

How Stanton Covered Up Lincoln's Murder Plot

By Don Thomas

Well before John Wilkes Booth attacked Lincoln, the President had already heard the many rumors circulating around Washington about a plot to kill him. On the very day Washington was celebrating an end to the Civil War, many people were talking about a secret plot to overthrow the Federal government using assassination.

The Washington rumors were actually about a secret military coup to unseat the United States President and his Secretary of State. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton's duty, after Lincoln had been removed from office was to convince everyone that the conspiracy came from within the Confederate government. This was how Stanton disguised the fact that the assassination was actually a conspiracy within Lincoln's own party.

Immediately following Lincoln's attack Secretary Stanton became the most politically powerful man in the United States. The formation of a conspiracy trial, as well as full authority over the investigation, was placed into the hands of Stanton, the very architect of Lincoln's murder plot. Even President Lincoln's funeral arrangements were under the strict control of Secretary Stanton.

As Lincoln lay dying, Stanton's War Department took full jurisdiction over the conspiracy investigation. In response to the Washington rumors about a conspiracy to overthrow the Federal government, the Secretary of War began withholding any collected evidence that could expose a large, well organized Washington conspiracy.

Stanton understood that the most plausible way to hide his treachery and convince the public that the assassination could not have come from men within Lincoln's own party, was to portray himself (and Lincoln's political rivals) as the grief-stricken dear friends of their slain, beloved President.

Many officers in the military, as well as government officials from both parties, recognized Stanton's charade, but they also respected his unbridled authority and realized that the Secretary of War was not a man to be challenged.

Stanton was supported by many Radical Republican congressional representatives, as well as some very wealthy Northeastern capitalists. This coalition against Lincoln viewed the President as the last obstacle before achieving their long, hard-fought quest. Not a quest to overthrow the Federal government as the rumors suggested, but a quest by the Radicals and their political backers to obtain complete authority over the reconstruction of the defeated Confederate states.

During the conspiracy investigation Stanton's military investigators realized: If it was ever proven that the President's murder plot came from men within Lincoln's own party, such a treasonous betrayal would destroy their glory of a Union victory. They had two choices: one, disgrace their Union cause for fighting the Civil War by exposing a military coup, or two, help Stanton frame the Confederate government as the conspirators who plotted Lincoln's murder.

It was paramount to Lincoln's rivals, as well as the reputation of the Federal army that Secretary Stanton be provided all the means necessary to claim that Lincoln's murder was a new act of war perpetrated by the defeated Confederate government. However, the actual sequence of events leading up to Lincoln's murder makes a Confederate plot historically impossible.

Two weeks before Lincoln was assassinated, the Confederate government existed in name only. Jefferson Davis and his entire administration were fugitives running from a Federal army that was many times larger and stronger than they had been on the day the war began four years earlier.

Five days before John Wilkes Booth attacked Lincoln, General Robert E. Lee had already surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia. The day before Lincoln was shot Stanton became enraged when Lincoln told him he could not arrest Jacob Thompson, the head of the Confederate Secret Service, in Canada. Secretary Stanton was backing the Radical Congressmen who were campaigning to capture and execute all the Confederate leaders.

On the day of Lincoln's murder the President stated, during his last cabinet meeting, that he wanted the Confederate leaders to scatter like falling leaves. That the war was over and the Confederacy was defeated. Lincoln told his cabinet that he had no feelings of hate or vindictiveness, nor would he take part in any hanging or killing. The President told his cabinet that he did not sympathize with the vengeful plans held by his political rivals.

The day Lincoln was assassinated, there was no Confederate government, no Southern economy, nor could the seceded states rebuild their destroyed infrastructure on their own. The scattered fragments of what was once a Confederacy was left with nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. The only hope remaining for the uncaptured remnants of the Confederate Army was to hold out for the best surrender terms under a restored Union. At the time of Lincoln's murder, any soldiers who still remained under the command of the Confederate military had no illusions that they could ever achieve anything more than Lincoln's promise of a just and lasting peace.

In the North it was easy for people to believe Stanton's claim that the motive for Lincoln's assassination was an evil plot of revenge. But, in truth, it was a secret plot of power and greed. Lincoln's murder required a large contribution of cash from his conspirators, but once the President was removed from office the initial upfront investment of assassination would give Lincoln's Radical rivals majority control over votes in both the House and the Senate.

Stanton was provided an unprecedented amount of government money as reward for the capture of Confederate assassins. Yet, after all was said and done, not a single Confederate was ever convicted of having anything to do with the assassination of President Lincoln.

The reward money offered for the capture of John Wilkes Booth and his accused accomplices was divided between Stanton's military personnel, with only a small fraction awarded to a select few civilian informants. Yet, when Booth's most notorious accomplice in the kidnapping plot, John Surratt, a known Confederate spy was the last to be captured and tried for Lincoln's murder, he was released because he had no role in the assassination plot.

The fact is: Two weeks before Lincoln was assassinated, the Confederate capital city of Richmond, Virginia had been captured by Grant's army. Soon to follow, Jefferson Davis and his entire administration were also captured, imprisoned, investigated and released.

Neither Jefferson Davis, his administration, nor his Secret Service in Canada ever went to trial. Not only was there no evidence against any Confederates, the Confederacy had no motive to kill Lincoln. Nor did the Confederate government have the ability to carry out an assassination plot against the President while he attended a public play inside the heart of Washington.

It took a very long time for the hysteria, caused by a Civil War and the assassination of the United States President, to reach a period of reflection and coolheaded objective reasoning. However, well before that time a new organization had already formed to explain why a nation of states, that had fought together to achieve independence from imperial rule, had to fight that same war against each other. The motive for killing Lincoln had to be explained, and the atrocities committed during the Civil War needed to be given a just cause.

The Military Order of the Loyal Legion was organized before President Lincoln was buried and was founded by three military honor guards who were hand-picked by Stanton to take charge of Lincoln's funeral train back to Springfield, Illinois. On April 20, 1865, a large gathering of war veterans in Philadelphia also held a meeting at Independence Hall, where they decided that the Loyal Legion would honor the legacy of President Lincoln and his term in office. This helped to further serve Stanton's theory that Lincoln's assassination was a Confederate plot, despite the fact no evidence was ever found which could even suggest that a Confederate plot was a possibility.

Without access to all the evidence collected during the conspiracy investigation (which could uncover the Lincoln conspiracy), the Loyal Legion attracted members from both sides of the conflict that had caused the states to wage war against each other. By 1900, 8,000 Civil War veterans were active members of the organization. Veterans such as Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, Philip Sheridan, George McClellan, Rutherford B. Hayes, Chester A. Arthur, Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley were all active members of The Military Order of the Loyal Legion. All the while, the collected evidence, never seen by anyone outside of Stanton's War Department, remained under the lock and key of the War Department.

Former Commanders for the Loyal Legion were noted Civil War veterans such as Winfield Scott Hancock who served from 1879 to 1886. Philip H. Sheridan served from 1886 to 1893. John M. Schofield held the office from 1899 until 1903. Grenville M. Dodge, Lincoln's old business partner, and head of the Secret Service in the West during the Civil War, served as Commander-in-Chief for the Legion from 1907 to 1909.

The only United States Presidents from that era, who were eligible military veterans, but did not join the Loyal Legion, were Presidents Andrew Johnson and James Garfield. Both Presidents Johnson and Garfield were Union generals during the Civil War, and both men rose to the highest office held in United States government.

However, President Andrew Johnson narrowly escaped being removed from office during his congressional impeachment trial. Whereas, President James Garfield was the second United States President to be successfully removed from office by assassination, after the murder of Abraham Lincoln. Chester A. Arthur, an active member of the Loyal Legion, served out the remainder of Garfield's term.

The third President to be murdered while in office was William McKinley. President McKinley was also a member of the Loyal Legion. However, McKinley was shot during his second term after changing his first term position. President McKinley would no longer support the high-tariff policy favored by his 'rule of the rich' political backers. High tariff-taxes on foreign products was the same political issue that caused South Carolina to withdraw from the Union.

In 2009, the once secret War Department microfilm files containing all the collected evidence about the Lincoln conspiracy cover-up were published in two books by historian William C. Edwards, The Lincoln Assassination: The Evidence & also his E-book: The Reward Files. That once hidden evidence was collected during the Lincoln conspiracy investigation, but the greatest majority was never presented during the conspiracy trial, nor included in any contemporary books about the Lincoln conspiracy. The microfilm files are now easily accessible public information, under the United States Freedom of Information Act.

Freedom of information allowed me to uncover the old 1865 Washington rumors about a conspiracy against the Federal government using assassination. The same plot Lincoln found out about, but could do nothing to stop. Nor could the President even gather enough political support to prevent his own murder.

The Lincoln conspiracy has always been a cover-up, but a completely documented narrative using all the once hidden evidence can now be found in two books by Don Thomas, The Reason Lincoln Had to Die, and its sequel, The Reason Booth Had to Die. Both books use William Edward's edited National Archives microfilm documents to reveal why Lincoln was assassinated, and the sequel is a documented reference source explaining how Stanton was able to cover-up the Washington conspiracy.

The two books by William Edwards and both books by Don Thomas can be purchased at Amazon.com.