

H-Net Reviews

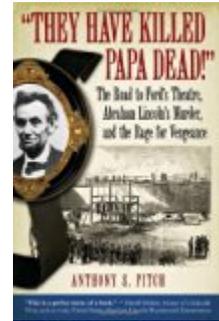
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anthony S. Pitch. *"They Have Killed Papa Dead!" The Road to Ford's Theatre, Abraham Lincoln's Murder, and the Rage for Vengeance.* Hanover: Steerforth Press, 2008. 512 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58642-158-8.

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Commissioned by Mary Beth Corrigan



New Insights into the Lincoln Assassination

The number of books churned out every year on Abraham Lincoln's life and work almost defies the imagination, but one, let alone thousands, of books have not conveyed what Lincoln and his assassination meant to the country. Lincoln's assassination was the first such tragedy in the nation's history and added a dark tinge to a country just turning a corner after a frightful war. Anthony S. Pitch's *"They Have Killed Papa Dead!"* (the cry of young Tad Lincoln on returning to the White House after seeing his mortally wounded father) is a special book that will surely serve as a benchmark in the vast Lincoln-related lore. Pitch's work takes the conspiracy story back to its origins and forward through the trial and sentencing of the conspirators. It achieves the same high standard as James L. Swanson's *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer* (2006), an epic retelling of John Wilkes Booth's escape and capture.

Pitch's book is riveting because of exquisitely detailed research (1,830 footnotes!), a fast-paced narrative that is evocative in depicting the personalities and places central to understanding Booth's original plan to kidnap the president. Booth was confident that he would be acclaimed a hero in the South and a shining symbol of rejection of all that the president stood for. However, the surrender of Robert E. Lee's armies dramatically changed Booth's goal to murder rather than kidnapping. Pitch's journalistic credentials and his experience in keeping a story moving stand him in good stead. The reader is kept so close to the details of the events described as to

feel more like a close observer than an armchair reader 145 years later. Despite the ground of the Lincoln story having been plowed so many times, Pitch has come up with significant additions to the narrative, including confirming Booth's presence in the Capitol Building at the start of Lincoln's second inauguration and the concern of the presidential entourage at Booth's hostility toward the president.

Despite a massive amount of detail deftly sorted and applied, the author maintains a nonjudgmental stance toward the punishments handed down by the military court. Of the eight tried, four were hanged, including the first woman in U.S. history, and four sentenced to hard labor in the Dry Tortugas Islands off Florida, to be commuted four years later by President Andrew Johnson as he left the White House. Pitch does, however, deplore the harshness of the treatment given the prisoners before and after the verdicts were announced. The country was not only eager for vengeance, but Lincoln's secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton, also asserted personal control over virtually all aspects of the post-assassination period and clearly sought revenge in ordering the prisoners' harsh treatment. As other studies, such as *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (2005) by Doris Kearns Goodwin, Pitch portrays Stanton's deep admiration and even love for Lincoln despite his frustrations with the president's ambiguity and indecision at many points during the war.

Pitch's recounting of the emotional response to Secretary Stanton's decision to use a military tribunal vice the civil court system to try the Lincoln conspirators parallels the current debate about where and how to try terrorist detainees following the September 11, 2001, attacks on major American targets. Secretary Stanton was adamant that a military tribunal was the only venue for the murder trial, while advocates for a trial by jury were "enraged" by the decision. "Proponents of a military trial argued the futility of expecting to find an impartial jury in such a politically divided city. They could not imagine any jury in Washington ever reaching unanimity, essential for a verdict to convict. A military tribunal, by contrast, required only a simple majority to convict, with two-thirds necessary to hang" (p. 312). Lincoln's first attorney general, Edward Bates, excoriated Stanton's decision, saying, "Such a trial is not only unlawful, but it is a gross blunder in policy; it denies the great, fundamental principle, that ours is a government of law, and that the law is strong enough to rule the people wisely and well" (p. 312). While differing in major respects, today's debate also raises a contentious issue with high stakes for the country.

Pitch's book paints an indelible picture of the presidential assassin, Booth, revealing a tortured personality who pictured himself showered with praise and honor by

a grateful South once he had kidnapped President Lincoln and taken him to Richmond as a prisoner of the Confederacy. Booth's selection of coconspirators is also revealing in that those most susceptible to his charisma were also society's losers, men destined never to create anything on their own and willing to follow the impassioned Booth down a dead-end road. The most mature of the conspirators refused to commit to the murder, despite complicity in the original kidnap plan. Pitch documents Booth's obsession with obtaining news accounts of reactions—North and South—to the assassination and his deep distress at realizing that many prescient southerners understood that Lincoln had been their best hope for a generous and gracious resolution of their collective treason. The author sidesteps matching the punishments to the crime due to the inadequacy of the historical record—voluminous as it is—in tracking all the original conspirators' conversion from would-be kidnappers to murderers (only Booth and Lewis Payne, who tried to murder Secretary of State William Seward, ultimately engaged in violence).

Pitch's masterful and highly readable account is a significant addition to the vast Lincoln record and a fascinating introduction for the lay reader to the complexities of this searing chapter in American history.

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