



# Lincoln Lore

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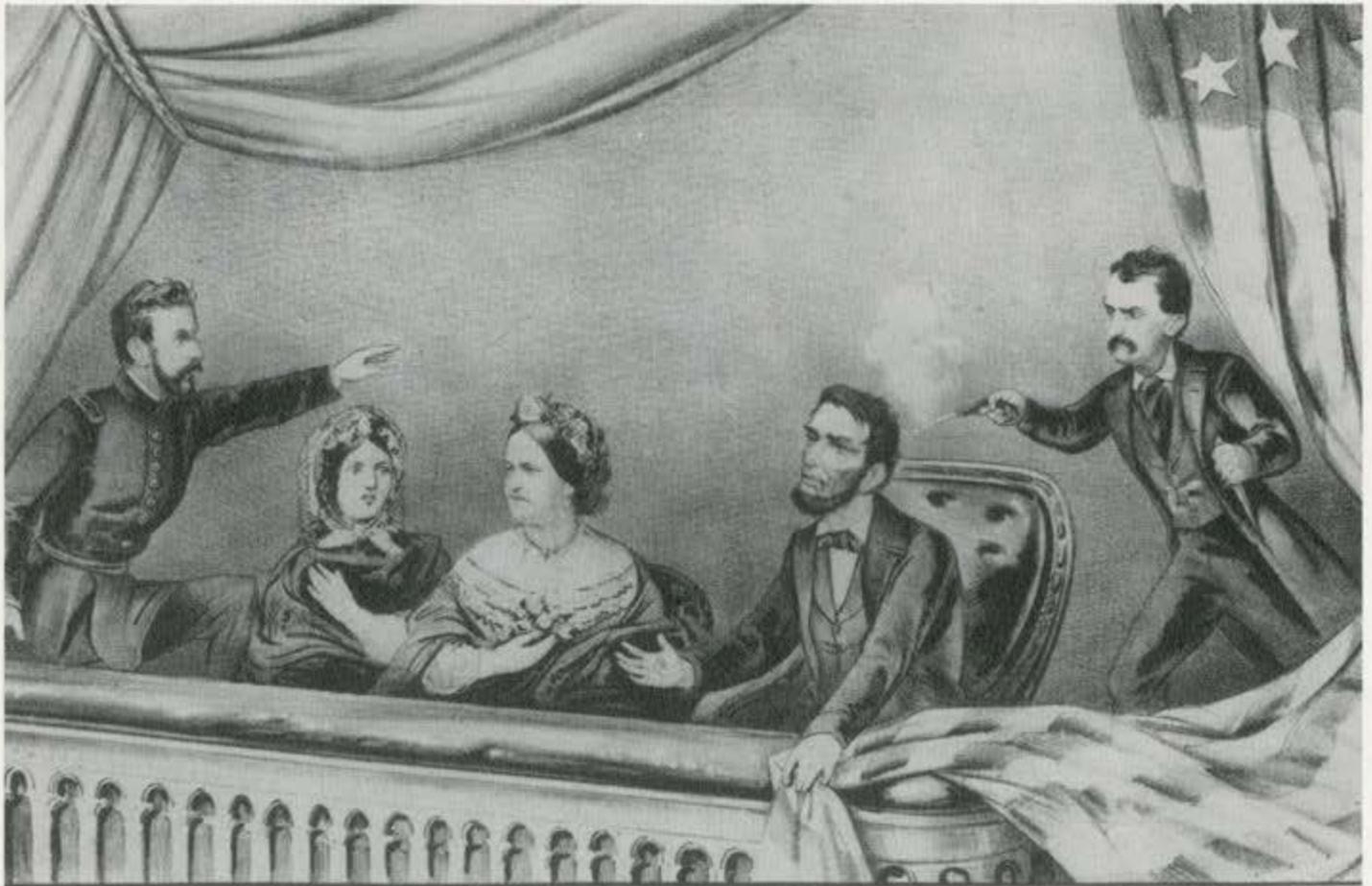
Number 1713

## JOHN HINCKLEY, JR., AND JOHN WILKES BOOTH

John Hinckley's attempt to assassinate President Ronald Reagan provoked the now customary ritual of national soul-searching and retelling of bad history. Reporters flocked to psychiatrists to get some insight on the madmen (and madwomen) who have at alarmingly frequent intervals attempted to sprinkle the pages of our history with the blood of American Presidents. In Hinckley's case the psychiatrists seem to have the most to tell us, but I long for the day when the reporters seek their historical perspective on current events from historians rather than medical doctors, political scientists, or other journalists.

The impulse to put such unsettling events in perspective is commendable, but the word "perspective" connotes the long

view. Only historians have a long enough view to assess the place of this most recent assassination attempt in America's political history. By failing to consult historians, the press falls for the version of history retailed by those who know little about it. Thus Jane E. Brody, in an article for the distinguished New York Times News Service, tells us that "Unlike other countries, where assassinations of heads of state are carried out either by political fanatics or in a military coup, in this country nearly all assassinations have been personally, not politically, motivated." Anthony Lewis, in an article in the New York Times of April 2nd, calls America's assassins and would-be assassins "lonely, demented men." "Of all the attacks," he writes, "only that on President



THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN,

AT FORD'S THEATRE WASHINGTON, D.C. APRIL 14<sup>TH</sup> 1865.

*From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURE 1. Lincoln's assassination as Currier & Ives depicted it.

Truman by Puerto Rican nationalists had an identifiable political purpose." *Time* magazine, in its April 13th issue, identified John Wilkes Booth as "the first of the modern American assassins." *Time* belittles his love for the Confederacy as "fustian" and stresses Booth's desire for fame. United Press International's Peter Costa got his history from a psychiatrist who had studied "Son of Sam" killer David Berkowitz and from other illustrious medicos. One of the latter said that "Recent assassination attempts have not been politically motivated." And the "Son of Sam" doctor added that John Wilkes Booth was similar to Hinckley in being a failure, overshadowed by a successful father. "The psychiatrist," Costa wrote, "said Boothe [sic] was a failed actor, who never received the critical acclaim that his father — also an actor — did." Most of the articles about the recent attempt agreed that only the Puerto Rican nationalists who attempted to kill President Harry Truman were exceptions to the rule that American assassins were mentally unstable loners little concerned with the issues of politics.

Absolutely nothing in the Lincoln assassination fits this new version of American history. In the hope of destroying this myth before it gains any serious degree of acceptance, let us review the facts of America's first Presidential assassination, John Wilkes Booth's political crime, the murder of Abraham Lincoln.

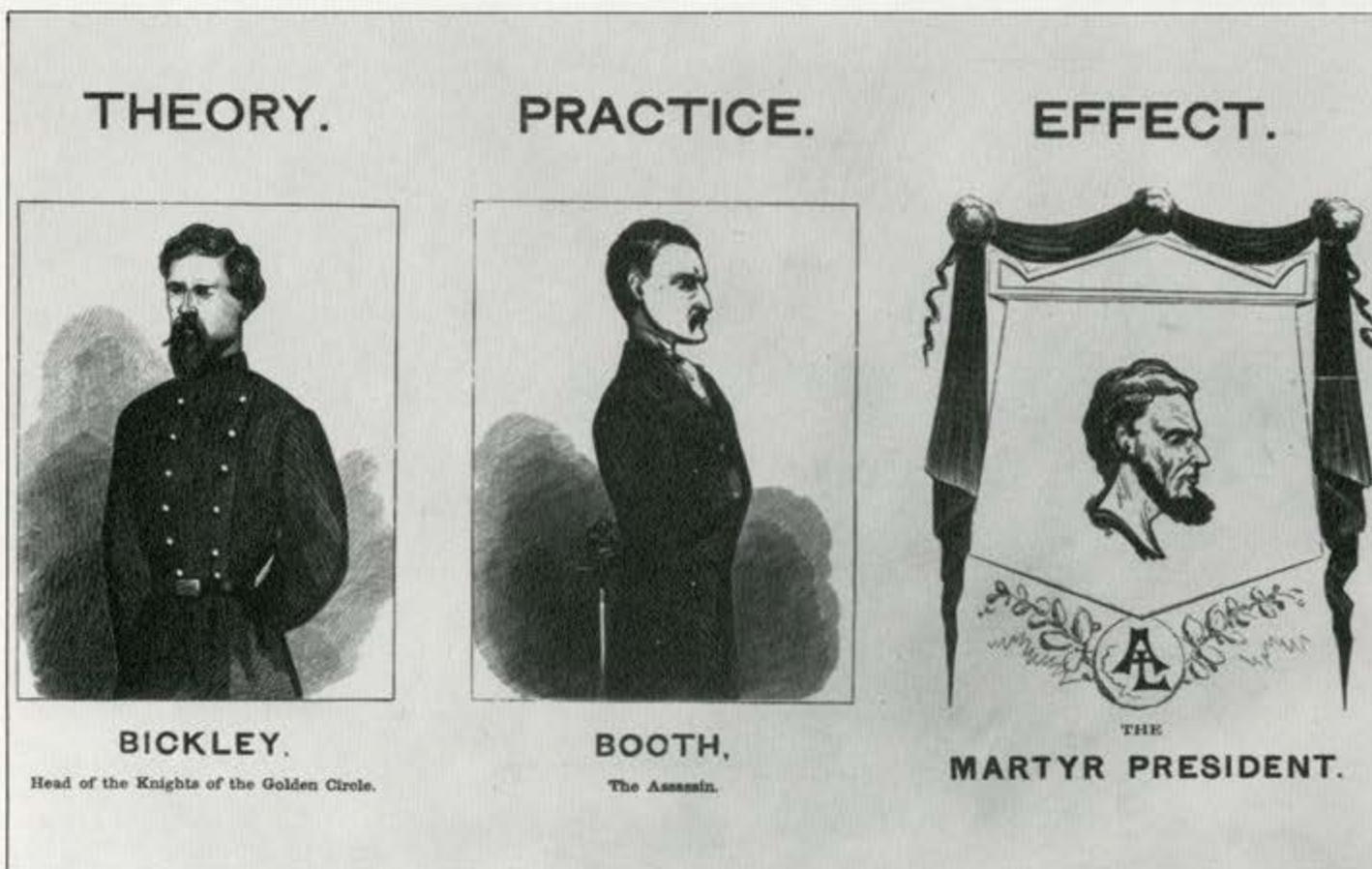
"They are quiet, slightly overweight young men more familiar with guns than with girls." This is the dramatic beginning of Peter Costa's article, which tries to force Booth into the mold of other assassins and would-be assassins. To this profile, Dr. Zigmund Lebensohn adds the portrait of "a single mentally disturbed person who is alienated from society, who feels like a zero, is wanted by no one and can't get a job." Jane Brody admits that Booth does not fit the mold of the "little people" who have since tried to kill American Presidents, but she hastens to add that "even Booth was the lesser light in a family of actors more successful than he."

It would be a great error to engage in a debate on this question on the narrow terms suggested by the journalists and psychologists. I do not relish the prospect of a debate over

Booth's psyche, about which we know very little. I feel certain that some doctors and journalists would not find Booth's \$20,000-a-year income a significant index of his secure fame as an actor. His reputation as a ladies' man might be thought a minor exception to the profile. More pertinent to setting the record straight is all the vast historical evidence the doctors and journalists fail to mention — the evidence that proves Lincoln's assassination was a crime with a clear political motive and not the weirdly inexplicable intrusion of a little lunatic into American history. The doctors and the reporters will not find the explanation of Lincoln's assassination by studying John Wilkes Booth's relationship with his father. The answer lies in the testimony, letters, and documents which Booth and his coconspirators left for historians to study.

Coconspirators? The doctors and journalists did not mention them, but they are an important proof of the nature of John Wilkes Booth's crime. In the first place, *they did exist*. His was not the work of some troubled individual so far from reality that he could enlist no one else in his cause. In fact, he enlisted quite a few. Booth's crime began as a plot to kidnap the President, and he gathered a large enough group to accomplish it — a group equipped with the talents he needed for a desperate act. In the late summer or early autumn of 1864, Booth contacted two old school chums of his, Samuel Bland Arnold and Michael O'Laughlen (or O'Laughlin). In the winter he added John Harrison Surratt, Jr. Surratt was well connected in the disloyal network of southern Maryland, and he probably introduced Booth to George A. Atzerodt, the next recruit. Booth added David Edgar Herold, a pharmacist's assistant who had sold the actor medicine when he was ailing from a growth on his neck, and, finally, Lewis Thornton Powell (alias Paine or Payne).

They were all useful men. Arnold and O'Laughlen were former soldiers. Surratt was a spy; he knew how to get away from Yankee soldiers and detectives. Herold was a partridge hunter, allegedly familiar with the backwoods of Maryland through which the kidnapers must flee. Atzerodt had often ferried spies across the river from Maryland to Virginia.



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. This rare and unidentified print interpreted Booth's crime as a political act.



*From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum*

**FIGURE 3.** Ford's Theatre was a less inviting spot for crime.

Powell was a former soldier, too, and he was large, strong, and violent.

What held this group together? Political views. Arnold and O'Laughlen were former Confederate soldiers. Surratt was a Confederate spy who carried the illegal "mail" from Richmond to Canada and back. Atzerodt had helped Confederate spies also. Powell was an escaped Confederate prisoner of war. Only Herold was so triflingly boyish as to lack any defined political opinions. The other members of the group all hoped the Confederacy would win the war. All had directly aided the Confederate war effort. It is no wonder they did not like Lincoln.

Booth was a man of pronounced political opinions. He, too, hoped that the Confederacy would win the war, and his hope was so fervent that he gave up his successful acting career to pursue the political object of removing Lincoln as an obstacle to Confederate success. In the spring of 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant had ceased exchanging prisoners, figuring manpower was a more serious problem for the South than for the North. Booth thought he could regain that lost manpower for the South by exchanging the President for Confederate soldiers in Yankee prisons.

We know little about John Wilkes Booth, but we do know his political opinions. In November, 1864, he left a letter — the longest extant Booth letter — with his sister, Asia Booth Clarke. "People of the North," Booth warned, "to hate tyranny, to love liberty and justice, to strike at wrong and oppression, was the teaching of our fathers. The study of our early history will not let me forget it, and may it never." This libertarian rhetoric, the stock-in-trade of the Democratic opposition to the Lincoln administration, led Booth to fear that Lincoln was a tyrant. He told his brother Edwin, who voted for Lincoln in 1864, that Lincoln would become king of America. To his fears of the demise of liberty in America, John Wilkes Booth joined racial fears. He had grown up in Maryland, and the political philosophy of that slave state permeated Booth's mind. "This country was formed for the



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**FIGURE 4.** The Soldiers' Home offered the conspirators great opportunities to kidnap Lincoln.



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FIGURE 5. John Wilkes Booth.

white, not for the black man," Booth's letter argued. "And, looking upon *African slavery* from the same standpoint held by the noble framers of our Constitution, I, for one, have ever considered it one of the greatest blessings (both for themselves and us) that God ever bestowed upon a favored nation. Witness heretofore our wealth and power; witness their elevation and enlightenment above their race elsewhere." Most accounts agree that when Booth shot Lincoln, he shouted, "*Sic semper tyrannis.*" The political motive was uppermost in his mind from the beginning of the kidnap plot until that fateful moment over six months later at Ford's Theatre.

To be sure, Booth's was not a legitimate, rational, or ordinary political act. Thousands of Americans held the same political views he did without deciding to stalk the President with a Deringer pistol. Booth's coconspirators shrank in number as the crime became wilder in conception. By the time Booth had gathered enough men to kidnap the President, it was no longer the season of hot weather in Washington. Lincoln was no longer taking his long rides to the Soldiers' Home to sleep at night, and their opportunity was lost. Booth then decided to kidnap the President from Ford's Theatre while he watched a play. Arnold and O'Laughlen thought the new scheme preposterous; they would not have a shadow of a chance of coming out of it alive. After an abortive attempt to capture Lincoln in his carriage, they left the plot. John Surratt went back to carrying the Confederate mail to Canada. Booth now had too few men to kidnap the President.

Richmond fell. There was no place to take Lincoln now, even if the conspirators could capture him. Only truly desperate measures could save the Confederacy, keep American liberties safe from the "tyrant" in Washington, and make this an all-white country. By killing the President, the Vice-President, and the Secretary of State, Booth thought he might cause a revolution in the North that would accomplish his purposes. Atzerodt, Herold, and Powell were still with him, and each had a role to play on the night of April 14th.

It is true that the political motives for Booth's crime have been obscured over the years since 1865. Lincoln's fame has been an important factor in this. Most Americans have regarded Lincoln as so good a President that it seems only a

madman could have killed him. Moreover, it took an enormous effort to bring this country back together after the bloodiest war in its history. It would not have aided this effort to be constantly reminded that men of Confederate sympathies were responsible for Lincoln's murder. The political motives were conveniently ignored for the sake of national unity; many eventually forgot them. Concern for the Negro reached an acme during the Civil War and Reconstruction. After 1877 white opinions of the Negro declined precipitously, and by the turn of the century few white Americans cared enough about the plight of the black man to recall that hatred of the Emancipation Proclamation motivated Lincoln's assassins.

Finally, Lincoln scholarship itself has been somewhat to blame for our tendency to forget Booth's political motives. The great Lincoln biographers, like James G. Randall, often boasted that they were concerned in their works only with the living Lincoln. They left the assassination to amateurs and sensationalists who invented new motives for Booth's act, motives that further obscured the true political motive for the crime.

The fact remains that Lincoln's assassination was the act of political fanatics, not of a solitary lunatic trying to work out his personal psychological problems. Historians would have told the reporters, if only they had been asked. There is no simple solution to the problem of assassination in America, but the problem will never be solved if we ignore what history tells us about these crimes.

## IN MEMORIAM

### EVERETTE BEACH LONG (1919-1981)

E.B. "Pete" Long, a member of *Lincoln Lore's* Bibliography Committee, died in Chicago on March 31.

Born in Whitehall, Wisconsin, Mr. Long attended Miami University (Ohio) and Northwestern University. His distinguished career began in journalism. He worked for the Associated Press for eight years and became an editor of the *American Peoples Encyclopaedia*. In the 1950s he became Bruce Catton's research assistant on the three-volume *Centennial History of the Civil War*. That experience led to similar work for Allan Nevins on the later volumes of his monumental *Ordeal of the Union* series.

In 1969 Mr. Long left Chicago, where he had lived most of his mature life, for Wyoming. He carried with him an enormous store of knowledge about the Civil War. Two years later he published *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865*. This remarkable reference work — 728 pages of facts — sits at the elbow of nearly all Civil War historians. Long became a Professor of American Studies at the University of Wyoming, one of the very few people in the country to attain such academic status without a Ph.D.

Professor Long recently completed *The Saints and the Union: Utah Territory during the Civil War*, a study of the troubled relationship between the Mormons and the United States in its most critical period. He returned to Chicago this spring to speak about his new book to a local club. He was among old friends. "Pete" was perhaps the most sought-after speaker for Civil War Round Tables, and the Milwaukee and Fort Wayne clubs were awaiting his visit. After the Chicago speech, he walked to his hotel, called his beloved wife of thirty-nine years, described his fine day to her, hung up, and died moments later of a heart attack.

"Pete" was friendly and conscientious. He was a stimulating conversationalist and a dedicated worker. He was a prolific and good writer. He was a gifted, even inspiring, speaker. He truly "gave the last full measure of devotion" to the study of the Civil War.