

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.

