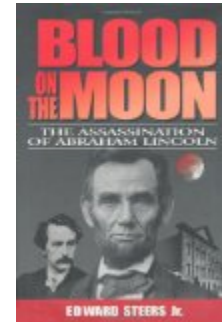


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward Steers, Jr. *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. xv + 293 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2217-5.

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Published on H-Pol (May, 2002)



## Southern Patriot, Not Southern Madman

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In *Blood on the Moon*, Edward Steers, Jr. takes a fresh look at the events surrounding the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Those not totally familiar with the historiography of the president's death might well raise the question as to whether we really need another book about Lincoln's murder. Surely, among the thousands of books written about all aspects of Lincoln's life and career, there cannot be much that has been left unsaid.

The truth is, however, that while Lincoln's assassination has been the subject of numerous books and articles, the death of the sixteenth president has remained mired in controversy. A sampling of the issues debated reveals a wide range of controversial questions: was John Wilkes Booth a madman; should civilians have been tried by a military commission; were Mrs. Mary Surratt and Dr. Samuel Mudd the innocent victims of military justice; did the radical Republicans use the assassination as a catalyst to wreak revenge on the South; coupled with even more esoteric charges that Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and the radicals were behind the murder or that Booth did not die in Garrett's Barn.

One of the reasons for the persistence of the more sensational claims has been the fact that for a long time academically trained historians tended not to regard the assassination as a genuine area of scholarly inquiry. It was not until the publication of my own *Beware the People Weeping* (1982), followed by Willam Hanchett's excellent *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies* (1983) that academic historians began to probe Lincoln's death, attempting to

place the events in their historical context and to expose the absurdity of many of the more spurious claims. Prior to that time the assassination was left pretty much to the sensationalists and popularizers who were free to spin their conspiratorial tales.[1]

Among the most influential recent works that have been published as part of this ongoing evaluation, and a book that has set the current framework for debate, is William Tidwell, James Hall, and David Gaddy's *Come Retribution: The Confederate Secret Service and the Death of Lincoln* (1988). The authors try to demonstrate that contrary to popular belief, there was a well-developed Confederate Secret Service in existence and that the Confederate government was the organizing force behind Booth's plan to capture Abraham Lincoln and exchange him for Confederate prisoners. Toward the end of the war and in response to unconventional acts of warfare by the Union government such as the Dahlgren raid on Richmond, which may have had as its objective Davis's murder, the Confederates decided to retaliate in kind. Thomas Harney was dispatched from the Confederate Torpedo Bureau to blow up the White House, but when Harney failed, Booth who as a Confederate agent was privy to the plot, decided to duplicate it as best he could. In effect, the many Northerners who in 1865 suspected Davis of involvement in Lincoln's death had been right after all.[2]

The so-called Tidwell thesis has not been without controversy. Critics have argued that the case is circumstantial and far from clearly proven. Nonet heless, it is

Tidwell's work that has become the focus of current debate.

Steers examines all of these controversial issues in his highly readable account of the assassination. Indeed, one of the strengths of this work is that Steers manages to make an often-told tale come alive and seem fresh in the re-telling. Another strength of this book is that the author has done a tremendous amount of research in the primary sources. Steers is intimately familiar with the major manuscript and archival materials and his impeccable scholarship adds great strength to his analysis.

The Booth, who is portrayed here, is anything but a crazy actor who came from a family of unstable actors. Whatever view one might take about the extent of Confederate involvement in Lincoln's death, there is no doubt that Booth was a Southern patriot. He attempted to capture Lincoln and finally killed him not because he was insane but because he believed that Lincoln was a tyrant who was responsible for all of the South's troubles. If Lincoln and some of his cabinet could be eliminated then perhaps the South still had a chance of succeeding. In many respects Booth's views about Lincoln were typical of other Southerners.

While Steers details Booth's involvement with the Confederate Secret Service, to his credit, and what makes this a much sounder and less controversial work than that of Tidwell and his associates, is that he doesn't try to prove a case that is not clearly supported by the evidence. For example, in discussing Harney's mission, Steers notes that while the timeframe could have coincided with an attack on Lincoln in the White House, it is equally possible that he was on some mission that was totally unrelated. Similarly, Booth's 1864 stay at the Parker House in Boston which Tidwell believes was to meet with Confederate agents, might have been nothing more than a visit with his teenage girlfriend Isabel Sumner.

Steers, as he did in his previous book *His Name Is Still Mudd* (1997), again presents a strong case that both Mary Surratt and Samuel Mudd were a lot more fully involved with Booth than previous defenders have believed. In a statement made by conspirator George Atzerodt and found by Joan Chaconas in the papers of his attorney William E. Doster, Atzerodt admitted that Booth had told him that Mary Surratt had been sent to her Surratsville tavern to tell her tenant Lloyd to have the weapons ready that had been stored there. This confirms Lloyd's own testimony that had previously been viewed as dubious. Atzerodt also added that supplies had been sent to Dr. Mudd a few weeks before the assassination. While it

does not necessarily follow that Surratt and Mudd were involved in the murder, they clearly seem to have been involved in the capture plot.[3]

In Mudd's case, he was also a strong Southern sympathizer who had clandestinely aided the Confederate cause and was a cruel master to his slaves. Indeed, Booth first met Mudd carrying a letter of introduction from Canadian Confederate agent Patrick Martin. Steers believes that Mudd lied about his numerous meeting with Booth and that not only did he know who Booth was when he came calling on April 15 but also actively aided the assassin in his flight. Mudd avoided hanging by the slimmest of margins, one vote, and his four-year incarceration is about what he deserved.

Another area that Steers tackles head on is the military trial. Many authors citing the 1866 Supreme Court decision *Ex parte Milligan*, which stated that military tribunals were illegal if the civil courts were open and functioning, have argued that all of the defendants were unjustly tried. However, Steers is one of the few historians to vigorously argue that the military tribunal was legal.

Steers believes that rather than being a universal condemnation of military trials, the *Milligan* decision was much more limited in its application. In his view, the conspirators were civilians who were aiding the enemy in time of war in the nation's capital and in making an attack on the commander-in-chief they were opening themselves to the possibility of military justice. Steers backs his position by citing a similar opinion from Attorney General James Speed, an 1868 decision by Judge Thomas Boynton where he denied Mudd's request for a writ of habeas corpus ruling explicitly that the *Milligan* decision did not apply to Mudd, and the trial of German saboteurs during World War II which was reviewed by the Supreme Court in the case *Ex parte Quirin*. The *Quirin* trial, held before a secret military court, involved the trial of eight German nationals, six of whom were hanged.

Finally, Steers also tackles some of the mythology surrounding the assassination, particularly the claims that Booth survived Garrett's Barn. There are many variations on this theme, one of them involving an alleged Booth mummy that toured the carnival circuit in the twentieth century. All of these turn out to be the worst nonsense although they are hardly unique regarding American assassinations. The remains of John F. Kennedy's assassin Lee Harvey Oswald were actually exhumed amid rumors that a double was buried in Arlington Texas while similar unsuccessful legal battles have

been waged to dig up Booth.

While there is much to admire here, one area that critics might take exception to is Steers's strong defense of military tribunals. While it is certainly easy to understand why a military trial was held and the outcome probably differed very little from a civil trial, there are many historians who will undoubtedly debate Steers as to their legality.

Even if the military trials were legal, the question can still be raised whether they were wise? A great deal of ink has been spilled on this subject that might have been avoided had the conspirators simply been tried in the civil courts, although Steers argues that a civil trial in Washington, D.C., might have encountered the same type of alleged jury nullification that has been witnessed in sensational trials like that of O.J. Simpson. In any case, George Bush and John Ascroft might be well advised to study the Lincoln assassination trials before embarking on their own proposed military tribunals for terrorists, as one would suspect that such trials will once again engender a heated historical debate.

This issue aside, *Blood on the Moon* is an important

work and adds a great deal to our understanding of Lincoln's assassination. There is a very small shelf of books that are absolutely essential to the understanding of Lincoln's murder and this is one of them. Although debate on the assassination will probably continue, since this book incorporates all of the recent controversies it will undoubtedly be the first place that researchers will turn to in the future to begin their investigation.

#### Notes

[1]. Thomas R. Turner, *Beware the People Weeping* (Baton Rouge, 1982); and, William Hanchett, *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies* (Urbana and Chicago, 1983). For examples of conspiratorial literature see Otto Eisenschiml, *Why Was Lincoln Murdered?* (Boston, 1937); and, David Balsiger and Charles Sellier, Jr., *The Lincoln Conspiracy* (Los Angeles, 1977).

[2]. William Tidwell, James Hall, and David Gaddy, *Come Retribution: the Confederate Secret Service and the Death of Lincoln* (Jackson, 1988).

[3]. Edward Steers, Jr., *His Name Is Still Mudd* (Gettysburg, 1997).

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**Citation:** Thomas R. Turner. Review of Steers, Edward, Jr., *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. May, 2002.

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