

By Dov Levy



# Robbing Lincoln's Grave

It was one of the most unthinkable crimes in American history. A group of outlaws dared to steal the body of arguably the most popular American president of all time. Incredibly enough, this bizarre story was overlooked by the media due to a more pressing issue that affected the country at the time—the election crisis of 1876.

April 14, 1865. Truly a date that lives in infamy in American history.

Five days earlier, General Robert E. Lee, commander of the South, surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the North, ending four long years of bitter civil war. Now, on this balmy April night in the nation's capital, President Abraham Lincoln decides to take a well-deserved break and attend a play at Ford's Theater, accompanied by First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln.

Despite the hatred of Lincoln in certain circles—both in the South as well as in the North—it does not occur to anyone to question the wisdom of the president appearing in public for a scheduled performance with no particular security measures in place. Lincoln himself, a deeply religious man, has been known to respond to death threats with the simple belief, "If I am destined to die, I cannot prevent it no matter how well I am protected."

He appears in a good mood tonight, no doubt reflecting the good news of General Lee's surrender, in contrast to the foreboding dream he had had recently in which he saw his body laid out in the White House East Room while people whispered in hushed voices, "Lincoln is dead."

While he sits watching the play, an actor with pro-Southern sympathies named John Wilkes Booth climbs into the presidential box and shoots Lincoln in the back of his head, before escaping from the building.

The president hovers between life and death for nine hours until... he finally succumbs to his wound the following morning.

## Booth and the South

John Wilkes Booth was born in Bel Air, Maryland, on May 10, 1838 to Junius Brutus Booth, who was a well-known and talented actor. Unfortunately, the man was also a talented drinker and he died young from his alcohol abuse. His elder son, Edwin, followed in the father's acting footsteps and developed a popular following, but the

younger John lacked confidence and was plagued by stage fright. Reviewers criticized his poor performance and even mocked his inability to carry on his father's talents. The poor boy was booed by spectators and was pelted with tomatoes (a traditional outlet for the public's impatience with bad performances, as readers of Huckleberry Finn will remember).

Edwin took John under his wing and paid for teachers to train his younger brother in the performing arts, and eventually the results paid off. John's self-esteem blossomed and when Edwin began a tour of the South on a performing circuit, he invited John to join the show. John became an instant celebrity and received recognition for his newly developed acting talent. The warm reception in the South, in sharp contrast to the ridicule to which he was subjected in the North, turned him into an avid fan of the Southern gentility.

John Wilkes Booth became an ardent agitator for the Southern causes, including the rights of states over the federal government and the right to own slaves, which led to the secession of the Confederate States in 1861 and touched off the Civil War. Despite his strong feelings, he refrained from participating in the war and joining the Confederate Army out of respect for his



A young Lincoln.

mother, who had not yet gotten over her husband's death. Instead, he decided to use his talents to further the Confederate cause. Whenever he acted in a play in the North, he made sure to poke fun at the Union.

His fame as a talented actor allowed him the rare privilege of traveling freely between the warring territories. With time he began to engage in espionage activities for the Confederacy, carrying with him messages from spies in the North each time he traveled to the South. Booth joined a group of Southern spies and smugglers who operated from Richmond to Montreal, performing various underground activities such as trying to disrupt the Union's blockade of the Southern states, smuggling medicines from Canada through Union territory to Virginia and delivering secret postal messages across army lines.

Whenever Booth found himself in Washington on a performing tour, he stayed at the National Hotel on 6<sup>th</sup> Street, not far from the Capitol, where Confederate agents would gather. Here the Southern sympathizers spin plans to sabotage the Union cause by the dim light of gas lamps, and it was John Wilkes Booth who introduced the most daring plan of all.

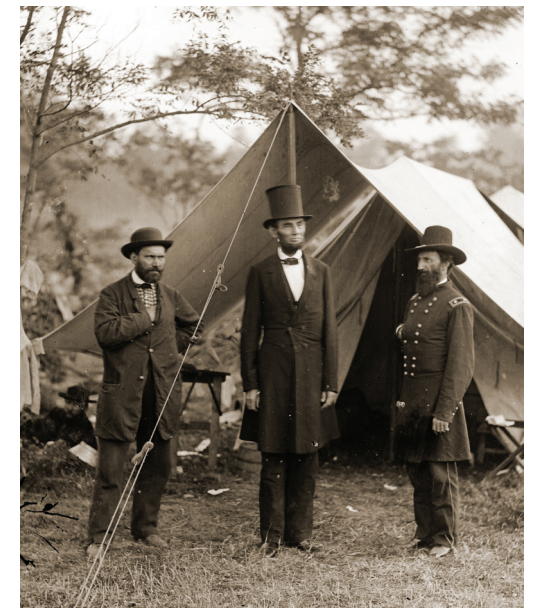
## Kidnapping the President

It was December, 1864. The war had dragged on for almost four years already and the end was not yet in sight. Things had been going badly for the Confederacy. The soldiers were too few and too poorly equipped; many were barefoot and surviving on insufficient rations. Since the middle of 1863, one lost battle after another had replaced the brilliant victories General Robert E. Lee had won earlier in the campaign. In addition, the war had taken a heavy toll on the South. High casualties, the economic devastation wrought by the Union's successful blockade of Southern ports and the wanton destruction of Southern cities and plantations left by General William Sherman's "March to the Sea" had worn down the Confederate spirit.

Against this bleak backdrop, Booth felt that something drastic had to be done, something



The cottage where Lincoln was raised, now a museum.



Visiting the war front with his generals.

that could turn the tide of the war. Booth proposed a plan to kidnap Abraham Lincoln and transport him 100 miles to the capital of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia. There Lincoln could be held hostage against the release of all captured Confederate soldiers or a large shipment of desperately needed supplies such as food and ammunition. In any case, the blow to Northern morale, Booth believed, would be sufficient to force the Union to agree to any conditions the Confederacy might decide to set.

Wild though the plan sounded, Booth was excited enough to collect a diverse and colorful group of individuals who agreed