

0. TO KIDNAP A PRESIDENT - Story Preface

1. ASSASSINATION PLOTS

2. WARNINGS AND OMENS

3. DREAMS OF DEATH

4. TO KIDNAP A PRESIDENT

5. THE WORST

6. WHERE WERE THE BODYGUARDS?

7. NO HOPE

8. A FOILED PLOT

9. MULTIPLE FUNERALS

10. BOOTH'S CAPTURE AND DEATH

11. THE CONSPIRACY TRIAL

12. EXECUTION

13. THE REST OF THE STORY

14. THE LAST WORD



Before he decided to *shoot* President Lincoln, in April of 1865, John Wilkes Booth had concocted a plan to *kidnap* him and "carry him off to Richmond." He wanted to exchange the President for Confederate prisoners of war being held by the Union. This 1865 image, maintained by the [Civil War Trust](#), depicts a part of the city of Richmond known as Rocketts Landing (which the Confederates had converted into their primary shipyard).

Before [John Wilkes Booth](#) wielded his derringer and knife at Ford's Theater, he had planned a less drastic assault on the President. During the Fall of 1864, he concocted a scheme to kidnap Abraham Lincoln. His anticipated "ransom?" The release of Southern soldiers held as prisoners of war in the North.

Not long before Booth revealed his plan for Lincoln, the President revealed his plan for continuing the war. He told General Grant:

Hold on with a bull-dog grip...

The President issued his orders in writing. Booth discussed his plan in secret.

Checking first to make sure no one could hear him, Booth told John Surratt:

I have a proposition to submit to you...It is to kidnap President Lincoln, and carry him off to Richmond!

Surratt was aghast at Booth's audacity. Yet, as he listened, the plan began to make sense. In December of 1870, five years after Lincoln's death, John Surratt told his story:

After two day's reflection I [Surratt] told him [Booth] I was willing to try it. I believed it practicable at that time, though I now regard it as a foolhardy undertaking. I hope you will not blame me for going thus far. I honestly thought an exchange of prisoners could be brought about could we have once obtained possession of Mr. Lincoln's person.

And now reverse the case. Where is there a young man in the North with one spark of patriotism in his heart who would not have with enthusiastic ardor joined in any undertaking for the capture of Jefferson Davis [President of the CSA] and brought him to Washington? There is not one who would not have done so.

And so I was led on by a sincere desire to assist the South in gaining her independence. I had no hesitation in taking part in anything honorable that might tend toward the accomplishment of that object. Such a thing as the assassination of Mr. Lincoln I never heard spoken of by any of the party. Never!

When it seemed as though the plot would never come together, the conspirators decided to abandon the whole enterprise. Booth, according to Surratt, even then seemed to have other ideas:

At this meeting I explained the construction of the gates, etc., and stated I was confident the government had wind of our movement, and the best thing we could do would be to throw up the whole project. Everyone seemed to coincide in my opinion, except Booth, who sat silent and abstracted. Arising at last and bringing his fist upon the table he said, "Well, gentlemen, if the worst comes to the worst, I shall know what to do."

What did Booth mean? Surratt continues [his story](#):

Some hard words and even threats passed between him and some of the party. Four of us then arose, one saying, 'If I understand you to intimate anything more than the capture of Mr. Lincoln I for one will bid you goodbye.' Everyone expressed the same opinion. We all arose and commenced putting our hats on. Booth perceiving probably that he had gone too far, asked pardon saying that he 'had drank too much champagne.'

It wasn't the champagne, though. Booth meant what he had said. On Good Friday, 1865, "the worst" came "to the worst."

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/TO-KIDNAP-A-PRESIDENT-Assassination-of-Abraham-Lincoln>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

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Questions 2 Ponder

What Does It Take to Step-Back from Wrongdoing?

If Booth's kidnapping plan had come together, do you think he would have killed the President? Why, or why not?

Do John Surratt's words—that the conspirators were willing to kidnap but not kill the President—ring true or false to you? Explain your answer.

Media Stream



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