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# Lincoln Assassinated!

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The assassination of President Abraham Lincoln almost exactly 140 years ago–Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth while watching the play "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. around 10:15 p.m. on Friday, April 14, 1865, and died at 7:22 a.m. the following morning–was, in the words of historian Edward Steers, Jr., "a cataclysmic event in American history" which "gave rise to an ominous cloud that spread across the American landscape leaving its fallout on subsequent generations." The prolongation of widespread virulent racism in this country, the calamitous failure of Reconstruction, the rise of the Jim Crow system, the continued economic and social oppression of African Americans and their transformation from slaves to underclass–all in some way resulted from the fact that Lincoln's violent, early death deprived America of his brilliant leadership when it was needed the most.

Even though it was the single most terrible murder in American history, until fairly recently professionally trained historians were wary of the Lincoln assassination as an independent topic. The first book on the assassination written by an academic historian was published in 1982, the second in 1983. Prior to then, books about the Lincoln assassination all had been written by journalists or nonprofessionally trained historians who often wrote with a partisan agenda, and whose research usually did not extend beyond secondary sources. Examples: David M. Dewitt, The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln and Its Expiation (1909), Clara E. Laughlin, The Death of Lincoln (1909), Lloyd Lewis, Myths After Lincoln (1929) (republished in 1994 under the title The Assassination of Lincoln), Otto Eisenschiml, Why Was Lincoln Murdered? (1937), George S. Bryan, The Great American Myth (1940), and Jim Bishop, The Day Lincoln Was Shot (1955).

Since publication of William Hanchett's The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies (1983), only the second book on the assassination written by a professional academic historian, the Lincoln assassination has regularly attracted the attention of professional

historians, both academic and nonacademic, who have focused their research activities on government archives and original papers stored in libraries or in private collections, and who, overall, have scrupulously avoided partisanship.

Today, as a result of the post-1980 historical research of these trained historians, we have a better understanding of events in Ford's Theatre–including for example, the facts concerning how John Wilkes Booth actually made his way into the president's private box. In order to get to Lincoln inside that box, Booth had to enter consecutively two closed, unlocked doors. The first, outer door opened into a short passageway leading on the left side to a second, inner door, which in turn opened directly into the rear of the private box where Lincoln was seated. Everyone agrees that there was no one stationed in the passageway, and that once Booth made it through the outer door there was nothing to prevent him from opening the inner door and stealthily approaching Lincoln from behind. And as for that outer door, the traditional view–set forth in innumerable accounts of Lincoln's death–is that at the time Booth approached the door Lincoln's police officer bodyguard, John F. Parker, had unaccountably left the chair placed for him practically in front of that door and had gone somewhere else, that no one else had stationed himself there either, and that Booth was therefore able to enter that door unchallenged by anyone at its entrance.

It is certainly true Parker was absent from his seat when Booth approached the front of that outer door; probably Parker had either moved to another place in the theatre where his view of the play would be unobstructed or he had exited the theatre to have a drink at a nearby saloon. But it is not true that there was no one monitoring entry through that door. There most definitely was someone sitting just outside that door, someone who might have changed history had he verbally opposed or physically resisted Booth's entry. This person was 30-year old Charles Forbes, Lincoln's messenger and personal valet, who inexplicably granted Booth permission to enter the door. A Union army officer, who happened to witness the brief encounter between Booth and Forbes, later described what he saw: Booth, apparently recognizing Forbes, walked up to Forbes and, after reaching into his vest pocket, presented Forbes with a calling card, whereupon Forbes allowed Booth to enter the door. Booth then closed and bolted the door behind him, strode down the short passageway, opened the inner door, entered the private box, and shot Lincoln in the back of the head with a single shot .44 cal. derringer. Forbes, a family friend of the Lincolns who died in 1895, remains a something of a mysterious historical figure. Strangely, he is not known to

have given a witness statement in the investigation that followed the assassination; nor, according to most scholars, did he leave any known written or verbal account of events. However, according to Timothy S. Good's We Saw Lincoln Shot: One Hundred Eyewitness Accounts (1995), in 1892 Forbes prepared a terse, one-paragraph account of the events at Ford's Theatre in which he acknowledged being in Lincoln's box when Lincoln was shot but said nothing about letting Booth into that box. In 1984 an historical society placed on Forbes' unmarked grave a tombstone which reads in part: "He accompanied the Lincolns to Ford's Theatre on the night of April 14, 1865 and was seated just outside the box when the president was shot."

The fact that Charles Forbes was positioned at the outer door to Lincoln's box was mentioned in newspaper articles shortly after the assassination and in George S. Bryan's 1940 book on the assassination, but it was omitted in most other accounts, including Jim Bishop's 1955 bestseller, claimed to be the most widely read of all Lincoln assassination books. Forbes' presence at the door is omitted in almost all movie or TV versions of the Lincoln assassination. It was not until 1983, when historian William Hanchett's The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies re-identified Forbes as "the man who allowed Booth to reach Lincoln's chair," that the popular myth, that there was no one positioned near the outer door to Lincoln's box when Booth entered through that door, was irretrievably shattered. Nowadays authoritative books on the assassination–for example, Champ Clark, The Assassination: Death of the President (1987), William A. Tidwell, Come Retribution: The Confederate Secret Service and the Assassination of Lincoln (1988), Edward Steers, Jr., The Escape and Capture of John Wilkes Booth (1996), Edward Steers, Jr., Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln (2001), Jay Winik, April 1865: The Month That Saved America (2001), and Michael W. Kauffman, American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies (2004)–mention Forbes' presence in the theatre and his decision to pass Booth into the box. Any assassination account that omits reference to Forbes–Leonard F. Guttridge and Ray A. Neff, Dark Union: The Secret Web of Profiteers, Politicians, and Booth Conspirators That Led to Lincoln's Death (2003) is an example–may be regarded as questionable. (The Guttridge and Neff book's questionable reliability is further demonstrated by its insistence that Booth was not, as history books tell us, killed 12 days after the assassination at Richard Garrett's farm near Port Royal, in Caroline County, Virginia, where he had been cornered by pursuing Union soldiers; instead, the book solemnly suggests, Booth escaped–and fled to India!) Oddly, Roy Z. Chamblee, Jr.'s Lincoln's Assassins: A Complete Account

of Their Capture, Trial, and Punishment (1990) contains no reference to Forbes and asserts that it was "Officer John Parker who allowed [Booth] to pass without question."

Recent scholarly research on Lincoln's murder has, however, accomplished hugely more than simply casting new light on such factual issues as how Booth made his way into Lincoln's presence. For this research has destroyed the consensus of opinion which prevailed from the late 19th century until almost the end of the 20th century regarding the scope of the conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln. Simultaneously, the research has resuscitated a conspiracy theory which predominated for only a few years immediately after the assassination, but then fell into discredit.

Three recent historians are principally responsible for this sea change in views of the scope of the conspiracy to assassinate Abraham Lincoln. The first is William Hanchett, a history professor emeritus who taught at San Diego University. The second is the late William A. Tidwell, a retired brigadier general who for years was an official in the U.S. intelligence community, including the CIA. The third is Edward Steers, Jr., since 1994 a recognized authority on the Lincoln assassination. The books and articles by these three excellent scholars are based on extensive investigation of archives and original documents. Some of the publications of these scholars are listed in the Bibliography at the end of this article.

In the immediate aftermath of Lincoln's murder many important officials in the U.S. government, civilian as well as military, were firmly convinced, not without reason, that responsibility for the murder lay with the top levels of the Confederate government. The assassination, these officials believed, was the result of a Confederate Grand Conspiracy to murder Lincoln. For a brief period the American public (outside the South) enthusiastically embraced this theory. By around 1870, however, for reasons too complex to explain here, the majority of Americans had abandoned the Confederate Grand Conspiracy theory and replaced it with what is known as the Simple Conspiracy theory–the view that the conspiracy to murder Lincoln comprised, in the words of William Hanchett, only "Booth and a small group of his ne'er-do-well friends." Although bizarre theories of the assassination cropped up over the next century–theories that the assassination was the work of the Roman Catholic Church, international bankers, or even high-ranking officials of the U.S. government–the Simple Conspiracy theory held sway in both American public

opinion and the academic community until almost the end of the 20th century. As recently as 1971, when the Simple Conspiracy theory had been the received opinion for a century and appeared unchallengeable, historian Allan Nevins confidently summarized the consensus as follows: "It is generally agreed today that there was no plot made by Jefferson Davis or anyone else in high position in the Confederacy to assassinate Lincoln, and that Booth and his array of miscreants acted on their own initiative."

Today the words of Nevins ring hollow. They embody a bygone perspective. Why? Why is it that the Simple Conspiracy theory now seems antiquated and that the Confederate Grand Conspiracy theory appears increasingly plausible? The answer is simple: because of what we now know about clandestine operations conducted by both sides during the Civil War. There is now a tremendous amount of documentary evidence, previously unknown, about Confederate and Union involvement in "black flag warfare," the type of irregular warfare that violated civilized standards and justified illegal acts such as murders or acts of terrorism if they were directed at the military defeat of the enemy. There is confirmed evidence that the Confederacy plotted the kidnaping and, later, the death by bomb explosion, of Abraham Lincoln. There is confirmed evidence that John Wilkes Booth was a Confederate secret agent. There is confirmed evidence that after the assassination, while he was fleeing arrest, Booth received help from members of a Confederate clandestine apparatus. And there is much more.

In fact, we know enough to be able to draw the following conclusions regarding the Lincoln assassination.

*First, it is now well established that the Confederate States of America had secret services which carried out espionage, counterintelligence, sabotage, and covert operations.* These secret services reported directly to Confederate President Jefferson Davis and were funded with legislative appropriations totaling about $6 million–a vast sum in those days, as several scholars have noted–and disbursements were made in gold subject to the personal approval of Davis, on the basis of paperwork prepared by Davis' close friend Judah P. Benjamin, Confederate Secretary of State, who would then hand over to secret services operatives the gold approved by Davis. In the words of William A. Tidwell, the Confederacy had "a sophisticated, technical, intelligence-related organization operating clandestine missions and reporting directly to President

Jefferson Davis." The traditional view that Confederate secret services could not have been involved in the assassination because there were no such services has therefore been proved dead wrong. The proven existence of active Confederate secret services, without question, strengthens the case of those favoring the Confederate Grand Conspiracy theory and weakens arguments in favor of the Simple Conspiracy theory.

*Second, agents of the Confederate secret services plotted clandestine operations involving terrorist acts.* This is totally proved. For example, these operatives constructed special explosive devices disguised to look like lumps of coal which were to be smuggled into furnaces of Northern factories and the boilers of Northern fishing ships. One of these coal bombs was found in Jefferson Davis' office in April 1865 shortly after the Confederate government evacuated Richmond. These agents even plotted biological warfare, endeavoring unsuccessfully to induce yellow fever epidemics among the civilian population in the North. These plots were approved by Jefferson Davis and other top Confederate leaders. What we now know of Confederate covert operations, therefore, refutes the claims–long held by the opponents of the Confederate Grand Conspiracy theory–that the Confederacy fought a chivalrous, romantic war and that Davis and other Confederate leaders were gentlemen of elevated character incapable of authorizing uncivilized warfare.

*Third, in 1864 the Confederate secret services plotted to abduct Lincoln, who was to be seized a few miles north of Washington, D.C. by a party of armed men who would transport their captive into Confederate territory where he would be held prisoner in an effort to force the North to concede the independence of the South.* Jefferson Davis and other top Confederate leaders personally approved this plan. The person designated to be in charge of the action team carrying out the kidnaping operation was John Wilkes Booth. To execute the abduction, William Hanchett notes, "Booth recruited helpers, made contacts in southern Maryland, and purchased carbines, revolvers, ammunition, canteens, handcuffs, and at least one boat capable of carrying 15 men. He also filled a trunk with potted meats, sardines, crackers, brandy, and other food for Lincoln's consumption, and sent it to lower Maryland." Until recently the consensus of opinion had been that the plot to kidnap Lincoln was a harebrained scheme of Booth's, that preposterously the president was to be seized at Ford's Theatre, and that the Confederate government had nothing to do with the plan.