

Lincoln and Booth: More Light on the Conspiracy

Frank J. Williams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Williams, Frank J. (2003) "Lincoln and Booth: More Light on the Conspiracy," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss4/14>

Review

Williams, Frank J.

Fall 2003

Winkler, H. Donald *Lincoln and Booth: More Light on the Conspiracy*.
Cumberland House Publishing, Inc., \$16.95 ISBN 1581823428

Trigger man

Author exposes details of murder and trial

Assassinations stun a nation. Research after the John Kennedy assassination confirmed there is a deep bond between the public and the President which does not exist between other politicians and the voters. From the moment John Wilkes Booth fired his derringer, the public wanted to know about him and his motivation, as well as the impact it would have on Reconstruction policy. As America's first successful Presidential assassination, it left the nation both bewildered and angered.

The nation unified, as typically takes place after an assassination. If Booth's political sense had been on par with his acting and shooting, he would have carried out his mission much earlier. But by the time he acted, the South had lost the war and his political act backfired. He could not fathom why he wasn't lionized. A country that groaned beneath this tyranny, and prayed for this end, and yet now behold the cold hand they extend me, he wrote in his diary before his capture. He wasn't a madman, just a murderous political fool.

Of course, Lincoln's death made the fate of white Confederates worse. Even Jefferson Davis understood this. Booth's blind hatred brought radical Republicans armed with full vengeance against the South. A harsh military occupation was alien to Lincoln's nature. Though Booth may have reserved some vindication in the short-term failure of radical Reconstruction, ultimately Lincoln's policy triumphed both in the South and the nation. The Civil War amendments would be followed by the Civil Rights movement decades later. Ironically, research now shows that assassination is one of the half-dozen factors which enhance a President's reputation! The heavily criticized sixteenth

President became a martyred political saint almost overnight.

Apart from anchoring Lincoln's reputation in sainthood, the assassination has created a cottage industry within the broader story of the Civil War and Lincoln's political legacy. As some have pointed out before, assassins in some sense appeal to the taboo side of human nature. We tend to know not only the first and last names of assassins but even their middle names — we are unlikely to know the full names of most Presidents. All presidential assassinations provoke interest, especially America's first. Volumes have been written about Booth's regicide, many which serve only to create and continue myths. Did Booth act alone or was he an agent of the Confederate government in Richmond? The persistent family of Samuel A. Mudd continues their generational efforts to exonerate their forebear who was found guilty of aiding in Booth's escape merely for treating the assassin's broken leg.

In *Lincoln and Booth: More Light on the Conspiracy*, H. Donald Winkler works to penetrate Booth's motives and actions from the assassin's point of view. The author draws and builds upon the latest scholarship and endeavors to dispel the myths. He has a writer's gift for knowing when to tell the story in his own words rather than rely only on primary sources. As a result, he successfully turns the book into an account that often reads like an adventure story.

Two key chapters are those dealing with Mary Surratt and Edwin Stanton. Most think that the former was involved in some way with Booth, and the latter was charged with bringing Booth to justice. Surratt was the owner of the boarding house where Booth and his conspirators met to plan their anti-Lincoln plot. First, it called for them to kidnap the President, and then to kill him, as well as the Vice President and Secretary of State. Surratt unintentionally made history as the first woman involved in an assassination, as well as becoming the first one executed by the federal government. Though Winkler believes she was involved in the plot to kidnap Lincoln, questions remain unresolved about her role in the final assassination. The closest to a smoking gun was her note to the tavern's proprietor in Surrattsville to get the shooting irons out. The military tribunal used that to proclaim her death sentence by hanging.

Even Secretary of War Stanton's behavior has been questioned by some. The author notes that Stanton acted strangely at times by refusing to comply with Lincoln's request for a specific protector at Ford's Theatre to managing the death

of Mary Surratt. Despite Booth's diary with its missing pages, the intimidation of witnesses, and the persecution of some conspirators while allowing others to go free, Winkler concludes that Stanton was not involved in a plot to murder the President who belongs to the ages.

This account of the assassination covers all the political and judicial dimensions of the episode: covert actions, deceptions, jury tampering, obstruction of justice, subterfuge, use of a military tribunal to try the conspirators and dirty politics. In addition to the guilt of Dr. Mudd and Mary Surratt, as well as Confederate involvement, the author discusses John Surratt's reprieve and the reliability of the government's main witness, Louis Weichmann. There are no heroes in this sordid chapter of American history.

Though scholars will regret the lack of footnotes, the author makes the story accessible to the general public. He trusts readers to draw their own conclusions about the behavior of those discussed. It will spur some to want to read even more on the topic.

Frank J. Williams is Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island and Chair of The Lincoln Forum. He serves as a member of the U. S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.