

The Lincoln Conspiracy: The Secret Plot to Kill America's 16th President—and Why It Failed

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Recommended Citation

Guelzo, Allen C. (2020) "The Lincoln Conspiracy: The Secret Plot to Kill America's 16th President—and Why It Failed," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.2.12

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss2/12>

Review

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Spring 2020

Meltzer, Brad and Josh Mensch. *The Lincoln Conspiracy: The Secret Plot to Kill America's 16th President—and Why It Failed.* Flatiron Books, 2020. Photographs, endnotes, bibliography, index. 448 pp. \$29.99. ISBN: 978-1250317476

That Abraham Lincoln was the first American president to fall to the hand of a political assassin is one of the simple facts that almost everyone can recognize. That the blow which killed him in 1865 was not the first attempt on his life is less well known. Even as Lincoln was *en route* to Washington in February, 1861, he was solemnly briefed in Philadelphia by the pioneering Chicago detective, Allan Pinkerton, that “certain parties” in Baltimore had arranged an ambush there to murder him “whilst passing through Baltimore.” The report gained more traction with Lincoln when Pinkerton was followed by another visitor – Frederick Seward, the son of Lincoln’s nominee for Secretary of State, New York Senator William Henry Seward – with an almost-identical warning about a Baltimore plot.¹

Lincoln was skeptical of “stories or rumours” about “people who were intending to do me mischief,” and so have many historians and biographers since. But the combined weight of Pinkerton’s and Seward’s warning, along with the pleas of Lincoln’s political ally, Norman Judd, swayed Lincoln, and after fulfilling a speaking engagement in Harrisburg, he allowed himself to be bundled onto a train back to Philadelphia, onto a midnight train to Baltimore where he slipped into the Baltimore & Ohio’s Camden Street station in the dead of the night, and was on the tracks to Washington by daybreak – while the Baltimore conspirators were still expecting him that day in Baltimore.

The *New York Herald* broke the story of Lincoln’s furtive transit of Baltimore with a barely-concealed guffaw at Lincoln’s willingness to be “hurried off from

¹ Pinkerton’s Report (February 21, 1861), in *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*, eds. Rodney O. Davis & Douglas L. Wilson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 312.

Harrisburg.”² Others were less forgiving, and in the end, the jeering that was generated by the so-called “Baltimore Plot” hardened Lincoln against any measures for his security which might generate the same ridicule. Which means, ironically, that what the Baltimore plotters failed to do in 1861 laid the groundwork for what John Wilkes Booth was able to do four years later.

The story of the Baltimore conspiracy is a difficult one to tell, since it must be a story about something which didn’t happen, and perhaps about a conspiracy which, like the grassy knoll or the Illuminati, never really existed. Ward Hill Lamon, who was with Lincoln on the train, dismissed the conspiracy as one of Pinkerton’s hallucinations. (“It is perfectly manifest that there was no conspiracy”). Ida Tarbell, in her *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, brushed past it in two paragraphs without serious comment; Harold Holzer, in *Lincoln President-Elect* (2008) believed that “verifiable evidence strongly suggests some kind of threat did exist,” although whether it was the threat Pinkerton imagined is another question; Michael Burlingame, in his magisterial *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (2009) fears that “Lincoln may have overreacted to a threat that was perhaps exaggerated.”³ Two recent accounts of the plot, by Michael J. Kline (*The Baltimore Plot: The First Conspiracy to Assassinate Abraham Lincoln*, 2008) and Daniel Stashower (*The Hour of Peril: The Secret Plot to Murder Lincoln Before the Civil War*, 2013) both endorse the reality of the plot, but their arguments are marred (in Kline’s case) by attempts to tie it to Booth and (in Stashower’s) by an over-reach that casts “the Baltimore episode...as a defining moment.”⁴

They will not be helped in promoting the reputation of either Pinkerton or the plot by *The Lincoln Conspiracy*. Neither of *The Lincoln Conspiracy*’s authors, Brad Meltzer and Josh Mensch, are historians or Lincoln scholars; both have collaborated in writing earlier conspiracy books (*The First Conspiracy: The Secret Plot to Kill George Washington*, 2020) and Meltzer has hosted a conspiracy series, *Decoded*, on the History Channel. No wonder, then that the style of the writing shares more with true-crime than

² “The Journey of a Night—The President-Elect Incog,” *New York Herald* (February 24, 1861)

³ Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1872), 513; Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1904), 1:422-23; Holzer, *Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter 1860-1861* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008) 403-05; Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 2:39.

⁴ Stashower, *The Hour of Peril: The Secret Plot to Murder Lincoln Before the Civil War* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2013), 4.

history, and teems with hushed, finger-to-the-lips single-sentence paragraphs. “There’s a secret on this train”(1)... “Tonight, his life is in danger”(3)...“The night is full of mystery”(33)...“The smell can’t be good”(41)... “There’s a strange noise coming from behind the building”(63)...“It starts with the mail”(105)...“The hearing room is private”(167)...“It’s been a mess”(181)...“Allan Pinkerton is getting anxious”(299). All we are missing is ZAP! and POWIE!

But the style is only the first problem with *The Lincoln Conspiracy*. Fully one-third of the book is consumed with digressions into the caning of Charles Sumner, the death of Lincoln’s sister (in 1828), Lincoln’s debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, the 1860 Chicago Republican convention – all before we even meet the Baltimore conspiracy on page 116. Even then, the narrative is propped-up by dubious materials. Meltzer and Mensch admit that “over a century and half later, it’s still difficult to tell what exactly transpired and the precise date on which the events” of the conspiracy “might have occurred.” (33) And in the endnotes, there are even more concessions of uncertainty, especially about Allan Pinkerton’s subsequent versions of the conspiracy. “The lack of supporting evidence makes the veracity” of Pinkerton’s descriptions “difficult to verify.” (378) Even the key scene describing the formulation of the assassination plan is, it turns out, “not reported in any of Pinkerton’s or his agent’s contemporaneous reports,” so that it is perfectly “possible Pinkerton embellished this scene” in his memoirs “based...on what he thought such a meeting would entail.” Pinkerton may have been a skillful private detective, but his work as an intelligence-gatherer for George McClellan on the Peninsula has long been the butt of Civil War mockery. So what, exactly, do the authors have to offer as the documentary trail for the plot, apart from Pinkerton’s admittedly unreliable imagination?

It gives no boost to a reader’s confidence to find one historical blunder after another in the book’s path. Lincoln did not split rails by “chopping raw wood by ax” but with wedges and a maul (43); Lincoln’s grandfather was not “scalped in a skirmish” with Indians, but picked-off while working his farm (45); David Davis, who managed Lincoln’s nomination in Chicago, was not a “former judge” (59); John Bell, the Constitutional Union presidential candidate in 1860, was from Tennessee, not Missouri (96); Norman Judd (and everyone else in 1861) received, not a “telegraph” but a telegram

(226); the 2nd Continental Congress never “ratified” the Declaration of Independence (287); Lincoln does not leave Harrisburg on the Grand Central, but the Northern Central Railroad (293); Major Robert Anderson’s Sumter report is not brought to Lincoln by Winfield Scott, but by Joseph Holt. (329) It does not help, either, that the book’s title – *The Lincoln Conspiracy* -- is the same as a sensationalistic conspiracy story from 1977 which had John Wilkes Booth escaping pursuit and dying peacefully, and unknown, decades later. That co-incidence is not Meltzer’s and Mensch’s fault. But it does them no favors that their work bears a title which makes every Lincoln scholar wince.

But the most serious failing of the book, and of the overall argument about the nature and importance of the Baltimore plot, is the dog which in this case never barked. Although every history of the conspiracy, starting with Pinkerton himself, identifies the organizer of the plot as a Corsican immigrant and barber, Cypriano Ferrandini, and although Seward’s inquiry into a possible plot actually interviewed Ferrandini in January, 1861, no one afterward ever bothered to arrest Ferrandini for conspiracy (in this case, to commit murder). Even after the outbreak of war and the attack on Massachusetts and Pennsylvania militia in the streets of Baltimore (at exactly the point of transit between railroad stations which was supposed to have been the occasion for Lincoln’s assassination), followed by the suspension of habeas corpus and the arrest of John Merryman and other Confederate sympathizers, no one ever thought to include Ferrandini in the dragnet. Not even Pinkerton.

Meltzer and Mensch would like to place Ferrandini “in the mob” that assaulted the militia on April 19th, but even they concede that “there’s no way to be sure.” Ferrandini was arrested in 1863 for pro-Confederate “language he had used,” but was released on taking the standard loyalty oath. He went back to barbering and died without attracting any further serious attention in 1910. If Ferrandini had been at the head of a conspiracy powerful enough to have genuinely threatened the life of Abraham Lincoln in 1861, it passes understanding how either Pinkerton or federal authorities who were aware, or were made aware, of the conspiracy took no follow-up action whatsoever against him. A good many Baltimoreans ended up in Fort McHenry for a lot less.

The Baltimore conspiracy is an interesting footnote to the election and inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. But not more than a footnote, and certainly not worth

more attention simply because it's cast in the hyper-ventilated style of crime fiction. Yet the plot did have at least this one serious result: it taught Abraham Lincoln the wrong lesson about his own safety. And for that, we all have cause for regret.

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