

2

Two Conspiracies

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored; the nearer the Union will be “the Union as it was.”

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN
LETTER TO HORACE GREELEY
AUGUST 22, 1862

The conspirators’ trial ended with a deliberate miscarriage of justice, and beckons a reexamination of the assassination. The burning questions yet to be resolved are: who could have been the people behind the assassin, and what would have motivated them to remove Lincoln from office? The investigation, hearing and judgments have long since concluded with eight prisoners convicted, but the conspiracy has remained an unresolved mystery. In a legitimate investigation and trial, the three key elements in identifying the guilty party are a suspect’s *motive*, *opportunity* and *ability* to commit the crime.

A review of the trial transcripts does not establish who provided Booth with the ability and opportunity to murder the President. Only one of the eight convicted was guilty of being complicit in Lincoln’s assassination, but all eight were convicted without establishing motive, opportunity and ability. A deeper study of the trial (including its withheld evidence) shows that the true conspirators got away with murder.

A careful examination of the 1860s political landscape in Washington, D.C., utilizing all the resources presently available, exposes what Lincoln’s death meant to those in power—who would profit, and who would lose. The real conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln was not merely to kill the man, but to destroy his vision for a post-Civil War America. Even a casual investigation

into just motive alone can reveal those who would most desire Mr. Lincoln's second term policies restructured.

War is politics without law, and during the Civil War Federal policy over the states was enforced through the authority of military might. By the day Lincoln was shot, Washington, D.C., had already celebrated the end of the Civil War, and there was no Confederate government left to contest the national authority of the Union. Lincoln's policy for his second administration was to again have the *states* resolve their issues and enforce their resolutions through Constitutional means. Four months into his second term Lincoln was restored as President of all the states.

This restored union was still a patchwork of industrial states, agricultural states, new states, territories and disputed frontiers. A daunting challenge facing the Federal government was the many regional issues of this changing and expanding republic. Lincoln's vision was to allow the states, jointly and severally, to decide their own solutions to these regional concerns. However, many in Lincoln's party opposed restoring Congressional authority to former Confederate states, and advocated rendering these states as territories under martial law. This coalition was desperate to change the President's reconstruction policy. They had the means and the will, if necessary, to destroy him.

January, 1865

During his tenure in office, Lincoln was constantly surrounded by many people, but he was not always sure he could distinguish friend from foe. The President begrudgingly tolerated around the clock bodyguards, and occasional military escorts when he traveled outside the city of Washington. He was heavily dependent upon a young staff to arrange his daily appointments and correspondence, with John Hay and John Nicolay being his two closest aides. Their first daily duty was to sort through the presidential mail bags, which contained a noticeable increase in hate letters after the hotly-contested November 1864 election, making their usual routine a bit more taxing than it had been during Mr. Lincoln's previous term.

On a seemingly uneventful January morning, both secretaries quickly sorted through the pile of mail to pick a good letter for Mr. Lincoln to see first. Lighthearted news was hard to find, but Hay spotted one from General Van Alen of New York, and he knew that the President always enjoyed hearing from a loyal friend.

The screening of the mail was not intended to hide any real threat to the President, but to topically categorize the heavy volume of letters. One would think that Lincoln's secretaries would have been instructed to divert any hate letters before they reached the President, but, according to the chronicles written by John Nicolay:

[T]hreats came in every form. ... Most of these communications received no notice. In cases where there seemed a ground for inquiry, it was made. ... The President was too intelligent not to know he was in some danger. ... [Mr. Lincoln] would sometimes laughingly say, "our friends on the other side would make nothing by exchanging me for Hamlin."¹ (Hannibal Hamlin was the Radical Vice President during Lincoln's first term, replaced in 1864 with Andrew Johnson.)

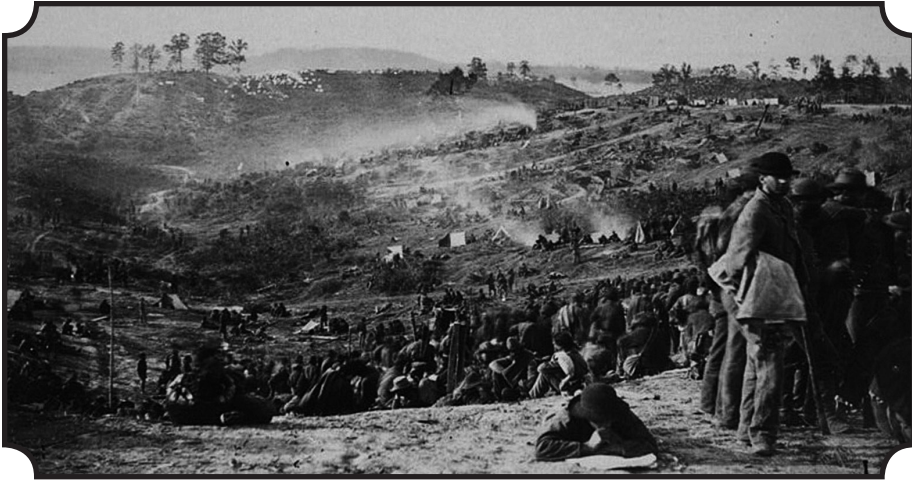
However, the most dangerous and threatening letter of them all was written, but never mailed. The man who would kill Abraham Lincoln after all the fighting had ended addressed his political manifesto to himself and sealed it in a thick, heavy envelope.² John Wilkes Booth left that letter in Philadelphia with his sister for safekeeping, and it was only after Lincoln's death that the letter would be opened and read for the first time. The manifesto was regarding a kidnapping plot to exchange the President for Confederate prisoners.

Booth's Plot to Kidnap President Lincoln

Booth never had a plot to kill Lincoln until the day of the assassination. Prior to that time the only plans Booth had were to abduct the President. Booth wrote his manifesto in November, 1864, explaining to "whom it may concern" his motivation for kidnapping Lincoln, in which he admitted the plan was solely his own, without help from anybody in the South. He declared:

The South has never bestowed upon me one kind word; a place now where I have no friends, except beneath the sod.³

Just after the assassination Booth's brother-in-law, John Sleeper Clarke, opened the sealed envelope and read the manifesto. Immediately he turned this letter over to U.S. Marshal William Milward, also in Philadelphia, who in turn shared the contents with *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, which printed the



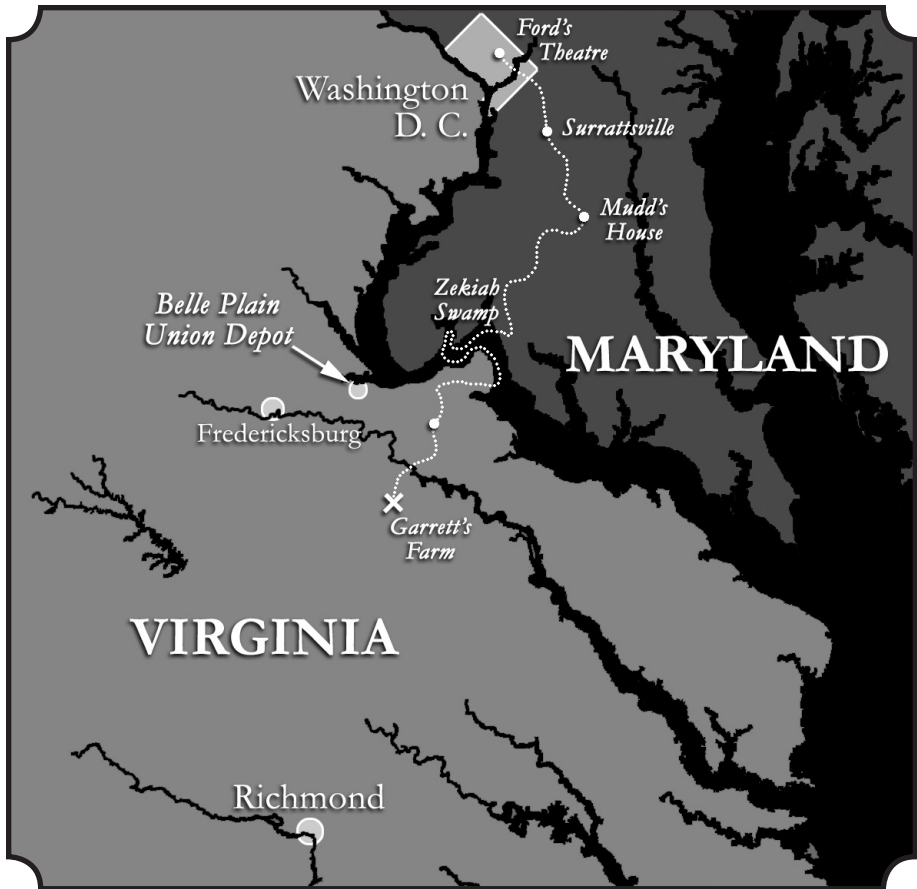
Confederate prisoners awaiting transfer at the sprawling Belle Plain Union supply depot near Fredericksburg, Virginia, on the Potomac River. In the distance are camps and campfires of the workers and soldiers who resided there.

manifesto only two days after Lincoln died.⁴ The military police confiscated the letter, arrested John Clarke and transferred him to Washington, holding him for a month in the Old Capitol Prison. The letter had been published more than a week before Booth had been captured, and while the investigation into Lincoln's assassination had only just begun. This telling letter should have been used as evidence in the conspiracy trial, but only the readers of one newspaper in the city of Philadelphia ever read it. The letter provided evidence that John Wilkes Booth was not working for the Confederacy, and the War Department needed to suppress the manifesto in order to implicate the South.

That one single document by itself destroyed the theory that the Confederate government was originally involved in Booth's plan to kidnap the President. The letter was an outpouring of his deepest thoughts and feelings behind his motives to abduct Lincoln. Booth left this letter with his sister, along with a second letter, oil stock certificates, and U.S. bonds.

Nowhere to Go

Apart from relying on historical evidence, common logic can deduce that, even if Booth were able to pull off his impossible plot to capture Lincoln, he would have had *nowhere* to take him. After January, 1865, the whole of eastern Virginia was under siege by the Union Army. Richmond was a twenty-hour



Map of the mid-Atlantic region, showing the terrain through which Booth would have had to transport his captive in early 1865.

journey from Washington that Booth would have to successfully make, while carrying the shackled U.S. President, without being intercepted. Every primary and secondary road in Virginia was being traveled by Union forces, and all traffic on the Potomac River en route to Richmond was controlled by Belle Plain, a Union depot just northeast of Fredericksburg, halfway between Washington and Richmond. The depot housed a large garrison of Union troops and gunboats that were there to receive and distribute weapons and supplies, along with the conveyance of captured Confederate prisoners. If Booth had planned to deliver the President to Richmond, he would first have to get out of Washington, cross the Potomac, then get past the garrison at the Belle Plain Union Depot.

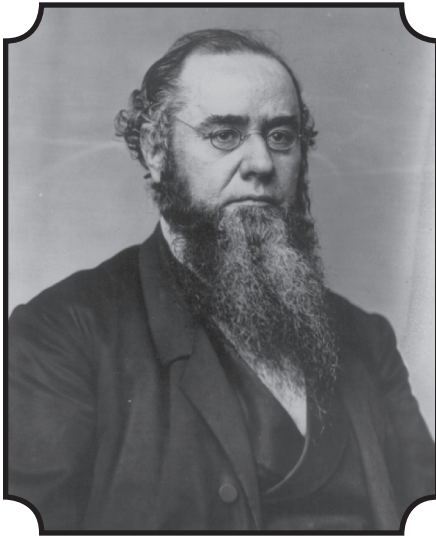
If Booth was in fact working for the Confederate government to kidnap Lincoln, the question is, *where and how could he have delivered Lincoln to the Confederate government when all of eastern Virginia, between Washington and North Carolina, was under tight Union control?* After January no kidnapers carrying the captured President could get south of Washington without the many Union checkpoints allowing their access. Any claim that the Confederate government was involved with Booth's plan to kidnap Lincoln is an allegation with complete disregard for the chronology and geography of proven historical events. By late March Lincoln could not have been kidnapped and carried to Virginia because he was already in Virginia.⁵

Negotiating Peace

Beginning around the first of January the war was very close to ending, and all of eastern Virginia was locked in battle; and by February it was under Federal control. The siege of Richmond was imminent. By mid-January, Lincoln was making plans to talk peace with Confederate President Jefferson Davis.⁶ Undaunted by numerous dangers, including rumors about assassination threats, Lincoln continued to travel outside of Washington, refusing to give in to intimidation. He made several trips to Virginia in early 1865, beginning with the proposed peace conference, which convened at Hampton Roads in early February.

On January 18, Lincoln offered his arrangements to Jefferson Davis for the peace conference. On January 21, Davis agreed to Lincoln's proposed meeting to negotiate bringing the war to an amicable end. There Lincoln and Seward met with the Confederate commission, consisting of Davis' Vice President Alexander H. Stephens, Judge John A. Campbell, and congressman Robert M. T. Hunter. The President left the negotiations with a promise to propose his concessions to his Cabinet. But, upon his return to Washington, the President's Cabinet unanimously rejected Lincoln's deal.

During this time the Confederate government would not have been planning to kidnap Lincoln as a bargaining chip. Jefferson Davis was making arrangements to send a peace commission to negotiate a deal for ending the fighting. He would not simultaneously plan to abduct Lincoln because the Confederate Vice President and two representatives would be in the custody of the United States military. How could Jefferson Davis have a plot to capture Lincoln and negotiate peace?



SECRETARY OF WAR
EDWIN STANTON



CHIEF TELEGRAPH OFFICER
MAJOR THOMAS ECKERT

Richmond knew that after January no kidnappers carrying the captured President could get south of Washington without the Union army allowing their access. And by late March Lincoln could not have been kidnapped and carried to Virginia because he was already there at City Point. By April 4, ten days before Lincoln's assassination, he was in Richmond and sitting behind the desk of Jefferson Davis in the Confederate White House. Meanwhile, Jefferson Davis and the bulk of his administration were on the run from General Sherman's army. The Confederate president was trying to avoid capture and possibly being hanged, and he was pursued all the way down into Georgia before being apprehended in early May.

The myth of Booth working for the Confederate government began as a fabricated allegation by Lincoln's rivals who were determined to frame the Confederates for the conspiracy to kill Lincoln.

Lincoln's Rivals

The Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, was responsible for assigning an escort messenger for the Confederate peace commissioners, and he chose Major Thomas Eckert for the duty. Eckert was not only the Chief Telegraph Officer for the War Department, he was Stanton's first officer in his exclusive intelligence gathering division.⁷ Stanton formed his own secret division that

reported all their findings directly to him, and to no one else. Eckert's devotion to Stanton earned him a senior position over the War Department's affairs and policies.

On February 1, Secretary of State Seward arrived at Fort Monroe, Virginia, to prepare for the peace negotiations. Two days later Lincoln entered to lay out his terms for surrender. The three Confederate commissioners sat down together with Lincoln and Seward to work out a deal for ending the fighting. No agreement was reached, but the Confederate commission found Lincoln willing to make an amicable concession to end the war.

Lincoln's negotiations with the Confederate commission caused quite a concern with his Radical rivals. The two most powerful Radical leaders in Congress, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner and Pennsylvania Representative Thaddeus Stevens, called on Secretary Stanton to discover firsthand exactly what Lincoln was willing to give away to their enemy during this planned conference in Virginia.⁸ Stanton appointed Major Eckert to find out for the Radicals all that he could about Lincoln's meeting, then immediately report back whatever deals Lincoln had offered to secure peace between the states.

The President's rivals relied on Stanton's War Department to help them pressure the administration into using the war as a means to restructure the governments of Southern states. The Radicals feared that the war would end before they could be assured that the former Confederate Congressmen would be prevented from returning to Congress. Major Eckert was unable to uncover any details because the parties agreed that the conference would be informal, with no written records. Without a way to monitor Lincoln's negotiations, Sumner and Stevens called on their majority-controlled Congress to force the President to report any offers he had made.⁹

On February 8, the Speaker of the House, Schuyler Colfax, Jr., wrote Lincoln:

The Senate have been hastening for two days about Mr. Sumner's resolution asking for information as to the recent conference at Hampton Roads. I stated to Mr. [Thaddeus] Stevens this morning that I understood from you that you had no objection to communicating the information, and a resolution has been passed unanimously asking for it.¹⁰

And so on February 10, a week after the negotiations with the Confederate commission in Hampton Roads, Virginia, Lincoln submitted a very detailed report explaining the conference to the House of Representatives.

News about the peace negotiations reached the rebel blockade runners working under cover in Europe, but with curious inaccuracies. They were led to believe that Seward was the reason the Cabinet rejected Lincoln's proposed concessions to the South.¹¹ In mid-March, Lincoln returned to Virginia, during which time assassins from France were sent to Washington to kill William Seward in order to keep him from interfering with Lincoln's lenient and generous peace proposals.¹² The mission of these assassins demonstrates that after the conference the Confederacy would not have wanted Lincoln captured or dead, but alive and well to negotiate his intended concessions for peace. This European assassination plot has been left out from histories written by the proponents of the Confederate conspiracy, because it, too, is further evidence that the South *needed* Lincoln in order to achieve an acceptable end to their hopeless cause.

After Lincoln won his second election, many who were closest to him expressed their fears that he may be killed. One such concern came in a letter from Lincoln's personal friend General James H. Van Alen, who had always supported Lincoln's policy of reunion throughout his first administration, and gave his political and military recommendations to the President more as a friend than as an advisor. In Van Alen's last letter to Lincoln, he urged the President:

... for the sake of your friends and the nation, guard your life and not expose it to assassination by going to Richmond.¹³

Lincoln always wanted to convey in his responses to his friends and allies a show of appreciation for their concern about his safety. He often wrote about the comfort he enjoyed from having so many people who supported his efforts to restore the Union and bind the nation's wounds. His last note to Van Alen ended with:

... to use your language, a Union of hearts and hands as well as of states.¹⁴

By the latter part of March the President and Mrs. Lincoln were both in City Point, Virginia, just east of Petersburg, confident of complete security under the protection provided by the United States military. At the beginning of April, Lincoln was able to stand on the deck of the *River Queen* steamboat, anchored at the City Point dock, where he witnessed the dark evening sky flash bright as mid-afternoon while the city of Petersburg was being bombarded by a deafening barrage of Union cannon and mortar shells.¹⁵

By April 4, Virginia was so secure that Lincoln was able to walk openly through the city streets of Richmond, where he entered the Confederate White House and sat in the chair behind the desk of Jefferson Davis. He propped his feet victoriously on the desktop and looked around the ransacked office that once belonged to the President of the Confederacy. Surely he must have sensed the rise and fall of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, it was sweet victory for the Union, but as that wave reached its crest, the fall exposed the job yet to be done. Order and authority had to be reestablished, and economic stability restored. Reassuring to the President was the fact that not a single incident of any kind disrupted his visit to Virginia, even during his stay in the city of Richmond.

What Lincoln did not realize was that in Washington, D.C., his assassination was being plotted. It would be in the very heart of Washington, not in Richmond, where he would soon meet his violent end, while under the protection of Stanton's War Department and Washington's metropolitan police force.

By April 3, Union forces had already captured the city of Richmond, ending any chance that Lincoln could be held there as a hostage. On April 5, Lincoln again met with John Campbell, the peace conference commissioner, and by then the only concession Lincoln could promise was to save the Confederate leaders from being hanged.¹⁶ This was nine days before Lincoln's assassination, so why would anyone among the Confederate high command want to kill the only person in Washington willing and able to save them from execution?

After the negotiations in February, it was clear to the Confederate leaders that Lincoln was resolved to reunite the seceded states back into the Union as they had been before the Civil War. They knew full well that if Lincoln were to fall, the fate of the South would be determined by those with far greater malice and much less mercy.¹⁷

The European Assassination Plot against Seward

Throughout the war the Confederacy received armaments and financing from various covert factions within Europe. The State Department had spies operating overseas to gather intelligence on the rebel blockade runners and their European suppliers. These spies reported their surveillances directly to Secretary of State William Seward (not to the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton). On April 5, 1865, while Lincoln was in Richmond, Seward showed Stanton¹⁸ three letters he received from his agents in Europe, which warned of two rebel assassins on their way to Washington from France to kill Seward and General Sherman.¹⁹

Seward immediately made ready to travel to Richmond to meet in person with the President to show him these letters.²⁰ However, before he could depart from Washington, he was almost killed in a carriage accident, which left him in a coma, with a broken shoulder and jaw. When Stanton telegraphed Lincoln about Seward's injuries, he did not reveal the news about assassins sent from France,²¹ nor did he mention them to Lincoln even a week after his return to Washington. Lincoln was left to find out about the assassins on his own, and only hours before his own fatal attack.

On the last day of Lincoln's life, he confronted Stanton about the European assassins, but Stanton reassured the President, insisting the plot was just another baseless rumor. Hours later at Ford's Theatre (a perfect location for Booth), Lincoln was left unprotected by men serving under Stanton's War Department, a situation and setting that only Stanton could have arranged. No Confederate agents had the ability to arrange Lincoln's location and security.

The President had many political enemies in Washington, namely the Radicals, who did not share the sentiment of "hearts and hands." They didn't wish to welcome back the former rebel states as equals, but instead demanded they be *disfranchised*—stripped of political autonomy. After four years of bitter war, the Confederate leaders were hated, held responsible for the bloodshed of loyal Americans. The idea of reinstating Congressional authority to their former enemies was nothing short of detestable.

Who Did Booth Work For?

After Lincoln was assassinated in Washington a theory was alleged and circulated that John Wilkes Booth had been some type of Confederate agent,

assigned by Jefferson Davis to kidnap Lincoln, and the plan was modified later to kill Lincoln. But it was proven two years after Lincoln's death that Jefferson Davis was completely uninvolved with Lincoln's murder. The masterminds of Lincoln's assassination plot knew the President's schedule, personal security, and the security surrounding Ford's Theater that specific day. Whoever plotted Lincoln's assassination has remained an unresolved mystery, while the Confederate conspiracy theory has continued to circulate, in spite of being proven false. The claim that Booth and Jefferson Davis conspired together to assassinate Lincoln originated as Stanton's allegation that the deed was an act of war, thus putting the investigation and trial under his authority.

Nine days before his assassination in Washington, Lincoln had walked openly through the streets of the Confederate capital, looming head and shoulders above the crowds. Had there been any advantage to the South in killing Lincoln, the Confederate government could have left assassins hidden in the ruins of Richmond.