

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Eight

## The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

### LESSON IDEA

To discuss the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and to show it was not the work of a "lone fanatic" but of a conspiracy whose purpose and leaders are still unknown.

### PREPARATION

How many American presidents have been assassinated? Who were the assassins? Were they involved in conspiracies? Check the library or encyclopedia for the answers. Be prepared for a discussion. Also, read "During The Week" and prepare the "time line" suggested.

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IN THE DIMLY LIT HALLWAY of an empty theatre, a handsome young man quietly and carefully drilled a hole through the door leading to the Presidential box. He peered through the hole to make certain he could see the rocking chair which had been placed there for the President of the United States; satisfied, he scooped up the wood shavings which had fallen to the floor, pocketed them, and left.

The man was John Wilkes Booth, an actor who was the romantic idol of hundreds of theatregoers. The place was Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.; the date was April 14, 1865 — only five days after the end of one of the bloodiest and most tragic wars in American history.

Booth planned to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln, boldly and dramatically, while the Washington audience who had come to laugh over the comic lines and stage antics of the players in *Our American Cousin* watched in horror. It was not intended to be a suicidal effort, or even a final gesture of revenge against the Commander-in-Chief of the Northern

Army who forced the South to its knees. Booth had every intention of escaping unpunished, and the conspirators with whom he worked planned to assist him in every way.

Months earlier this same group had planned to kidnap the President from his box in Ford's Theatre and take him to Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy. He was to be bound and gagged, lowered from his box to the stage, spirited out the rear door of the theatre, and thrust into a wagon bound for Richmond. It might have worked, except for one thing — the President did not attend the theatre as planned the night of January 18. The conspirators scattered and waited for another opportunity.

It came in March with the announcement that the President would attend a play, *Still Waters Run Deep*, at the Soldier's Home three miles from Washington. Again, the conspirators planned carefully, then waited patiently; but when the Presidential carriage arrived at the appointed hour, the man who stepped out was not Abraham Lincoln.

[Optional question for discussion: Many persons naturally prefer to believe that any murder of a President, or a Cabinet officer, or another important official, is the work of an insane person, rather than the result of a carefully planned conspiracy by brilliant and ruthless men. But when such a horrifying event occurs anywhere in the world, is it usually planned by a group, or is it the demented act of one deranged person? Offer examples and reasons for your answer.]

Lincoln was well aware of the constant danger. In fact, he kept an envelope in his desk labelled

“Assassination” which was bulging with at least eighty threats against his life. As a precaution, the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, had assigned four members of the Washington Metropolitan Police Force to twenty-four-hour guard duty and had ordered a cavalry escort for the President whenever he travelled.

But Stanton was either unaware of the theatre plots hatched by Booth and his associates, or he chose to ignore the report made by Louis Wiechmann, who lived in the same boarding house where the conspirators met. Wiechmann, a government employee, overheard some of the scheming and reported it to his employers, giving them the names of all the boarders and of those who frequently visited the house. His employers made a report to their superiors, but from that point on we have no record of what happened to Wiechmann’s warnings. It would appear that nothing was done to check the story – an incredible oversight for which Edwin M. Stanton must bear the ultimate responsibility.

Or was it an “oversight”? Many historians have questioned: Was Stanton involved in the plotting? Since the evidence available today is only fragmentary, no one can be sure. But we do know that his many blunders (if that is what they were) contributed to the success of the conspiracy and to Booth’s escape.

On April 14, while Booth and his associates put the finishing touches on their plan for the President’s murder, the intended victim conferred with his cabinet members on plans for the reconstruction of the South. Stanton insisted that the Southern states be divided into military districts, each to be

run by a military governor accountable to Stanton. Gideon Welles, the Secretary of the Navy and a man who thoroughly distrusted Stanton, protested that such a plan was “in conflict with the principles of self-government which I deem essential.” Others agreed with Welles, believing it was a self-serving scheme designed to increase Stanton’s power.

Lincoln, foreseeing the brutal revenge possible under military rule, commented: “I hope that there will be no persecution, no bloody work after the war is over. No one need expect me to take any part in hanging or killing these men [*the Confederate leaders*], even the worst of them. Frighten them out of the country, open the gates, let down the bars, scare them off, – enough lives have been sacrificed.” Lincoln clearly believed both sides had suffered enough; he did not intend to punish the Southern leaders for their secession – nor allow Stanton to do so.

**WHAT** DOES Lincoln’s lack of vengeance tell us about his character? Is it possible that his conciliatory attitude toward the defeated South is one of the reasons for his assassination? [*Lincoln’s attitude toward the South is an important point for family members to remember, especially in light of what happened after his death and the bitterness Reconstruction created between Americans – even to the present day.*]

Late in the day, perhaps while Booth was drilling the hole in the door of the President’s theatre box, Lincoln and his wife took a leisurely drive through the Washington streets. The President’s spirits were high – so much so that his wife remarked: “Dear husband, you almost startle me by your great cheerfulness.” To which he replied, “And well may I feel so. Mother, I consider that this day the war has come to a close. We must both be cheerful in the future. Between the war, and the loss of our darling Willie [*a son who had died*], we have both been very miserable.” As they rode along, they talked of reconstruction, of travelling to Europe when Lincoln’s Presidential term ended, and of moving back to Illinois and reestablishing Abe’s law practice. The future looked promising as they returned to the White House for a quiet dinner and a pleasant evening at the theatre.

At seven o’clock that fateful evening, Wil-

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

One question that comes to mind is: What part has conspiracy played in the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, and in the attempted assassination of George Wallace?

Are we to believe that Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, Arthur Bremer, and James Earl Ray – all of whom have pro-Communist backgrounds – were “lone fanatics”? Or is it more reasonable to believe that they, like Booth, were part of a conspiratorial group?

We suggest making a study of one of these modern-day assassins. For background material contact your local American Opinion Bookstore, or write directly to American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

liam H. Crook, a Presidential bodyguard, paced back and forth outside the President's office, his anger growing every minute. His replacement, John F. Parker, was three hours late. Parker was known for his carelessness; he had been reprimanded several times for misconduct ranging from drunkenness to falling asleep on duty to using profanity in front of women. Though married and the father of three children, his unfaithfulness to his wife was common knowledge. Parker definitely was not a man who should have been given the job of protecting the President from potential assassins.

When the irresponsible guard finally reported for duty, he offered no excuse for his tardiness. After a hasty, routine check of the theatre, he merely escorted the President and his guests to the special box, waited in the hallway outside until the lights dimmed and the play began, then deserted his post. He was not seen again until the following morning; and even more strange, apparently he never received so much as a reprimand for his dereliction of duty.

**P**ARKER'S MYSTERIOUS disappearance, whether by design or accident, made Booth's job much easier. The actor-assassin strolled casually into the theatre, and headed toward the unguarded hallway leading to the Presidential box. His presence there aroused no suspicion. Had anyone tried to stop him, he was prepared to use the knife he carried in his belt. The ball in the single-shot brass derringer was reserved for the President.

Booth paused at the door to peer through the hole he had drilled earlier, just to be certain the President was within range. Then he opened the door and, standing just behind Lincoln, pointed the gun at the President's head. His finger pressed the trigger at the exact moment the comedy on stage drew a high point of laughter. Booth's timing was perfect; the audience did not even hear the shot, or notice Lincoln slump forward in his chair as if asleep. With a shout of "*Sic semper tyrannis*" ("Thus always to tyrants"), the assassin shoved Mrs. Lincoln aside and leapt over the balcony railing.

But his plan of escape, a leap from balcony to stage, which was so foolproof in the planning, was flawed in the execution. The spur of his boot caught in the drapery of the box; this knocked him off

balance, causing a painful fall in which he broke his left leg.

Yet, in the panic which followed as the crowd realized the President had been shot, no one even attempted to stop the assassin as he hobbled across the stage to a prearranged exit and a waiting horse.

Within the hour, the horrifying news that the President had been shot raced through Washington. And as it spread, it met other news no less terrible. At the same hour Booth had shot Lincoln, a man had forced his way into the house of Secretary of State William Seward and had stabbed both the Secretary and his son so seriously that it was feared they would die. In his entrance and exit, the assassin had wounded three other members of the household. Like Booth, he had escaped. Horror fed rumor, and dread seized the town. Suspiciously, all telegraph connections except the secret line operated by the War Department went dead within fifteen minutes after the assassination, cutting the city off from all outside communication.

"Rumors are so thick," wrote the editor of the *National Intelligencer* at two o'clock in the morning, "... that we rely entirely upon our reporters to advise the public of the details and result of this night of horrors. Evidently conspirators are among us. To what extent does the conspiracy exist? This is a terrible question. When a spirit so horrible as this is abroad, what man is safe? We can only advise the utmost vigilance and the most prompt measures by the authorities. We can only pray God to shield us, His unworthy people, from further calamities like these."

**I**MMEDIATELY AFTER the assassination, while the President lay dying, Secretary of War Stanton took complete control of the United States government. And over the only telegraph wire still operating in the city, his office sent numerous misleading and contradictory messages. North of Washington, for example, a colonel received a War Department wire telling him the assassins had galloped toward Maryland; in Alexandria, Virginia, a general was told that it was not known in which direction the assassin had escaped. A wire to a commander in Baltimore instructed him to arrest John Wilkes Booth; yet another officer in a different city was informed that the War Depart-

ment had no clues to the identity of the assassin.

In Washington, Stanton ordered guards posted around the homes of all cabinet members, declared martial law, ordered Ford's Theatre closed and all its employees arrested, established a special court of inquiry to investigate the assassination, and blocked every exit from the city except one — the one Booth took.

By the following morning, April 15, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was dead; and John Wilkes Booth and a fellow conspirator, David Herold, were resting comfortably in the Virginia home of Dr. Samuel Mudd, where Booth had received medical attention for his broken leg. But the final chapter in the story of the Presidential assassin is as clouded with mystery as its beginnings. We are reasonably certain that Booth and Herold hid in tobacco fields for several days after leaving Dr. Mudd's home, and that they were finally trapped in a tobacco shed on William Garret's farm near Bowling Green, Virginia. Herold surrendered, Booth refused. The popular version of the rest of the story says that under cover of darkness the shed was set afire, and as Booth moved toward the door, an unknown assailant shot him in the neck.

We know that David Herold *did* surrender to the Union soldiers. Some historians, however, are not convinced it was John Wilkes Booth who died at Garrett's farm. They speculate that he may have escaped with the help of other conspirators during the fire. If so, who was killed in the shed? A would-be rescuer? Another member of the conspiracy? We do not know.

In fact, there are many things we do not know about the assassination of President Lincoln. We can be certain that his murder was plotted by a band of conspirators; but we still do not know whether the plot was masterminded by Booth, or whether the actor was merely an agent of other conspirators, as yet unexposed.

### **Concluding Thought**

What can be said with certainty is that with the death of Abraham Lincoln the defeated South lost all hope for a just and fair peace that would "bind up the nation's wounds . . . with malice towards none; with charity for all." No one was able to check the thirst for vengeance. Reconstruction was brutal; and the scars it left in the minds of those

who lived through it were deeper and more lasting than any of the wounds of war.

### **DURING THE WEEK**

Make a copy of the following "time line" and post it on the family bulletin board, by the telephone, or at the breakfast or dinner table where all members of the family can see it. Ask that the dates be memorized to ensure a basic framework of historical events, or use the "time line" as a quiz.

1846	.....	Mexican-American War begins
1846	.....	Mexican-American War ends; Gold discovered in California
1849	.....	California Gold Rush
1861	.....	War Between the States begins
1863	.....	Emancipation Proclamation issued; Battle of Gettysburg
1865	.....	War Between the States ends; Lincoln is assassinated

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### **The Family Heritage Series**

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For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

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