

*Is it Dangerous to Believe Anything We Want to Believe In? The Plot to Kill
President Lincoln and the Role of Conspiracies in Genesee County – and
American – History*

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Introduction

It is common knowledge that Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States, was assassinated on April 14th, 1865. Dying at 7:22 a.m. the following morning, he was the first president to be murdered. As Batavia's *Spirit of the Times* told its readers on April 22nd, 1865, in an article bordered in black, Lincoln's death was the product of a conspiracy. Hence the publication of a \$100,000 reward:

\$100,000 reward! The murderer of our late loved President Lincoln is still at large. \$50,000 will be paid by this Department (the War Department) for his apprehension, in addition to any reward offered by Municipal authorities or State Executives. \$25,000 reward will be paid for the apprehension of G.A. Atzerot, sometimes called Port Tobacco, one of Booth's accomplices. \$25,000 will be paid for the apprehension of David C. Harold, another of Booth's accomplices.

In the case of President Lincoln's assassination there is no doubt that a conspiracy existed, one that will be explored in this presentation. But an equally compelling question is that of conspiracy itself and its place in the thinking of the nation at large and Genesee County in particular. What is it in American culture – and by extension that of Genesee County – that tends to produce this understanding of reality? For while it is clear that the legal definition of a conspiracy in criminal law was met in the case of Lincoln's murder – “an agreement by two or more persons to commit an unlawful act” – such is not the

case in numerous other examples throughout American history. Nonetheless, the belief in conspiracies remains a consistent theme over the centuries in American and Genesee County life.

Accordingly, our examination of the conspiracy to assassinate President Lincoln must of necessity raise the question of why conspiracy thinking has so commonly appeared over the generations. Free Masons have been a favorite topic for conspiracy theorists, as have Jesuits and Roman Catholics in general. So too has the belief in conspiracies of international bankers and communists functioning in the highest levels of government. Indeed, while Lincoln was still alive there was a widespread belief that he was working with others to establish himself as tyrannical despot intent upon what would amount to a permanent military dictatorship.

Such unwarranted beliefs – such as the insistence in the 1950s by the leader of the John Birch Society, Robert H. Welch, that President Eisenhower was “a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy” that was “based on an accumulation of detailed evidence so extensive and so palpable that it seems to put this conviction beyond any reasonable doubt” – serve to cloud our understanding of those moments when conspiracies actually do exist. Lewis Powell, David Herold, George Atzerodt, Mary Surratt, Samuel Arnold, Ned Spangler, Michael O’Laughlen, Samuel Mudd, and, of course, John Wilkes Booth, all agreed upon and advanced the cause of murdering Lincoln and others in his administration. In all probability, so too did Mary’s son, John. Here there is a rational base of evidence that points to the existence of a conspiracy. But how do we explain the belief in conspiracies in the *absence* of such a credible evidentiary base?

This question – as much as the questions surrounding the plot to kill Lincoln – goes to the heart of American life. By extension, it also goes to the heart of Genesee County life. There is a perplexing ambivalence in the broad sweep of American history. On the one hand, Americans have been by definition adventurers all too willing to dream and to believe in stories that do not resonate as readily in more traditional, conservative societies. Conversely, Americans have

also displayed, and prized, steadiness and what can be understood as “common sense.” These two tendencies were still balanced by each other in the mid-nineteenth century. But the onset of a modern industrial economy spawning new technologies eventually led to a redefinition of reality that, if anything, lent itself to a wider circulation of conspiracy theories resting on a very American premise. A radical belief in individual freedom meant that one has the right to believe anything that one desires to believe in. Experts do not have the last say. All beliefs are equal to anyone else’s. So why not conclude, as Ray Neff did in 1960, that an additional twenty-four civilians, twenty-three military and naval officers, and a minimum of eleven members of Congress were involved in the conspiracy to murder President Lincoln? Neff’s evidence was a coded message in a British military journal, authored by none other than a Stafford native, Lafayette Baker. Neff alleged that this code was lying buried in an otherwise innocent-looking article.

Does this mean that Neff is mistaken? According to *Civil War Times* and a host of professional historians trained in the use of evidence the answer is clearly yes. But the reply on the part of those supporting Neff’s argument is a resounding message of support. The very consensus of expert opinion positioned *against* Neff, for his supporters, is indicative of a conspiracy to cover-up the complicity of the United States government in the assassination of President Lincoln.

Therefore, in this talk we will explore the dangers to a democracy of a belief that it is one’s right to subscribe to whatever view one advocates – regardless of the evidentiary basis it may, or may not, rest upon. This question is brought into focus in any serious effort to explore the conspiracy to kill President Lincoln, Vice-President Andrew Johnson, General Ulysses Grant, and Secretary of State William H. Seward. That effort will concentrate in particular on the perceptions of the conspiracy in Genesee County in the immediate aftermath of Lincoln’s death. As we explore those observations a nagging question will have to be addressed – is there a precedent here for the view of conspiracies in our own day, a century and a half since that fateful night in Ford’s Theatre? For a democratic republic prizing civic involvement, how can we respond to the late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s remark that “you are entitled to your own opinion, but you

are not entitled to your own facts.” But before probing that remark further we need to spend some time with what was clearly the plan to assassinate Abraham Lincoln.

The Conspiracy to Kill President Lincoln

Before examining the perception of both the assassination itself and the conspiracy as it was understood at least by some in Genesee County, it is incumbent upon us to briefly outline the essential facts surrounding the murder and the attempted murders. The shooting of President Lincoln occurred at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. on the evening of April 14th, 1865 – Good Friday. John Wilkes Booth, the well-known actor and Confederate sympathizer, shot the President in the back of the head while Lincoln was enjoying the comedy *Our American Cousin*.

Booth hailed from a family of renowned actors. His brother, Edwin, was a major star of the American stage by 1865. Both brothers were the heirs of a family stage tradition headed by their father, Junius Brutus Booth, yet another famous American actor originally from England. John was raised in the border state of Maryland and thus considered himself a southerner. He was passionate in his support of slavery. Keeping his promise to his mother that he would not fight for the Confederacy, he resided in the North throughout the Civil War. As the war ensued, his hatred of both Lincoln and abolitionists deepened.

As the war winds down to its eventual official end on April 9th, 1865, Booth plotted with others to kidnap Lincoln as early as the previous month. The idea was worked out with fellow conspirator Lewis T. Powell (a Confederate army veteran and a cousin of General John B. Gordon, leader of Georgia’s Ku Klux Klan). The original plan was to abduct Lincoln and take him to Richmond, Virginia. Booth and Powell believed that they could use the President as leverage in an effort to secure the release of Confederate prisoners of war held in Union prison camps.

Accordingly, in March of 1865 Booth and Powell, along with others that had included Samuel Arnold and Michael O’Laughlen, conspired to kidnap Lincoln as he traveled to attend, ironically, a play being held at a hospital close to his

Presidential summer home. The group gathered on the road to the hospital – but their plan failed when Lincoln decided to attend a different event.

Accordingly, the original plan of kidnapping evolved, by April 9th, into a conspiracy to murder the President. The conspiracy included a plan to assassinate Vice-President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward. Powell was assigned to kill Seward. David Herold had the responsibility to assist in the slaying of Seward. George Atzerodt, who had worked with Confederate spies, was tasked with killing Vice-President Johnson.

Atzerodt withdrew from the plan to murder the Vice-President, while Powell savagely attacked Seward while the Secretary of State lay in bed recovering from an accident. Booth of course killed the President. After the President was shot, Booth escaped from Ford's Theatre while Lincoln was attended to by physicians who, by chance, were also at the play. They decided to move the President across the street to the home of William Peterson. Lincoln lay unconscious while his life ebbed away as a consequence of a bullet lodged deep in his brain. He died early on the morning of April 15th.

Now on the run, Booth and Herold hid for days in a Maryland swamp. Booth, who had injured his leg when leaping from the presidential box to the stage below at Ford's Theatre, was treated by a physician in Maryland, Samuel Mudd. Pursued relentlessly by U.S. Army troops, the pair was cornered at a farm in Virginia. Brought there by a confederate sympathizer, Thomas Jones, Herold surrendered while Booth refused. The barn he remained in was set ablaze, and Booth was shot and soon died.

All told, eight conspirators were tried by a military commission. Along with Herold, Powell, and Atzerodt Mary Surratt, a forty-two year old owner of a Maryland tavern and a Washington, D.C. boarding house, was tried as well – her boarding house had served as a meeting place for Confederate spies – and those conspiring to assassinate the President. In addition, another four conspirators were also put on trial – Mudd, Arnold, and O'Laughlen – along with Edmund Spangler, a Ford's Theatre employee who was friendly with Booth and was known as a Confederate sympathizer and supporter of slavery. A ninth conspirator, John

Surratt, a Confederate spy and the son of Mary Surratt, fled the country. Herold, Powell, Atzerodt, and Mary Surratt, were convicted and hanged. O’Laughlen, Arnold, and Mudd were handed life sentences, while Spangler received six years in prison. O’Laughlin died in prison of Yellow Fever, while Arnold, Spangler, and Mudd received a Presidential pardon from Andrew Johnson in 1869.

It is estimated that at least 16,000 books have been written about Lincoln. This is a conservative estimate, and it does not include a seemingly inexhaustible number of scholarly and popular articles. How many of these books and articles address, in whole or in part, the questions surrounding the conspiracy are really anyone’s guess. It is therefore well beyond the scope of this very superficial overview of the facts involved in the conspiracy to elaborate further. It is hence incumbent upon us to shift the analysis to how the conspiracy – which one knows existed beyond any shadow of a doubt – was perceived here, in Genesee County. But to understand that one has to also take into account what conspiracy theories were circulating nationally, and how they played out locally, here in this part of western New York.

The Perception of the Conspiracy in Genesee County

In the voluminous literature on the Lincoln assassination there are seven common conspiracy theories. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination three of these theories are visible in some of the historical evidence we have from Genesee County. Before turning to one primary historical source in particular – Batavia’s *Spirit of the Times* newspaper – we should take the time to explore what these seven theories are.

The first of these is the allegation that Andrew Johnson, the Vice-President who became President upon Lincoln’s death, had been one of the conspirators with Booth. This idea emerges from Booth’s allegedly stopping by the Washington Hotel that served as Johnson’s residence in the capital. The visit was about seven hours prior to the assassination. Learning that the Vice-President was not present, Booth left a note notifying Johnson of his visit. William A. Browning, Johnson’s private secretary, testified before the military court that he had found this note in Johnson’s box later on that same day. A number of historians have claimed that

the two knew each other – that they had met in Nashville as early as February of 1864, and that Johnson – while military governor of Tennessee – had, with Booth, knew sisters who served as their mistresses. Of course, there is also the famous letter written by Mary Todd Lincoln to her friend Sally Orne in 1866 in which the President’s widow stated in the clearest of terms her belief that Johnson “had an understanding with the conspirators . . .”

A second conspiracy theory that emerged in the wake of the President’s murder is the most commonly accepted – that Booth simply organized a plot to kill the President. In this scenario Booth was a fervent Confederate who originally conspired to kidnap President Lincoln but then turned to murder when the kidnapping attempt proved to be futile. In effect, assassination for Booth and his fellow conspirators was a simple act of revenge in an ongoing struggle against the national government.

A third theory is quite different. Those advancing this perspective argue that there was an extensive Confederate conspiracy to assassinate President Lincoln. The idea took root almost immediately when coded letters were discovered among the possessions of Booth. This speculation has some compelling logic. It appears beyond doubt that the Confederate leadership saw Lincoln as a legitimate wartime target – a situation that only intensified as the South’s position in the war worsened. Lincoln had of course approved Colonel Ulrich Dahlgren’s raid on Richmond. A note was found on Dahlgren when he died in the raid; a memorandum stipulating that Jefferson Davis and his cabinet should be killed. A number of scholars have asserted that the catalyst for Booth’s actions was the capture of Thomas F. Harney, an explosives expert who was on his way to Washington to bomb the White House when he was captured only days before Booth’s fateful blow at Ford’s Theatre.

The compelling logic of the Confederate conspiracy theory is not as discernible in a fourth conjecture. In this one the stress is placed upon the international banking community. The idea here is that Lincoln had angered bankers in Europe who had offered loans designed to finance the war effort – loans with high interest rates. The President rejected these offers and pursued alternative

monetary policies. A crucial component of this argument is that these bankers were also opposed to Lincoln's protectionist policies. As is well known, Lincoln planned a mild treatment of the defeated South. This would translate into a resumption of agricultural production that would have the effect of harming the commodity speculations of leading European bankers. Lincoln was therefore an economic liability. While one could discern a certain logic here, the problem – unlike that of the Confederate conspiracy theory – is one of evidence. In the banker's theory, the evidence remains very thin at best.

A fifth conspiracy theory concerns the Roman Catholic Church. Twenty-one years after Lincoln's death an ex-priest, Charles Chiniquy, alleged that there was a Catholic conspiracy to murder the President. In *Fifty Years in the Church of Rome* he asserted that Booth was hired by Jesuits in order to assassinate the President. Chiniquy had been a client of Lincoln's in 1856 while Lincoln was practicing law. The dispute between Chiniquy and the Church arose after a disagreement between him and a bishop that resulted in a lawsuit being filed by a friend of the bishop. Lincoln negotiated a settlement of the case, which Chiniquy understood as a victory. He also felt that some Jesuits blamed Lincoln for the settlement.

This line of reasoning eventually merged with the thinking of others regarding the Catholic Church. Some therefore concluded that the Vatican viewed Lincoln as a sworn enemy, and that the Church had been historically involved in the removal of heads of state viewed as unacceptable. This theme of anti-Catholicism and the perception of a conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln is one that we shall return to later in this talk.

Along with these conspiracy theories there is a sixth that needs to be acknowledged. This is the one in which Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, was a conspirator. Indeed, so the argument goes, he actually coordinated the plot. This theory stresses Stanton's opposition to Lincoln's overtly mild Reconstruction plans. Accordingly, Stanton was motivated to remove Lincoln so as to construct a harsh and vindictive plan for the postwar South. Those taking this position believe that Stanton knew of the meetings of the conspirators at the Surratt boardinghouse. It is also argued that Stanton's refusal to release from duty Major

Thomas T. Eckert – an officer that Lincoln had requested as a bodyguard – was a denial founded upon the falsity of Eckert’s “crucial” work in the War Department’s Telegraph Office.

These developments combined with subsequent events. Chief among these was Stanton’s failure to alert security at the Navy Yard Bridge, over which Booth escaped, along with the allegation that Stanton withheld evidence by the removal of pages from Booth’s diary. Then there was the work of the aforementioned Ray Neff, and his arguments regarding the cipher messages of Lafayette Baker – messages implicating Stanton in a conspiracy to murder President Lincoln.

Stanton’s purported role as a Northern conspirator brings us into the seventh conspiracy theory worth noting. In this perspective we see the assertion that Northern dissenters conspired to murder President Lincoln. A number of groups have been focused upon in this regard – all of whom were in strident opposition to the policies of the President. Cotton speculators benefited from the wartime conditions produced by the Union blockade that drove the price of cotton up to record levels. A return to prewar conditions would mean the obvious – a steep fall in those prices that would harm the profits of cotton speculators. Radical Republicans opposed the President’s stated preference for a lenient Reconstruction plan. As recently as 2004 a book appeared that stressed the motivation for profiteers to remove Lincoln from office; a task made easier by the anger many felt regarding a mild Reconstruction policy. See Charles Higham’s *Murdering Mr. Lincoln: A New Detection of the 19th Century’s Most Famous Crime*. While this book has many flaws – not the least of which is the razor-thin use of evidence – the monograph nonetheless stands as a reminder of how pervasive conspiracy theories are, Lincoln assassination and otherwise.

At this juncture the obvious question is raised – which of these conspiracy theories is discoverable in Genesee County? Restricting ourselves to the County-wide *Spirit of the Times* in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy at Ford’s Theatre, the answer is that *three* of these theories enjoyed common currency. As a result, they made their way into the most common mass media of the day – the newspaper. These conjectures were the premise of Booth as the originator of the

plot resulting in the executions and imprisonment of Mary Surratt, Powell, Herold, Atzerodt, Mudd, Arnold, O'Laughlen, and Spangler – and the escape of John Surratt; the idea of a Confederate scheme; and the belief that the Roman Catholic Church was behind the murder of Lincoln. We shall turn first to the depiction of a Booth-led conspiracy.

The concept of Booth as the leader of a plot to take the life of the President made its initial appearance in the black-bordered Saturday morning edition of the *Spirit of the Times* on April 22nd, 1865. Subsequent to a detailed narrative outlining the event at Ford's Theatre, it was initially reported that there was a conspiracy involving two murderers. The readers were told that

It is now ascertained with reasonable certainty that two assassins were engaged in the horrible crime, WILKES BOOTH, being the one that shot the President and the other a companion of his whose name is not known, but whose description is so clear that he can hardly escape.

The reader was then informed that “a letter (was) found in Booth's trunk,” revealing that the crime had been planned prior to the fourth of March. Then a hint of a Confederate government involvement was suggested, as readers were told that “the accomplice backed out until Richmond could be heard from.”

The *Spirit of the Times* then shifted back to a more narrow focus on Booth. The readership was then informed that

Booth and his accomplices were at the livery stable at six o'clock last evening and left there with their horses about 10 o'clock or shortly before that hour. It would seem that they had for several days been seeking a chance, but for some reason it was not carried into effect until last night.

The sketchiness of the reporting regarding the Booth-led conspiracy evident in the April 22nd article was completely gone by June 3rd. In an article entitled “The

Charges Against the Assassins,” there is an extended list of conspirators that included not only those eventually imprisoned, executed, or forced to be on the run, but in addition, others as well- all with Booth remaining as the ringleader. In this article, we again see the effort to link Booth’s group with the Confederate leadership, as Jefferson Davis figures prominently among the conspirators. By June 24th, the *Spirit of the Times* account of the conspiracy, which earlier in the month exhibited an effort to be as precise as possible regarding the number of conspirators and their respective roles, now featured an equal precision pertaining to the procedures of the Military Commission charged with trying the conspirators. The article also stressed the controversy surrounding the use of a military tribunal in lieu of a civilian court.

By July 15th the *Spirit of the Times* featured a detailed narrative of the fate of the four defendants who were hanged. The article was entitled “The Execution of Mary E. Surratt, Lewis T. Powell, David E. Harold, and Geo. A. Abzerodt.” It concluded with this dramatic flourish:

There they hung, bundles of carcass and old clothes, four in a row, and past all conspiracy or ambition, the river rolled by without a sound, and men watched them with a shiver, while the heat of the day seemed suddenly abated, as if by the sudden opening of a tomb.

But the certainty of the end of those four conspirators – just as those other four sent to the federal prison at Dry Tortugas as described in the August 5th, 1865 issue of *Spirit of the Times* – was weakened by the continuing controversy surrounding the use of a military tribunal. In that July 15th issue there was a very impassioned article entitled “The Conspiracy Trial and Fate of the Prisoners.” Here the legitimacy of the proceedings leading to eight convictions is eerily similar to the controversy still swirling around the Warren Commission Report and the assassination of another President – John F. Kennedy. Accordingly, readers were told that

Throughout the trial nothing has occurred

to vindicate the course of the Washington authorities in resorting to the military code to investigate the charges against the accused. We think it is a serious and lasting blemish upon our country's fair name that the prisoners were not at once turned over to the ordinary legal courts; for, in spite of all arguments to the contrary,

the article goes on to say,

it will be difficult to relieve the proceedings, in the minds of those who are to come after us, of the character of an arbitrary inquisition . . .

In other words, a lack of legitimacy regarding the ultimate findings of the Military Commission would only, over time, have the consequence of spawning innumerable theories about who was actually involved in the Lincoln assassination. As I have already suggested, the role of the Confederate leadership was already being speculated about even before the Military Commission was convened. This, then, is the second perception of the conspiracy that was surfacing in Genesee County in the wake of the President's murder.

This was especially discernible in two *Spirit of the Times* articles. In the June 3rd issue, in "The Charges against the Assassins," George N. Sanders was identified as yet another member of the conspiracy with strong Confederate ties. Sanders was a Kentucky native who was a fervent Democrat with alleged ties to radical political movements dedicated to the assassination of governmental leaders. Throughout the Civil War he was believed to be in Montreal supporting the Confederate cause. This same article also refers to Beverly Tucker (Nathaniel Beverly Tucker), a Virginia native and member of the Confederate Army. During the Civil War Tucker was the Confederate government's economic representative in France, England, and Canada. Jacob Thompson, the United States Secretary of the Interior who resigned in 1861 in order to assume the duties of the

Confederate Army's Inspector General, was also alluded to. He went on to lead the Confederate Secret Service and most likely met with Booth.

In this article the belief in a Confederate-coordinated conspiracy to murder the President was clear and asserted as simple fact. Adding names such as Clement C. Clay (Confederate States Senator from Alabama) only served to bolster the view among some that the Confederate leadership was intimately involved in Lincoln's death.

Ironically, despite the perception of Confederate complicity observable in the *Spirit of the Times*, an article entitled "The Capture of Jeff. Davis" also appeared on May 20th in which Davis is presented as someone who would not necessarily have lowered himself to be involved in Lincoln's murder. The striking inconsistency of the views on Davis that surfaced in this article is deserving of an extended quote:

Now that the rebel President is really in our hands, the great question arises what should be done with him. He will of course be put on trial as an accomplice in the assassination of President Lincoln, but what evidence has yet been adduced to implicate him, the public are not informed. We, as yet, do not believe him guilty of this enormity, for whatever prominent part he may have played in the great rebellion drama, we can hardly think a man of his standing would thus debase himself as to become a party in such a foul plot.

The refusal of the *Spirit of the Times* to see in Davis one who would actually join in on the Confederate conspiracy to murder the President of the United States speaks to the view that despite everything, Davis was seen as an American leader, one whose ancestors had served in the Revolutionary War army of George Washington. In addition, he was a graduate of the military academy at West Point. Indeed, his very name – Jefferson – had been selected by his father in honor of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson Davis may have been misguided, but he could still be redeemed – and as a native-born American gentleman, could never

have agreed to undertake a plot to murder Lincoln. However, the same could not be said of the Roman Catholic Church, as the readers of the *Spirit of the Times* were reminded.

This takes us to the third conspiracy to surface in this widely-read Genesee County newspaper of the mid-nineteenth century. On July 1st, 1865, an article appeared, entitled “Attempted Political Assassinations Since 1850.” The list compiled in this article was taken from a Catholic publication, *The Unita Catholica*. In the mid-nineteenth century this was understood by many to be the official publication of the Papacy. To present a list of recent assassination attempts around the world is one thing – but to place it on page one of the *Spirit of the Times* – a short time after Lincoln’s murder – and to identify this publication as coming from a Vatican source is quite another. The wording of the opening of the article was highly suggestive – “*The Unita Catholica* gives the following curious list of all the attempts at political assassination that have been made since 1850.” The word “curious” is suggestive of a list compiled by those in the Vatican who were privy to knowledge of conspiracies those outside of the Vatican were not.

The publication of this article is an expression of a long-standing belief among those who were suspicious of the Catholic presence in republican America – and the attendant view that the Papacy had a history of removing foreign heads of state that it disapproved of. The Church, seen as an undemocratic and authoritarian institution from this vantage point, allegedly viewed Lincoln as an extremist in terms of his opposition to slavery and his support of popular sovereignty. Unable to accept the evidence emerging from the Military Commission’s trial of the defendant – along with the undisputed aura surrounding the dead President – it is not surprising that these three conspiracy theories were discernible in the *Spirit of the Times*. What is surprising is that there were not more.

Is There a Precedent for Our Own Day?

The answer to this is a clear yes, and it is a reply anchored in the doubt generated by the findings of the Military Commission that sent four defendants to the gallows and the other four to a federal prison – while not reaching yet a ninth

conspirator, Mary's son, John. The doubts surrounding the propriety of using a military tribunal to try civilians – along with the inordinate influence of Catholics in this case – only tended to generate a plethora of conspiracy scenarios of which only some have been discussed in this talk. The case exacerbated an American cultural tendency to see conspiracies when in fact there may not be any – for it is difficult to place one's trust in government proceedings when they do not appear to be forthcoming. This case is an historical precedent for one that followed less than a century later – that of the assassination of another President, John F. Kennedy. Indeed, the parallels between the suspicions surrounding the Military Commission's handling of what would have otherwise been a civilian murder trial – and the investigation and consequent suspicions about the Warren Commission's probe into President Kennedy's assassination a mere century later – was a ready-made recipe for the conspiracy theories that are still being generated in both cases.

In the aforementioned July 15th, 1865 article in the *Spirit of the Times*, there was an unrelenting criticism of the Military Commission's adjudication primarily because it was alleged to have the effect of obscuring the truth behind the President's death. The readers were therefore told that the trial

. . . has been marked from first to last by a striking illiberality, and unrelenting zeal, entirely incompatible, in our opinion, with a simple desire to see nothing but justice done.

All of this blocked the search for not only justice – but the truth behind the murder that the public so desired:

Obstacles were presented constantly to the introduction of testimony for the defense, while the common rules of evidence were unremittingly strained in order to present circumstances seemingly unfavorable to the accused.

The conclusion was then reached

. . . that the Military Court was organized
to convict.

The important point here is perception rather than factual accuracy. While one is not presented with evidence supporting this view of the Commission, the important point here is twofold. One is that the Commission was determining the fate of defendants who, at the time of the murder, acted while there was still fighting taking place – indeed, battles such as those at Palmito Ranch (in Texas) as late as May of 1865. Hence the argument of U.S. Attorney General James Speed was that the defendants were being charged not simply with killing a private citizen. Instead, they were alleged to have killed the Commander in Chief of the American military during a time of war.

But the point regarding the Commission's legitimacy was part of a perception that the crime was so heinous that it simply could not be the result of the actions of a handful of plotters. There is something deeply embedded in American culture – for reasons that would take us far beyond the scope of this talk – that clings to the idea that there are sinister developments in highly dramatic moments such as this that are in evidence at high levels of power.

This combines with the assumption – on some equally deep cultural and psychological level – that a president – especially one that has a high purpose – could not have had his life ended by anything other than a highly-organized, highly complex conspiracy. It is not satisfying for many to accept the idea that a lone gunman acted out of mental illness – or ideological fervor. Instead, it is more comforting to conclude that murderers were trying to stop the great plans of a president. As Lincoln scholar Thomas Reed Turner once put it in *Beware the People Weeping: Public Opinion and the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, “it is more satisfying to believe that a president died as the victim of a cause than at the hands of a deranged gunman.”

To complicate matters further, there is another factor at work – the simple presence of social class. Be it 1865 or 1963 – there are many in our country – and

in Genesee County – who could not accept the simple truth that people such as the conspirators around Booth – or Lee Harvey Oswald a century later – would be in a position to take the life of an illustrious leader and consequently radically alter the future of an entire nation.

As a result, there emerged a seemingly endless variety of conspiracy theories, produced in part by official proceedings (the Military Commission of 1865 and the Warren Commission of 1964) viewed as highly questionable *and* by the cultural and psychological factors I have noted above. I have alluded to seven conspiracy ideas associated with President Lincoln’s death, with three making their appearance in Genesee County. But there were more that I did not mention, and additional research is necessary to see if they at some point made their presence felt in Genesee County. These include theories about Freemasons, B’nai B’rith, the Knights of the Golden Circle, an alliance of Confederates and disaffected Northerners, and even Mary Todd Lincoln herself. Of course, President Kennedy’s assassination has spawned a tidal wave of conspiracy accusations that dwarf those of Lincoln – at last count, forty-four groups have been cited by conspiracy writers as having been involved in the Kennedy assassination – these groups range from the U.S. Department of Agriculture through exiled Czarist Russians to the Roman Catholic Church. As if this were not enough, at last count 214 individuals have been alleged to have conspired to murder President Kennedy. These people range from Joe DiMaggio through the patrolman J.D. Tippitt to Abraham Zapruder of home movie fame.

But the suspicion directed against the Military Commission and the Warren Commission is not the only crucial factor here – in both the Lincoln and Kennedy cases there is also the presence of people perceived as outsiders. It is not insignificant that one of the more common conspiracy theories regarding Lincoln focused on Roman Catholics – the murder took place not long after the vehemently anti-Catholic “Know-Nothing” movement in the years leading up to the Civil War, which were followed by the arrival of about four million Irish Catholic immigrants. Mary Surratt was a devout Catholic. David E. Herold was yet another Catholic. John Surratt had been a Catholic seminarian, and eventually worked as a papal guard at the Vatican. Three priests testified on behalf of Mary

in front of the Commission. The Catholic presence in mid-nineteenth century America only served to fan the conspiracy flames. As Catholics in Protestant America, they were the quintessential outsiders. Indeed, Jefferson Davis himself, while not Catholic, had been educated in a Catholic school.

The Catholic factor that played such a prominent role in the public's perception of a conspiracy engineered by outsiders is analogous to the role played by communism in the public's perception of Oswald in 1963. Within twenty-four hours of Kennedy's death Dallas police found many materials in Oswald's boarding house room that were at variance with mainstream America in 1963. Communist newspapers and literature, letters from the Socialist Workers Party (a communist group), and a host of other materials that identified Oswald as a clear outsider – one who had actually defected at one point to the Soviet Union and brought home a Russian wife. All of this, and much more, at the height of the Cold War translated into a view of an assassin who clearly stood apart from main street American life in 1963. This only helped to feed the growing belief that there had been a complicated conspiracy to murder President Kennedy. The multitude of demonstrable facts in both the killings of Lincoln and Kennedy eventually became overwhelmed by a belief that the only reality that is valid is the reality that we ourselves create. This brings us back to where we started in this talk. Is it dangerous to believe anything that we want to believe? And if it is, what role does a notion of conspiracy – attached now to topics far beyond the Lincoln and Kennedy murders – play in this American drift from a previously agreed upon consensus that demonstrable facts do indeed matter?

Conclusion

My earlier reference to Senator Moynihan's remark that "you are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts" once again rears its head. Many of the conspiracy theories that abound in our own day – not only those surrounding the Lincoln and Kennedy murders – are predicated on precisely what someone such as Senator Moynihan warned against. Does being an American with a First Amendment protection mean that one is entitled to believe anything that one desires to believe in – and is such a belief, even without

evidentiary support, as valid as anyone else's? Can real democracy, real freedom, and real tolerance survive such a perspective?

I do not think so. Is it too much to ask that an opinion about who actually conspired to assassinate President Lincoln start with an examination of the evidence at work in the Military Commission's proceedings? Along these lines, what of the Warren Commission report compiled over a nine-month period after having examined 3,154 pieces of evidence and analyzed 25,000 interviews and taking the testimony of 552 witnesses? Is it too much to ask of someone venturing an opinion on Kennedy's murder to at least attempt an appraisal of the twenty-seven published volumes of the Warren Commission?

The essence of a democratic society is its reliance upon a rational, informed citizenry. If anything, the immediacy, unreliability, and sheer showmanship of much of what transpires on the Internet only functions to fan the flames of an irrational flight from verifiable facts that may have already produced irreparable harm to our republic. Therefore, the point is not simply the Lincoln assassination conspiracy. The real point is how we think about the conspiracy, and what it says about us. When one examines the plethora of conspiracy theories surrounding just these two cases – those of Lincoln and Kennedy – it is as if there is not only a headlong rush into irrationality. More alarmingly, it is as if there is a deep public resentment of any reasonable study of the topic at hand and the judicious weighing of evidence that can produce an assessment of actual reality. Conspiracy theories of all sorts keep people frightened, resentful, and angry. The important question, then, and maybe the most disturbing of all, is who precisely benefits from the existence of a frenzied American public unable any longer to have any faith in the key institutions necessary for the successful functioning – and continuation – of American society?

