

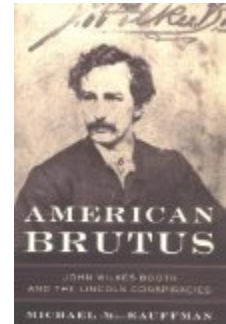
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Michael W. Kauffman. *American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies*. New York: Random House, 2004. xvi + 508 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-375-75974-1; \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-50785-4.

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Brutus or Bin Laden?

Abraham Lincoln delivered a rather extraordinary speech to a crowd that gathered outside the White House on April 11, 1865. Though Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant just two days prior, and the end of the Civil War appeared imminent, Lincoln chose to focus his remarks on the daunting task of Reconstruction. Lincoln realized much important work would remain after the shooting stopped and he took the first opportunity following the surrender at Appomattox to plead his case for the Unionist government in Louisiana that had been formed under his auspices. Louisiana Unionists had failed to implement Lincoln's private suggestion that the franchise be extended to "very intelligent" African Americans and those who had served in the military, yet the president continued to favor a limited franchise for African Americans and he made this position known to the public in his April 11 address. That Lincoln would raise the highly contentious issue of equal rights at a time when he could have basked in the glory of victory over the rebel armies was further evidence of his evolving views on the purpose and meaning of the war. It is also possible that this endorsement of civil rights cost him his life.

According to Michael Kauffman, John Wilkes Booth was among those who listened to Lincoln's speech on April 11. Upon hearing Lincoln advocate voting rights for African Americans, Booth reportedly remarked: "That means nigger citizenship ... Now, by God, I'll put him through" (p. 210). Booth made good on his promise three nights later when he assassinated Lincoln at Ford's The-

atre. Ever since that tragic evening, the plot to murder Lincoln has been the subject of intense interest. From the outset, it was evident that Booth was part of a conspiracy to kill not only Lincoln but also Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward. Johnson's would-be assassin lost his nerve, but Lewis Powell's knife nearly killed the bed-ridden Seward who was at home convalescing from injuries sustained in a carriage accident. Clearly, Booth and his co-conspirators hoped that these assassinations would throw the federal government into such a state of chaos that the seemingly defeated rebellion would be resuscitated.

Not unlike the presidential assassination that occurred in Dallas ninety-eight years later, the Lincoln assassination has spawned a wide variety of conspiracy theories. There have been some, including Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, who believed the Confederate government was directly responsible for the assassination and others who concluded that Stanton himself was the evil genius at the center of the conspiracy. The latter theory was championed by Otto Eischeniml in the 1930s and revived in 1977 with a book and film titled *The Lincoln Conspiracy*. No professional historian has done more to refute the Eischeniml thesis and various other grand conspiracy theories than William Hanchett. His 1983 book, *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies*, remains the finest work on the subject. Taking a cue from Hanchett, Kauffman dismisses Eischeniml's work as the product of "spotty research, false assumptions, and leading questions" (p. 392). Such cannot be said of Kauff-

man's meticulously researched narrative of the events leading up to and following the assassination. Kauffman's book not only offers a minute-by-minute account of the events on April 14-15, but it also eschews grand conspiracy theories by focusing on the details of Booth's life in an attempt to show how he single-handedly masterminded the assassination plot and cleverly manipulated those around him.

American Brutus is the product of three decades of research on Booth and the Lincoln assassination. Based largely on records in the National Archives that were collected during the government's investigation into the assassination and subsequent trial of Booth's cohorts, Kauffman's emphasis on primary sources gives the work a sense of immediacy and his vivid depictions of the scenes at Ford's Theatre and Lincoln's deathbed are particularly effective. In marshaling his evidence Kauffman took advantage of computer technology by constructing a database that enabled him to sort documents using a variety of criteria. The end result is a rich, highly detailed narrative replete with numerous details and a cast of dozens of characters. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find an aspect of the assassination that Kauffman omits. He provides the reader with a preponderance of data, including descriptions of the various horses used by the conspirators. While such minutiae can be overwhelming, there is a payoff when Kauffman employs this evidence to show how Booth used public livery stables as a means to implicate his associates in the plot. Kauffman also uses eyewitness testimony concerning Booth and David Herold's getaway horses to argue that, contrary to popular legend, Booth did not break his leg while jumping from the president's box to the stage. Instead, Kauffman concludes that Booth's horse fell on him during the ride from Washington to Southern Maryland.

While researchers can comb through thousands of pages of evidence in the National Archives, the collected writings of Booth fill a single thin volume.[1] Undoubtedly many of Booth's correspondents destroyed his letters in the wake of the assassination for fear of being linked to him in any way. Though few of Booth's writings survive, Kauffman offers some insight into Booth's character and motives by analyzing the available documents. For Kauffman, Booth "was always an actor" and he envisioned himself as a modern-day Brutus whose role was to preserve Southern liberty by assassinating the tyrant Lincoln (pp. xiv, 292). Booth supported secession following Lincoln's election, and when Lincoln resorted to force in order to preserve the Union, Booth believed Southerners had to resist or face "either extermination or

slavery for *themselves*." [2] For Booth, the Civil War was therefore a struggle between liberty-loving Southern patriots and an oppressive central government led by a dictator.

In addition to opposing Lincoln's heavy-handed policies toward the South, Booth was also quite uncomfortable at the prospect of sectional reunion under the new order wrought by emancipation. Kauffman points out that Booth viewed the enslavement of African Americans as a "blessing" for both slaveholders and the enslaved (p. 113). In a document that was probably written in November 1864, Booth further asserted: "This country was formed for the *white* not the black man." [3] Following Lincoln's re-election, Booth sought to stave off Confederate defeat by making plans to kidnap the president and take him to Richmond in the hope that this would compel Union authorities to resume the exchange of prisoners of war. It was only much later, after hearing Lincoln's speech on April 11, and learning that General Grant would return to Washington on April 13, that Booth decided it was time for "something decisive & great" to be done (p. 399). The opportunity presented itself on the night of April 14, and after shooting Lincoln in the back of the head (Grant had declined the invitation to accompany the Lincolns to the theater), Booth uttered the famous line, "Sic semper tyrannis" before exiting the stage. This Latin phrase meaning "thus always to tyrants" was not only the state motto of Virginia but it was also what Brutus allegedly said following the assassination of Julius Caesar.

Booth envisioned himself as a savior of republican liberty in the mold of Brutus, yet there are many contradictions between this image and the crime he committed. Considering Kauffman's command of the subject, it is unfortunate that he does not explore these inconsistencies in greater depth. Oddly enough, Kauffman notes that the self-proclaimed Brutus's best part was the title role in *Richard III* (1597)—a role that certainly does not bring the defense of liberty immediately to mind. Given Kauffman's emphasis on the Booth-Brutus connection, it seems that he could have benefited from the insights contained in Albert Furtwangler's *Assassin on Stage: Brutus, Hamlet, and the Death of Lincoln* (1991), which offers a comprehensive and highly informed discussion of the relationship between Shakespeare's plays, the Booth family, and Lincoln's assassination.

Brutus is the tragic hero in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1623) and Kauffman observes that Booth has become a "romantic hero" because he "reflected the complexi-

ties of a rapidly changing time” and resisted the “advent of a new, uncertain time” (p. 394). One wishes Kauffman had devoted more attention to the question of how a presidential assassin acquired a cult following and became a mythic character in our culture. While Kauffman does not endorse Booth’s actions, it is clear that he admires Booth for his ability to organize both a real kidnapping/assassination conspiracy and a “shadow conspiracy” that implicated persons who were not actually involved in the plot. All this was successfully done under the noses of federal authorities during a period of “unprecedented paranoia” (p. 394). The enormity of Booth’s crime tends to be submerged in the numerous details surrounding his activities. Kauffman’s harshest words are reserved for the detectives who conducted a slipshod investigation and federal officials who subjected some of the co-conspirators to “barbarous” treatment and an unfair trial before a military tribunal (p. 354).

Kauffman does not shy away from making comparisons between the government’s handling of Booth’s associates and the way in which suspected terrorists have been treated since September 2001. Certainly military tribunals and the rights of prisoners are as relevant today as they were in 1865. Kauffman, however, does not take this analogy a step further and explore the reasons why federal officials may have acted in such a draconian manner. By late 1864, Confederate partisans were becoming increasingly desperate. In October, rebels operating from Canada conducted a raid against St. Albans, Vermont, and on the night of November 25, Confederate agents set fire to several buildings in New York City. Kauffman notes the coincidence of Booth being in Canada just prior to the St. Albans incident and he was also in New York on November 25 performing the role of Marc Antony in *Julius Caesar*. Even if Booth had no part in these other activities, the federal government’s paranoia had a solid basis in reality, for these acts were all designed to terrorize the North and aid the Confederacy.

As a professional actor, Booth had a flair for the dramatic and he chose to assassinate Lincoln in a place

where he would have an audience. Through this horrific and very public act of terrorism Booth sought to reverse defeats on the battlefield and the result of a democratic election. Kauffman is correct that Booth was motivated out of a desire to resist change, but his act was not that of an American Brutus. Instead of defending liberty, Booth attempted to perpetuate a morally bankrupt regime whose cornerstone rested upon the institution of slavery. While Booth’s assassination of Lincoln failed to prevent the defeat of the Confederacy, he has proven to be more successful in the long run. By killing Lincoln and failing to assassinate Vice President Johnson, Booth’s conspiracy unwittingly elevated a man to the presidency who did all in his power to minimize the impact of emancipation. Instead of being one of the last shots of the Civil War, Booth’s derringer fired the opening shot in the contest over the war’s legacy, and as one of the patron saints of the Lost Cause, Booth has enjoyed more popularity than perhaps even his own inflated ego could have imagined.

Kauffman’s depiction of Booth as a rational, charismatic, highly skilled, and ideologically committed assassin is not likely to diminish his place in popular memory. Nevertheless, *American Brutus* offers a compelling account of the assassination conspiracy and draws some original conclusions that are based on a prodigious amount of archival research. Kauffman’s work is therefore essential reading for anyone with an interest in this awful event. As a reminder of what Americans truly lost as a result of Booth’s actions, readers should also re-familiarize themselves with some of Lincoln’s words, especially what turned out to be his final public speech delivered on April 11, 1865.

Notes

[1]. John Rhodehamel and Louise Taper, eds., *Right or Wrong, God Judge Me: The Writings of John Wilkes Booth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[2]. Ibid, 125.

[3]. Ibid.

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