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A sordid anniversary

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This month marks the 146th anniversary of an historical event, the first assassination of a president of the United States.

On April 14, 1865, a Friday, Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president, was struck down by an assassin's bullet while attending a performance at Ford's Theatre in Washington.

Also on that night at about the same time, Secretary of State William Seward was attacked in his bed while recovering from a carriage accident nine days earlier. Also targeted were the vice president, Andrew Johnson, and the secretary of war, Edwin Stanton.

Seward eventually recovered. Presidential assassin, and actor, John Wilkes Booth was identified shortly after murdering Lincoln. Historians have written that Booth had wanted to throw the Union and the government into chaos. That is a very likely scenario. The war between states had ended a few days earlier, and Lincoln set upon rebuilding and reuniting the war-torn nation as one. Booth miraculously escaped from the theater by horseback and headed south through lower Maryland toward Virginia. The largest manhunt ever assembled trailed Booth, finally corralling him in a tobacco barn a few miles south of Port Royal, Virginia, after a hard pursuit for 12 days.

This tragedy is rife with conspiracies, Confederate operatives, and clandestine activities. The plot was initially to kidnap the president and hold him for ransom to secure the release of captured Confederate soldiers before the war had ended.

Booth was a Southern sympathizer and has been described as a lunatic, even fanatical. He was neither. Booth was cunning and self-absorbed. He even appears to have set his cohorts up so that

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there was no way out unless they implicated themselves.

He relied on self-preservation as his saving grace for what he wanted to accomplish—to bring down what he considered a tyrant, President Abraham Lincoln. But at that time, there was no way Lincoln's removal from office could further the Southern states' agenda.

Many other people were implicated in this plot: Mary Surratt, the first woman executed by the federal government; Dr. Samuel Mudd, the doctor who splinted Booth's ankle, injured during his escape; Lewis Powell, who bungled an attempt on the life of the secretary of state; and George Atzerodt, who lost his courage to take out Vice President Johnson. David Herold, who aided Booth in his escape, was also caught up in the government's dragnet.

What makes the assassination of Lincoln so fascinating is that a common thread is woven through the story. The thread is John Wilkes Booth; the whole cloth becomes the conspiracy.

Who knew what? When did they know it?

Now 146 years later, in the anniversary month of Lincoln's assassination, director and actor Robert Redford has released his take on the event. Redford's film, *The Conspirator*, presents Washington City boarding house owner Mary Surratt's involvement in the demise of Lincoln.

Surratt's boarding house was where Booth and his small band of conspirators met and concocted a plan to abduct Lincoln. Later, the plan turned deadly.

A 52-day trial of eight people thought to be conspirators in the assassination plot resulted in the hanging of half of them. Mary Surratt was later deemed by President Andrew Johnson as having "kept the nest that hatched the egg" in her boarding house. Now, Redford's movie retells the story as a reminder of a historical event that will never be forgotten.

Randal Berry is a reptile keeper at the Little Rock Zoo. He has studied the Lincoln assassination for more than 30 years. He is also the founder of Lincoln-Assassination.com.

