

THE CHARGER



CLEVELAND CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE

MARCH, 2016

VOL. 37, #7

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TRIP UPDATE!

I hope many of you have reserved September 22 – 24 for our fall field trip to The Wilderness and Spotsylvania. It's never too early to make your reservations.

We will be making our "headquarters" at The Fredericksburg Hospitality House and Convention Center in Fredericksburg. They have given us an exceptional group rate of \$94.00 per room. We have 20 rooms reserved at this time. To reserve a room, please visit their booking link at:

<http://www.fredericksburghospitalityhouse.com/accomodations-en.html>

More information will be available at the March meeting.

Jean Rhodes, Vice President, CCWRT

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Join Us For Our Next Meeting

March 9th

Drinks @ 6pm, Dinner @ 6:30

Judson Manor - East 107th St & Chester

Program: C. Ellen Connally speaking on

Salmon P. Chase



March & April Program Switch

**March 9th will be Ellen Connally speaking on:
Salmon P. Chase**

**April 13th will be William Vodrey speaking on:
Lincoln's Two Vice Presidents**

ON INCONVENIENT TRUTH AND CONVENIENT FICTION

by

John C. Fazio

Truth, like a bastard, comes into the world, never without ill-fame to him who gives her birth – Thomas Hardy

All great truths begin as blasphemies – George Bernard Shaw (Annajanska (1919))

Shall truth be first or second with us? "Us" is we, historians, real or fancied, amateur or professional. Lincoln said that history isn't history unless it is the truth. I agree with that, to which I would add only "or some reasonable facsimile thereof arrived at conscientiously and with due diligence". Therefore, if truth is to be second with us, second, that is, to convenience, aka political correctness or some other approximation of comfort, then I suggest that we are in the wrong business and that we should find some other vocation or avocation, one that doesn't tax our character so meanly.

Abraham Lincoln, William Seward, Edwin Stanton, Jefferson Davis, Judah Benjamin and James Seddon were human beings not sacred cows. Like all human beings, they were capable of good and evil and at some time in their lives surely manifested both. Therefore, if we want to stay in this business, and if we want to honor it, we owe it to ourselves and to each other to unhesitatingly and unsparingly criticize these men when the facts and circumstances, as we see them, warrant it, on any score. Further, we fail, as historians, if we allow ourselves to be deterred by reverence for anyone open to criticism, from whatever quarter.

Case in point: *The Surratt Courier*, May, 2015, p. 9:

"...no reliable historian has ever connected the Confederate President with the (assassination of Lincoln)."

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Really? Whose standard of "reliable" are we using? I suggest that by anyone's standard, anyone, that is, who knows anything about this business, William A. Tidwell, James O. Hall and Winfred Gaddy must surely be deemed "reliable" historians, indeed, very likely the most reliable in the last half century, at least as far as the assassination is concerned. It was they, recall, whose seminal work, *Come Retribution: The Confederate Secret Service and the Assassination of Lincoln*, a product of two lifetimes of intelligence service and years of meticulous research, concluded that:

...it can be shown that the Confederates had the knowledge and technical skill to mount an operation against President Lincoln; that they engaged in a number of activities in 1864 and 1865 that could have been related to planning such an operation; that John Wilkes Booth was in contact with known Confederate agents; and that the course of the war developed in such a way that an attack on Lincoln was a logical amendment to the original plan to capture him.

Many of the suppositions in this logic trail may never be proven, but there is much firm evidence that supports it. Of all of the theories about the assassination, this one does appear to be the one that can be most strongly supported.

Tidwell, Hall and Gaddy also explained why Davis and other Confederate leaders dropped off the radar screen:

The trial strategy was flawed by questionable testimony on key points, which allowed the Confederates and their Copperhead allies to launch an effective disinformation campaign after the war. It would have read as follows: "John Wilkes Booth? Not one of ours, certainly. An actor fellow wasn't he? Obviously a madman. Everybody knows that the death of Lincoln was the worst thing that could have happened to a defeated South. And look at the trial testimony of Sandford Conover [Charles A. Dunham], Godfrey Hyams, Dr. James B. Merritt, and Richard Montgomery. Perjury, rank perjury."

Repeated ad infinitum this became truth... Thus an old political ploy became useful: cover one transgression by denying a different one.

In his sequel to *Come Retribution*, in 1995, Tidwell continued in the same vein:

...Dunham [began] a long-term campaign to provide invaluable assistance to the memory of the Confederacy. Nearly everything that Dunham did...helped to destroy the case that the Federal prosecutors were developing against Jefferson Davis and key persons in the Confederate Secret Service... The effect of this campaign was overwhelming. The federal government did not abandon its positions, but Dunham was tried and convicted of perjury and the country at large has accepted the Sanders version of history: the Confederates had nothing to do with Booth and his associates. Sanders "feeding" Dunham and Merritt to the Union authorities would have been very much in keeping with his reputation. He kept himself informed on the most important political activity of the moment—the trial. He was not going to let the trial take place without trying to influence it, and he was successful in shaping the way the country thought about the assassination—even to this day.

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Also in his sequel, Tidwell affirmed the conclusion that he, Hall and Gaddy had arrived at in the earlier work:

What has been established, however, is a network of documented facts that logically coincide with the information that would have had to exist if Davis did decide to attack the leaders of the Federal government. One can refute the logic only by a bizarre distortion of reason. The probability that all of these facts were true and that Davis did not make the critical decision is very slight indeed.

Another "reliable" historian, William Hanchett, wrote that *Come Retribution*:

...is based upon far more substantial and imaginative research than any previous work on the assassination.

He also wrote that:

April '65 ...powerfully supplemented *Come Retribution*.

Further, Richard N. Current, a prominent Lincoln scholar, wrote, in his review of *Come Retribution*, that the authors' conclusion is made "with justification".

Further, Stephen W. Sears, another leading Civil War historian, wrote, in his review, that "it is hard to put this book down without acknowledging that this is the way it must have happened.

Still further, H. Donald Winkler joined Hanchett, Current and Sears in their support of Tidwell, Hall and Gaddy when he wrote that:

...Sanders went on to expose Dunham/Conover, Merritt and Montgomery as liars, thereby discrediting the efforts of Stanton, Holt and Johnson to blame the Confederacy for the assassination...Sanders's propaganda effort paid off. By exposing the chief Union witnesses as liars, the government's case collapsed, even though credible witnesses had indeed submitted untainted affidavits implicating the Southern President and the Confederates in Canada... Since Dunham/Conover, Merritt and Montgomery were all disgraced as witnesses, Finnegass's testimony and that of other reliable witnesses was not taken seriously. The credibility of all the government witnesses was marred by the fabrications of the three... For his [Davis's] freedom, he owed a tremendous thank you to the covert operations of George N. Sanders and Charles Dunham... Thanks to the work of these two men, Clement C. Clay was also released from prison [in April 1866] and returned to his home in Alabama.

And still further, there is the Report of the Committee on the Judiciary of the House of Representatives (the Boutwell Report). Making use of only testimony of witnesses against whom no imputation of perjury was made, the Report concluded that there was "probable cause to believe that (Jefferson Davis) was privy to the measures which led to the commission of the deed (assassination)".

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And, finally, an author of modest credentials, in a recent work on the assassination, alluded to the following (and much more) in support of Tidwell, Hall, Gaddy, Hanchett, Current, Sears and Winkler:

1. The dozen or so attempts to assassinate Lincoln both before and after the Wistar and Dahlgren-Kilpatrick Raids against Richmond;
2. The perceived license granted by the Wistar and Dahlgren-Kilpatrick Raids;
3. The attempt by Dr. Luke Blackburn to assassinate Lincoln by sending him shirts "infected" with yellow fever, part of Blackburn's yellow fever scheme, which scheme was known to Davis;
4. The fact that in the conversations between Confederate operatives in Canada, as testified to in the trial of the conspirators, there are dozens of references to assassination;
5. The fact that the Confederate government was at all times aware of Booth and his action team and their conspiracy and did nothing to stop him;
6. Thomas F. Harney's mission to assassinate Northern leaders by blowing up the White House;
7. Lewis Powell's statements to Thomas Eckert that government prosecutors did "not have the one-half of them" (i.e. conspirators) and that it was his impression that arrangements had been made with others for the same disposition as he was to make of Seward;
8. The April 10, 1865, letter to Booth from "T.I.O.S.", which states that "If the four are assassinated our wrongs are avenged" and that "there is one man to every one in the Cabinet."
9. Atzerodt's May 1, 1865, confession in which he alludes to the "New York crowd" getting the President certain and getting him quick, as well as a plan to assassinate many other Northern leaders by luring them into the White House prior to blowing it up;
10. The Union agent's May 10, 1865, letter from Paris wherein he refers to the Confederate agent "Johnston's" note in which he said that he was in Washington on April 14, 1865, that within half an hour he knew an "attack" would be made that night, and that had it been carried out as was previously arranged, some 15 Yankee leaders would be dead;
11. The fact that all the letters that came into the possession of the Bureau of Military Justice, which relate to Confederate Secret Service work, speak only of assassination;
12. The affidavit of Henri Beaumont de Ste. Marie, in which he swore that Surratt admitted to him his and Booth's complicity in the assassination, but would not tell him whether or not Davis was complicit;

When we stop to think about it, it is really very simple. What happened in our Civil War is what happens in virtually all wars: The Black Flag is raised early and there is soon a vicious cycle of atrocities and retaliation and therefore a lot of dead and in some cases mutilated bodies all over the landscape. Everyone is fair game. The assassination attempts against Lincoln, both before and after Wistar- Dahlgren-Kilpatrick have already been mentioned, and we may be

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sure that Lincoln and Stanton authorized both raids and that one or both of them, probably with the assassination attempts in mind, authored the odious orders to their commanders to capture and kill Davis and his cabinet members. The Confederacy's back was to the wall. The catastrophe that they had fought four years to prevent was upon them—the loss of their political independence, the loss of their wealth and property, the "nightmare" of integrating 4 million suddenly free blacks into a society of 5.5 million whites, the "mongrelization" of their race, and the loss of their lifestyle and culture. Their armies were melting away. In these circumstances, it was perfectly predictable—and Seward, in fact, did predict it—that Southern leaders would resort to the most extreme measures if such measures offered the tiniest hope of averting the catastrophe. Had the shoe been on the other foot, it is all but certain that Northern leaders would have done the same. They had already shown what they were capable of in the rape of the Shenandoah, the burning of Atlanta and Columbia and the plunder and spoliation of Georgia.

Let us stop playing patty-cake. Let us manfully face and accept the truth, with all its grit, grime and gore. A painful truth is better than a soothing lie any day. The truth is that we are all the same animal and have the same nature, which means that we are all capable of good and evil, Davis and Lincoln no less than the rest of us. The truth, further, is that the likelihood of recourse to evil is directly proportional to the degree to which we feel that our survival is threatened. Davis proved both truths by approving a policy of summary execution of black prisoners of war, by authorizing, with Benjamin, a year of "dirty war", i.e. terror against the North from April, 1864, through April, 1865, and by ordering his Secret Service to play his last card, namely decapitation of the United States government by multiple assassinations. Lincoln proved the truths by ignoring the Constitution when it suited him, suspending the writ of habeas corpus without authority, closing newspapers, abrogating free speech, incarcerating or exiling his political enemies, including entire legislative bodies, without trial, and, with Stanton, ordering the capture or killing of Davis and his cabinet by raiders against the Confederate capital. Now let us move on.

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 3. Tidwell, William A., *April '65: Confederate Covert Action in the American Civil War*, Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1995, pp. 153,154.
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 7. Current, Richard N., *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol. LXXXII, No. 4 (Winter, 1989), p. 271.
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