two polls and the rationale behind the selection see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 112, no. 2 (Summer 1997), pp. 179-190.

² For election results for each candidate by state see Mark E. Neeley, Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), pp. 97-100.

most of his presidency, and the most divisive president in American history. So violent was the feeling toward Lincoln that he became the target for seven separate attempts to remove him from office by violent means before John Wilkes Booth's successful assassination on April 14, 1865.

While Booth's act is often viewed as the act of a lone assassin bent on revenge, the facts suggest a far more complicated scenario. By 1864 matters were becoming increasingly desperate for the Confederacy. Despite a series of battlefield successes, the Confederacy was running out of everything necessary for victory: men, food, materiel, money, and most of all, time. To Jefferson Davis and several of his top advisors it was not Lincoln's armies that stood in the way of Confederate independence, but Lincoln himself. Lincoln's tenacity in prosecuting the war was unwavering throughout the four years of war. In a letter to his secretary of state, William H. Seward, Lincoln wrote: "I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsake me . . ."³ It was Lincoln's uncompromising demand for reunion together with his insistence on the abolition of slavery that stood in the way of meaningful negotiation as far as Davis was concerned. This, of course, was unacceptable to Davis and nearly everyone else in the Confederacy. It was tantamount to unconditional surrender. Slavery was the reason the South seceded in the first place, and by this time it was a significant reason that the war was being fought. Slavery was non-negotiable on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line. The only realistic hope left for the Confederacy was Lincoln's defeat in the upcoming election. Davis acted by establishing a group of Confederate agents in Canada with the principal objective of interfering with the Union war effort by wreaking havoc throughout the North in an attempt to demoralize the civilian population, with the hoped-for result of Lincoln's defeat in the November election.

By the spring of 1864, John Wilkes Booth had come to his own conclusions on saving the Confederacy. A year later he would explain his thinking in a diary entry written during his attempted escape from pursuing cavalry: "our cause being almost lost, something decisive & great must be done."⁴ Like many, he believed Abraham Lincoln had to be removed from office. At the very same time Booth set out to plot Lincoln's capture, two other plans were being proposed by Confederate officials to carry out the same objective.⁵ Whether Booth knew of

³Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953), 9 vols., 5:291-292

⁴ John Rhodehamel and Louise Taper, eds., *"Right or Wrong God Judge Me" The Writings of John Wilkes Booth* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 154.

⁵ These capture plots were proposed by Thomas Nelson Conrad with the support of Confederate secretary of war James A. Seddon, and Brigadier Bradley T. Johnson. See

these prior plans or not is not known, but he did express concern at one point in the fall of 1864 that if he did not act soon others might beat him to it.⁶

That Booth was serious about his plan as early as the spring of 1864 is seen by his decision to abandon his lucrative acting career and devote his energies to capturing Lincoln. On May 23, he gave his last paid performance. From June 1864 until the night of April 14, 1865, eleven months later, Booth appeared in only three stage performances, and all three were benefits without pay. Booth's lucrative source of income ended abruptly leaving him without any visible livelihood.

By August of 1864, Booth was putting his plan into effect. He called on two of his early Baltimore boyhood friends, Samuel Arnold and Michael O'Laughlen. The recruitment of Arnold and O'Laughlen was a good start to assembling an action team, but it was far from enough to carry out so bold an attempt as the capture of the President of the United States. If Booth were to be successful he would need more men, and a plan of escape. Richmond was roughly one hundred miles south of Washington. The escape route passed through territory occupied by Union cavalry, and crossed the Potomac River, which was heavily patrolled by the Union Navy. Booth would have to travel at night and on reaching the Potomac River would need a clever boatman to get them across the river without detection. All this required skilled people whose loyalties were unquestionably pro-Confederate.

Booth's safest route to Richmond ran through Southern Maryland (Prince George's County and Charles County). The area was home to a people who fit the bill nicely. They were friendly to the Confederacy and had successfully outmaneuvered their occupiers on numerous occasions. Dozens of local citizens were active members of a successful Confederate underground that maintained a communications link between Richmond and various points as far north as Montreal and Toronto, known as the "Mail Line." It ran from Richmond through Bowling Green and Port Royal, Virginia across the Rappahannock River to a point on the Virginia side of the Potomac known as Mathias Point where it crossed the Potomac just east of Port Tobacco, Maryland and ran north to Surrattsville in Prince George's County. From Surrattsville it made its way another thirteen miles into Washington. It is over this exact route that Booth would make his escape after murdering Lincoln.

Booth needed to make contact with the key people in Southern Maryland. There was one person that he knew from pre-war days in Baltimore that might be able to provide him just the help he needed. His name was Patrick Charles Martin.

Edward Steers, Jr., *Blood on the Moon* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 26 and 55-58.

⁶ Joan L. Chaconas, "Unpublished Atzerodt Confession," *Surratt Courier* (vol. 13, no. 10), pp. 3-5.

Martin, a pre-war Baltimore liquor dealer who spent time in Charles County, was familiar with prominent people in that region. Martin spent the first year of the war as a blockade-runner before escaping to Canada in the summer of 1862. He continued his activities from Montreal where he eventually became head of the Confederate Secret Service operations in that city.⁷ Booth decided to pay Martin a visit and solicit his help.

On October 16, Booth headed north to the Canadian province of Quebec. On the 18th, he registered at the St. Lawrence Hall in Montreal, headquarters for several of the agents working out of Montreal including Patrick Martin. Meeting with Martin, Booth was able to acquire a substantial sum of money and a letter of introduction to two key Charles County Confederate agents, Doctors William Queen and Samuel Mudd. Queen was an elder statesman among the Confederate underground in Charles County while Samuel Mudd was one of several active Confederate agents servicing the "Mail Line." The line ran past the Mudd farm and both Mudd and his wife routinely passed mail from Richmond north, and from the north, south to Richmond.⁸

Having made successful contact with Patrick Martin in Montreal Booth returned to Washington where spent the next two months filling out his capture team. After opening a bank account where he deposited \$1,750, he boarded a stage for Charles County where he spent the night at the home of Dr. William Queen, one of Patrick Martin's correspondents in the letter he gave to Booth. The following morning Booth attended St Mary's Catholic Church in Bryantown where he was introduced to Dr. Mudd, the second of Martin's correspondents. The meeting between Booth and Mudd proved vital to Booth's efforts. A few weeks later Mudd introduced Booth to John Surratt who agreed to help Booth capture Lincoln. With Mudd and Surratt's help Booth added George Atzerodt and Lewis Powell to his team, and by March Booth had the men he needed to strike. The opportunity came on March 17, when Booth learned that Lincoln would travel to Campbell Hospital on the outskirts of Washington to attend a benefit performance for wounded soldiers. He summoned his team and together they set out to kidnap Lincoln. Fortunately for Lincoln, and the nation, the president cancelled his trip choosing to stay in Washington and accept a captured Confederate battle flag from an Indiana regiment. Frightened they had been discovered, Booth's team disbanded returning to their civilian lives, but only for a short while. Most were still willing to go forward, but only under circumstances that included a guarantee of success.

The fall of Richmond on April 2, 1865 changed everything as far as Booth was concerned. No longer able to deliver a captured Lincoln to Confederate

⁷ William A. Tidwell, *April '65 Confederate Covert Action in the American Civil War* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995), p. 135.

⁸ Union Provost Marshal's File of Papers Relating to Two or More Civilians, NARA, RG 109, M-416, file 6083.

leaders now on the run for their lives, Booth decided to take matters into his own hands and kill the president. At what moment this change in plans took place is not clear, but sometime between April 3 and April 11 Booth made his fateful decision. On the morning of April 13, he sent Lewis Powell to reconnoiter the home of Secretary of State William Seward where he actually chatted with the household maid.⁹ Booth may well have been casing the home in anticipation of assigning Powell the task of killing Seward. Whatever occurred between that visit and the early morning of April 14 remains a mystery, but at that time Booth's "boatman," George Atzerodt, took a room at the Kirkwood House not far from the room where vice president Andrew Johnson was staying. Sometime between 10 o'clock and 11 o'clock on the morning of the 14th Booth stopped by Ford's Theatre to pick up his mail. He learned that the president and General Grant would attend that evening's performance of "Our American Cousin." The time and place were perfect. Booth was thoroughly familiar with both the theater and the play. It was just what he had been waiting for.

Booth spent the rest of the day putting matters in order. He wrote a lengthy letter to the editor of the Washington *Intelligencer* explaining his motives for killing the greatest despot the country had ever known. He visited the theater and the box and made preparations to secure the outer door and carefully go over his plan of attack and escape. By 7 o'clock he gathered three of his loyal cohorts at Powell's room not three blocks from the theater. Booth's plan was essentially to decapitate the Federal government by killing its top leaders. To Atzerodt he assigned Andrew Johnson; to Powell he assigned William Seward; reserving Lincoln for himself. Booth went over the plans with his team and coordinated the attacks for between 10 o'clock and 10:30 that night. Around 7:30 the team dispersed and melted deep into a city still celebrating the surrender of Lee and his once mighty Army of Northern Virginia.

At approximately 10:20 PM Booth struck. Entering the President's box he fired his small derringer at point blank range into the back of Lincoln's head, blowing a path diagonally through the president's brain. A few blocks away Lewis Powell was wreaking havoc at the Seward house bloodying five people, but failing to mortally wound Seward. Atzerodt came within a few feet of Andrew Johnson's room, but saw his courage evaporate at the last minute. Fleeing the hotel he wandered about the city before checking into his favorite hotel around 2 AM. Powell, left on his own by his guide, David Herold, who abandoned him on hearing screams coming from the Seward house, fled into the darkness of the city.

Jumping from the box onto the stage, Booth made his way to the rear door of the theater and mounted his horse to begin his escape. Heading east at a fast gallop, he reached the Navy Yard Bridge that spanned the eastern branch of the Potomac River. Allowed to cross by the guard, Booth then made his way between

⁹ William A. Tidwell, James O. **Hall**, and David W. Gaddy, *Come Retribution* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), pp. 422-423.

Forts Baker and Wagner, the last obstacle to his escape. Within a few miles he came to a prearranged rendezvous point where he waited for his cohorts to arrive. Within minutes David Herold showed up. Powell and Atzerodt failed to appear, and Booth could not afford to wait for them. The two fugitives set out on their attempt to elude the Federal forces soon to be close on their heels.

Traveling mostly by night, Booth would follow the same escape route laid out along the Confederate mail line that he had planned to use in taking a captured Lincoln to Richmond. His visit with Patrick Martin paid off. Booth and Herold would be on the run for twelve days and travel one hundred and ten miles before their capture at the farm of Virginia planter Richard Garrett near Port Royal, Virginia. Booth would depend on the same Confederate agents that successfully serviced the line throughout the war. Principal among these were Samuel Mudd, Samuel Cox, and Thomas Jones, three Confederate agents who had served the Confederacy throughout the war. Without their help Booth and Herold would not have lasted as long as they did.

Responding to a tip received in the war department telegraph office on Monday, April 24, a troop of the 16th New York Cavalry finally caught up with Booth and Herold at Garrett's farm early Wednesday morning, April 26. After a bravado performance in which Booth failed to induce the troopers to engage him in a shootout, Booth was shot by Sergeant Boston Corbett and mortally wounded. Herold was taken prisoner.

During the twelve days leading up to Booth's death Federal authorities rounded up hundreds of suspects including seven who would join Herold charged with Lincoln's murder before a military tribunal. The trial would last fifty days and hear testimony from over 360 witnesses. In the end, four of the defendants would be sentenced to death by hanging (Mary Surratt, Lewis Powell, George Atzerodt, and David Herold), three would receive life sentences (Samuel Mudd, Samuel Arnold, and Michael O'Laughlen), and one (Edman Spangler), would be sentenced to six years. The prison sentences were served in Fort Jefferson located off of the Florida Keys on the Dry Tortugas. O'Laughlen would die in prison a victim of yellow fever. The three surviving conspirators would receive full pardons from President Andrew Johnson after serving just under four years.

John Surratt, the tenth conspirator, had initially escaped by fleeing to Canada where Jesuit priests hid him before helping him make his way to the Vatican States in Italy. Arrested while serving as a Papal Guard, Surratt escaped once more only to be arrested in Alexandria, Egypt and returned to the United States. Surratt was tried in civil court in June 1867, and released after the jury failed to reach a verdict. He died at his home in Baltimore in 1916, the last of the ten conspirators charged with Lincoln's murder.

The Lincoln assassination has been fruitful ground for all sorts of myths and conspiracy theories including the belief that Booth was never killed, but escaped

only to die years later under an alias, in Enid, Oklahoma in one theory, and Guwahati, India in another. Other theories maintain that Lincoln's own secretary of war Edwin Stanton, along with powerful allies in the North including the head of the National detective Police, Lafayette Baker, engineered Lincoln's death. Still others claim Pope Pius IX ordered Lincoln's assassination. Among the persistent myths that continue to cloud the true history of the assassination are those that claim Samuel Mudd and Mary Surratt were innocent victims of a ruthless Federal conspiracy, and that the military tribunal acted as an illegal kangaroo court that denied the accused their constitutional rights. While interesting, and often titillating, none of these conspiracy theories and myths are true. Thorough research by numerous historians has readily disproven all of them.¹⁰

Lincoln's assassination is one of the greatest tragedies in American history. Continued efforts to misrepresent and cloud the facts surrounding it only add to the tragedy. As one pundit astutely pointed out, "It isn't the history we don't know that's the problem; it's the history we know that isn't so."

¹⁰ An excellent treatise on dispelling these false conspiracy theories is: William Hanchett, *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1983). See also: Edward Steers, Jr., *Lincoln Legends* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).