

American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies

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It is a tale as familiar as our history primers: A deranged actor, John Wilkes Booth, killed Abraham Lincoln in Ford's Theatre, escaped on foot, and eluded capture for twelve days until he met his fiery end in a Virginia tobacco barn. In the national hysteria that followed, eight others were arrested and tried; four of those were executed, four imprisoned. Therein lie all the classic elements of a great thriller. But the untold tale is even more fascinating.

Now, in *American Brutus*, Michael W. Kauffman, one of the foremost Lincoln assassination authorities, takes familiar history to a deeper level, offering an unprecedented, authoritative account of the Lincoln murder conspiracy. Working from a staggering array of archival sources and new research, Kauffman sheds new light on the background and motives of John Wilkes Booth, the mechanics of his plot to topple the Union government, and the trials and fates of the conspirators.

Piece by piece, Kauffman explains and corrects common misperceptions and analyzes the political motivation behind Booth's plan to unseat Lincoln, in whom the assassin saw a treacherous autocrat, "an American Caesar." In preparing his study, Kauffman spared no effort getting at the truth: He even lived in Booth's house, and re-created key parts of Booth's escape. Thanks to Kauffman's discoveries, readers will have a new understanding of this defining event in our nation's history, and they will come to see how public sentiment about Booth at the time of the assassination and ever since has made an accurate account of his actions and motives next to impossible-until now.

In nearly 140 years there has been an overwhelming body of literature on the Lincoln assassination, much of it incomplete and oftentimes contradictory. In *American Brutus*, Kauffman finally makes sense of an incident whose causes and effects reverberate to this day. Provocative, absorbing, utterly cogent, at times controversial, this will become the definitive text on a watershed event in American history.

MICHAEL W. KAUFFMAN is a political historian and graduate of the University of Virginia who has studied the Lincoln assassination for more than thirty years. He has appeared on A&E, the History Channel, C-SPAN, and the Learning Channel, and was called to testify as an expert witness in the 1995 Booth exhumation hearings. He lives in southern Maryland. ONE

"By God, then, is John Booth crazy?"

Good Friday had never been a well-attended night at the theater, but on that evening, the city of Washington was in a partying mood. On Palm Sunday, General Robert E. Lee had surrendered his Virginia troops to General Ulysses S. Grant at the village of Appomattox Court House. Though some forces remained in the field, Lee had been the greatest obstacle on the path to victory. Now that his troops were out of the way, the bloodiest war in America's history would soon be over, and the celebrations had already begun. Four years to the day after its surrender, Fort Sumter was again under the Stars and Stripes. The flag raising there that day was marked with speeches, music, and prayers of thanks. There were prayers in Washington as well, but a lighter, more carefree atmosphere prevailed. There, buildings were "illuminated" with gas jets configured in the shape of stars, eagles, or words such as "peace" and "victory." The city's population, which

had ballooned to more than two hundred thousand during the war, had gone crazy. The streets were crawling with silly, drunken revelers—soldiers back from the war, tourists passing through, and all the usual odds and ends—staggering from one bar to another in search of a party and another toast to the military victors. All things considered, maybe this Good Friday 1865 was not such a bad night for the theater after all.

Ford's Theatre, on Tenth Street, was one of Washington's leading establishments. It had all the amenities of a first-rate playhouse. Its owner, John T. Ford, presented the finest talent the American stage had to offer. The audience that turned out this night made up a pretty fair cross section of Washington society: clerks, businessmen, politicians, tourists. And of course, there were soldiers. An ever-present part of life in the capital, they came to Ford's from every camp, fort, and hospital in the area, their dark blue uniforms scattered among the hoopskirts and crinolines. Some wore the light blue of the Veterans' Reserve Corps, whose members once served in the ranks but were no longer suited for combat or strenuous duty. Here, they mingled comfortably with socialites, power brokers, and people from all walks of life. It was a diverse crowd, but nearly everyone had something in common, which explained, in large measure, the need to be in a house of entertainment on such a holy day: these people had been through hell.

One could hardly name an event in recent history that someone in this audience had not witnessed. Here were the veterans of Bull Run, Shiloh, and Gettysburg; the political warriors who shaped the nation; and the commercial giants of the age. One man had survived the horrors of Andersonville prison, and others had just arrived from Appomattox. This was more than just a "large and fashionable audience"; the people who came to Ford's Theatre that night had already been eyewitnesses to history. No doubt they were eager to get back to an ordinary life.

The play was *Our American Cousin*, a popular British comedy from the 1850s. Its humor was derived from the homespun "Yankeeisms" of Asa Trenchard, a backwoods Vermonter, and the physical eccentricities of Lord Dundreary, a self-important British nobleman. The star was Laura Keane, a London native, whose character, Florence Trenchard, believes that her cousin Asa (played by actor Harry Hawk) has just inherited the family fortune. Florence and her British relatives try to stay in Asa's good graces, but find it difficult to overlook his crass country-boy manners. It is this culture clash that carries the play.

For most of the audience that night, however, *Our American Cousin* was not the main attraction. A notice in that day's *Evening Star* had announced that President Abraham Lincoln and his wife would attend the performance. Their guest would be Ulysses S. Grant, lieutenant general of the army, victor of the recent war, hero of the hour. Their surprise reservation had come in that morning, and it sent Harry Clay Ford, brother of the theater's owner, on a mad dash to organize a special program. A patriotic song called "Honor to Our Soldiers" was written for the occasion, and Ford sent notices of it to the *Evening Star*. He even redesigned the evening's playbill to reflect the new developments. By late afternoon, the reservations were rolling in. A normally dismal night was now showing some promise. By curtain time, at eight o'clock, Ford's Theatre had a fairly good house.

Abraham Lincoln was famously fond of the theater, and had passed many an evening at Ford's or its competitor, the National. At Ford's, he always occupied the same box, on the right side, directly above the stage. It was an oddly shaped space with sharp angles and cramped, narrow corners, accessible only through a narrow passageway just off the balcony. It actually consisted of two boxes, numbered 7 and 8, which were normally divided by a partition. Stagehands set aside the divider and brought in more comfortable furniture to fill the space. For the president, a large walnut rocker, upholstered in burgundy damask, was placed in the corner nearest the door. A matching sofa went along the rear wall of the box, and the third piece, a large, comfortable armchair, was placed in the "upstage" corner, farthest from the door. The box had just enough space for those chairs, plus a small one for Mrs. Lincoln.

American flags were hung on either side, and two more were draped over the front balustrade. The blue standard of the Treasury Guards hung on a staff in the center, just above a gilt-framed portrait of George Washington. The flags added more than just a festive dash of color. They let everyone know where to look for the hero of Appomattox. Make no mistake about it: General Grant, and not Lincoln, was the evening's chief attraction.

James P. Ferguson was keeping an eye out for the general. Ferguson owned a saloon next door to the theater, and he always made a point of attending when the president was there. But he took a particular interest in Ulysses S. Grant, whom he claimed to have known since boyhood. When Harry Ford told him that Grant was coming, Ferguson bought two tickets for the dress circle, or first balcony, with a clear view into the box directly opposite. With the best seats in the house, "Fergy" brought along his young sweetheart so she could see the general as well.

They were in for a disappointment. General Grant had taken an afternoon train home to Burlington, New Jersey. A young couple came to the theater in his place. The presidential party arrived late, and as they appeared in the dress circle, the audience burst into a long, spontaneous ovation. The president acknowledged the approbation with a smile, then took his seat, partly hidden behind a flag. Miss Clara Harris took a seat at the far side of the box, and her fiancé, Major Henry Rathbone, sat on the sofa just behind her. Though Grant's absence was a disappointment, many in the audience assumed he would appear later. Ferguson, for one, kept a lookout for him.

By ten-fifteen, *Our American Cousin* had progressed to the second scene of the third act. Asa Trenchard had just told a woman named Mrs. Mountchessington that he hadn't inherited a fortune after all, as everyone thought, and the character (played by Helen Muzzy) had a change of heart about the marriage she had hoped to arrange between Asa and her daughter Augusta.

asa (to Augusta): You crave affection, you do. Now I've no fortune, but I'm biling over with affections, which I'm ready to pour out to all of you, like apple sass over roast pork.

mrs. mountchessington: Mr. Trenchard, you will please recollect you are addressing my

daughter, and in my presence.

asa: Yes, I'm offering her my heart and hand just as she wants them, with nothing in 'em.

The president's guests seemed to enjoy the play. Miss Harris had been the Lincolns' guest here before. Major Rathbone, of the 12th U.S. Infantry, was not quite so familiar to them. He had commanded a company under Burnside at Antietam and Fredericksburg. More recently, he had served as the head of disbursing for the Provost Marshal General's bureau. Henry and Clara had known each other since childhood, when her widowed father married his widowed mother.

Mary Todd Lincoln seemed especially pleased to make a public appearance that night. Sitting next to the president, she looked radiant in her flowered dress. She seemed to be enjoying a rare moment of happiness, her mind unburdened, for now, by personal loss and suffering. One lady in the audience noticed that Mrs. Lincoln smiled a great deal, and often glanced over at her husband.

The years had weighed heavily on Abraham Lincoln, and an occasional night out gave him a much-needed diversion. But even the theater did not free him from the weight of his duties. Twice he was interrupted by the delivery of messages. Charles Forbes, the White House messenger, brought one dispatch, then took a seat outside the entrance to the box. A newspaper reporter named Hanscom brought the other. Neither message seemed to require an immediate response, and the president settled quietly back in his rocking chair, head propped in his hand, looking lost in thought.

Though Lincoln was hidden from view most of the time, he occasionally leaned over the box railing to look down into the audience. That is how Isaac Jacquette, in the dress circle, got his first look at him. It was halfway into the play, and a woman sitting nearby remarked that she had never seen the president before. A man whispered that she might see him now, as he was leaning forward. Every time he came into view, the president stole the show.

On the far side of the dress circle, James Ferguson, still watching for General Grant, had borrowed his girlfriend's opera ...

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