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## Edwin M Stanton and the Lincoln Assassination

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EDWIN M. STANTON AND THE LINCOLN ASSASSINATION

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A Thesis

Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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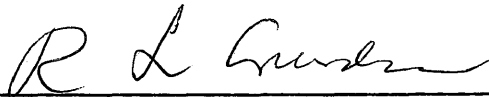
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Robert L. Crewdson

1986

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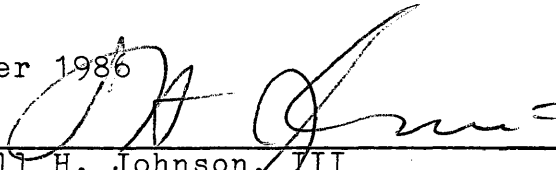
Master of Arts



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Robert L. Crewdson

Approved, December 1986



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Ludwell H. Johnson, III



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James P. Whittenburg



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Boyd Coyner

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Mary Eugenia Surratt, wrongfully executed for aiding and abetting the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. May we never again shun the dictates of humanity and truth for the gratification of momentary passion and misguided patriotism.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to interpret the actions of Edwin M. Stanton in the wake of the Lincoln assassination, based on his personality characteristics and behavioral history.

The writer examined the principal evidence gathered by various writers that suggested that Stanton was involved in the assassination.

A study of Stanton's personality and behavioral history reveals that the characteristics of fear and anxiety were predominant and produced other characteristics such as deceit, vindictiveness, secrecy, and insubordination. Stanton's fear of the rebel conspiracy was so pervasive that it dominated his personality during the war years.

Many of the actions Stanton took in the wake of the assassination fit easily into his personality framework, including such items as the midnight burial of Booth and the abnormal security precautions taken with respect to the Lincoln conspirators.

The results of this study suggest that Edwin M. Stanton did not play any kind of role in the conspiracy to kill Lincoln, but that his unusual actions can be understood only within the context of his own unique personality.

EDWIN M. STANTON AND THE LINCOLN ASSASSINATION



## INTRODUCTION

Psychohistory, as it is generally known, encompasses a wide variety of analytical approaches. Traditionally, historians sought to record merely what had happened and why. A disastrous diplomatic move by a world leader would be explained by reference to that leader's insatiable ambition or stubbornness. The origins of that ambition or stubbornness, which lie in the individual psyche, were either ignored or subjected to "armchair" psychology. It is to the question of psychological motivation in history that psychohistory addresses itself. Psychohistory picks up where traditional history ends, pursuing the true origins of personality traits and their effect on historical figures and events. This field of endeavor began by applying the childhood traumas, drives, and defenses discovered by Freud to historical figures. Though this approach continues, as evidenced by the Journal of Psychohistory (formerly History of Childhood Quarterly), various newer approaches have captured the imagination of psychohistorians. Particular attention will be given to the forms most appropriate to the type of analysis this thesis employs.

A standard approach to the study of political leaders is found in "personality studies." Promoted by political biographers like Fred Greenstein, these studies first discuss the "phenomenology" of a person, or his personality traits and characteristics. The second stage consists of identifying the personality dynamics of a leader, or the syndromes suggested by his characteristics and how they interact with the societal environment. Finally, a personality study forms a genetic hypothesis of the individual, which is an identification of the origins of those traits or syndromes.<sup>1</sup> In general, psychological method is introduced in the second and third stages. The first stage has been used by historians since Thucydides, at least by those who have bothered to describe the character of historical figures. The most prominent study using the Greenstein model is Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House by Alexander and Juliette George.

The Georges summed up Wilson's personality traits in a research note attached at the end of the work. They found that he displayed a compulsive, insatiable ambition, as well as a lust for power, whether he was President of Princeton University or of the United States.<sup>2</sup> The dynamic analysis of Wilson's traits described his pursuit of power and ambition as compensatory devices for a feeling of inadequacy and inferiority.<sup>3</sup> His need to dominate any endeavor in which he was involved often crippled his

ability to maneuver and compromise, which he knew to be imperatives of the political process. Certain measures became a test of personal worth, on which he could not give an inch. Such feelings quickly transcended the immediate political task at hand.<sup>4</sup> An example was Wilson's effort to win approval for the League of Nations in 1919. When his enemies bottled up the League in the Senate with a demand for reservations, he would not budge. It became an intensely personal battle that he waged to its bitter and self-defeating end, when compromise would have carried the day.

The genetic hypothesis put forward by the Georges traces Wilson's traits and personality dynamics to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority developed in his childhood. Wilson's father unceasingly criticized Woodrow and made sarcastic barbs whenever his son failed to achieve perfection. This exacting form of domination by his father, and the inferiority it generated, drove Wilson in his later years to abhor and resist the demands of others. "He was assuredly driven to his passionate stubbornness by the irresistible, never-articulated need to retaliate against the kind of domination he had once endured at the hands of his father."<sup>5</sup> Thus, he could not bow to the demands of the Senate and Henry Cabot Lodge without destroying the core of his personal integrity.<sup>6</sup>

Many historians hailed the Georges' analysis as a superb example of psychohistorical work; yet criticism of it continues because of the presumptive nature of the genetic analysis. As Bernard Brodie has noted, "it is one thing to observe compulsive behavior and identify it for what it is; it is quite another to find the original causes."<sup>7</sup> Even Greenstein wondered whether genetic analysis was worth the effort, given the less equivocal nature of the phenomenology and dynamic stages.<sup>8</sup> Historian Page Smith agreed that the shaky speculations about Wilson's relationship with his father really "do not in the end add to our understanding of his triumphs and his ultimate tragedy."<sup>9</sup> Thus, even in a superb work like the Georges', one can validly question the necessity and value of extending an overview of personality into a psychological explanation of inner motivation.

Another approach to psychohistory is the "repetition compulsion" method employed and developed by Rudolph Binion. Binion applied this particular "traumatic mechanism" to Belgium's King Leopold and his neutrality policy in the years prior to World War I. The King subconsciously led his nation to diplomatic and military disaster as a repetition of a traumatic car accident years earlier, in which he was the driver and his wife a fatal victim.<sup>10</sup> Binion also used his theory to explain Hitler's philosophy and leadership. Hitler is alleged to have had a

subconscious desire to lead his nation into another world war as a repetition of World War I, which had reawakened traumatic feelings from Hitler's childhood. His Jewish policy was an effort to replay and finally expunge the guilt he felt at directing a Jewish doctor to administer fatal medicine to his mother.<sup>11</sup> The repetition theory is a classic example of the presumptive nature of psychoanalytic theory, for Binion based much of his work on Freud's theories. On the issue of the absence of documentary evidence, Binion argued that "no amount or kind of evidence can turn a psychohistorical insight into an inference."<sup>12</sup>

Another emerging area of the psychohistorical field is cognitive psychohistory. This approach seeks to determine the process by which men and women make sense of their society and formulate responses to its stimuli.<sup>13</sup> Often this involves identifying operational belief systems in order to reveal the underlying motives of political leaders. These determinations are much more verifiable since documentary evidence plays a large part in forming them. Given that the aim of such analysis is the cognitive, or conscious, functions of the particular person or group, the instinctual origins of psychoanalytic theory rarely come into play. In fact, historians have used cognitive psychohistory, without rigid guidelines, for years.<sup>14</sup> Trait psychohistory is a related approach, one that merely seeks the underlying personality components of

historical action. In general, traits are organized into certain specific categories of character types and individual actions are then predicted given the character and the situation presented. This is especially useful in group analysis, and has been applied to the revolutionary movement in Colonial America.<sup>15</sup>

Cognitive and trait psychohistory are part of a broader category of descriptive psychological analysis, which has found greater favor in the historical profession than any other type of psychohistorical approach. As mentioned earlier, descriptive psychology is very distinct from analytic psychology, which deals with instinct and hidden impulses. Faye Crosby has called this approach "coherent whole explanation."<sup>16</sup> These explanations aim to make plain a given pattern of behavior within an individual or group, to state the meaning of a set of behaviors or events. Nonsensical behavior is analyzed to determine its consistency with prior behavioral or trait patterns of individuals and groups. Crosby outlines a five-step procedure for doing descriptive psychohistory: 1) document the behavior and events, 2) justify the presence of psychological factors, 3) identify the factors and discount other probable factors, 4) present a concise explanation, and 5) reconcile contradictions.<sup>17</sup>

Descriptive psychohistory is closest to the analytical approach used in this thesis. As a result of the flaws in

psychohistory in general, which will be reviewed in a moment, this thesis rejects an explicit use of any of the above theories. Since the purpose of this thesis is solely to explain the odd events that occurred after Lincoln's assassination, the focus will be on identifying prior behavior by Secretary of War Stanton which makes his actions during the assassination period consistent with his own personality, if not reality itself. The objective will be to refute notions that Stanton was involved in the conspiracy, while giving a satisfactory explanation of his irrational behavior. While this sounds like "coherent whole explanation," it will reject clinical categories and syndromes for common descriptions of character and personality (secretiveness, vindictiveness, etc.). Of course, we are not concerned with why Stanton developed these characteristics, so no psychoanalytic or genetic analysis will be involved. The reason why this traditional approach is maintained, and theory and method rejected, is found in the criticisms outlined below.

Criticism of the psychohistorical approach has been extensive. Jacques Barzun, perhaps the most vocal critic, attacked the basic premise that psychology can be an element of historical analysis. He emphasizes the extreme complexity of historical causation, noting that the whole purpose of writing history is to show "the vagarious disorder of human affairs, the force of the irrational, the

unstructured character of the past, and the futility of trying to make it say something unshakable in answer to system and method."<sup>18</sup> Stressing instead an intuitive handling of historical evidence, Barzun argues that historical writing is the very "counterpart of method, equally sound and particularly health-giving."<sup>19</sup> The reader of history should not be consigned "to a siege of Hineinstudieren," much less to a weighing of "pros and cons among the dubities and contradictions of rival systems."<sup>20</sup> While Barzun is consistent in his criticism of method (quantitative analysis is attacked as well), few historians have been prepared to dismiss psychohistory so readily; they focus instead on several specific, serious problems with its application.

Evidentiary problems, for instance, are particularly striking in this field. As Erik Erikson admitted, psychohistorians must be prepared "to relinquish the security of seemingly more objective methods."<sup>21</sup> Though Erikson tried to establish rigorous, austere criteria for "psychohistorical evidence," such standards are not commonly observed in practice.<sup>22</sup> Bruce Mazlish, another careful psychohistorian, opined that "the application of psychoanalytic method to patients who are dead. . .and which analysis must proceed in terms of a one-way Socratic dialogue with their remaining documents is fraught with dangers."<sup>23</sup> What these psychohistorians quite admirably



realized was that their approach often employs a heavy ratio of theory to historical fact. Rudolph Binion argues that this is irrelevant, that "soft data may yield solid, and hard data shaky conclusions."<sup>24</sup> Barzun disagrees, countering that psychohistory cannot be properly challenged and criticized once it steps off "the common ground of evidence."<sup>25</sup>

Psychoanalysts agree that psychohistory has serious evidentiary problems, for the simple reason that biographers can rarely retrieve enough information on their subjects to do a proper analysis.<sup>26</sup> Secondary material is scant, and diaries and letters often record only moods. Dream material is extremely rare. Compared to the information obtained during the course of therapy with a view toward completeness, the written material concerning historical figures is essentially negligible.<sup>27</sup> Into the void of fact, psychohistorians introduce theory and method. While theory is not an adequate substitute for data, psychohistorians compound the problem by using it to twist data in analogical and metaphorical ways.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the data is of no intrinsic importance; rather it serves as a convenient "hanger" for a theoretical message. In the end, "bold assertion, emphatic reiteration, clinical anecdote, and a richly metaphorical terminology all contribute to masking the paucity of empirical verification."<sup>29</sup>

Evidentiary weaknesses result in another major problem - reductionism. As Gerald Izenberg describes it, hypotheses about early developments in a person's life, for which there is no evidence, are "speculatively deduced from adult events and then used to explain those events."<sup>30</sup> Psychohistorical explanations transform all outward or public behavior into the product of intrapsychic conflict.<sup>31</sup> Reducing historical events to the product of deterministic, neurotic mechanisms is widely seen as a problem by psychohistorians themselves. Norman Brown, in fact, argues that psychoanalytic method is truly a way out of history.<sup>32</sup> Yet Erikson and Mazlish argue that psychology and history need not be exclusive, while recognizing the existence of reductionism. Of course, Barzun is particularly eloquent on this issue, claiming that psychohistory seeks to "dispose of history and civilization, of human error and achievement, rather than contemplate them."<sup>33</sup>

As a result of these criticisms, many practitioners in the field have reconsidered many of the bolder approaches. This reevaluation consists of giving greater weight to ego and reality factors and less weight to drives and defenses.<sup>34</sup> Efforts to integrate sociology with psychoanalytic theory are being encouraged by psychobiographers like Fred Weinstein and Gerald Platt.<sup>35</sup> Part of the impetus behind this reform lies in the

realization that the psychological models of human development constructed by Erik Erikson and others in the twentieth century are inappropriate for historical social contexts. How does one apply these models "to ages that knew endemic famine, awoke and went to sleep with the sun, and suffered extremes of heat and cold as a norm?"<sup>36</sup>

Lawrence Stone has argued that four of the main traumas Freud found to be universal among his patients "are dependent on particular experiences which did not happen to the vast majority of people in most of the recorded past."<sup>37</sup> Consequently, psychohistorical work in the future is likely to take greater account of external social pressures than in the past.

Some criticism has been directed toward the state of flux in both the fields of psychology and psychohistory. The historian, and much more so his reader, are faced with a myriad "rival and contradictory theories of human development from among which he must choose an initial hypothesis."<sup>38</sup> The answers that result from the different theories vary radically. This is not to say that traditional approaches to history are free of criticism. Rather, in the psychohistorical context, it is particularly striking how the same evidence yields opposite results depending upon the model used. What might be repetitious phenomena to Binion could be classic drives phenomena to Llyod DeMause. As was mentioned earlier, psychoanalysts do

not even believe a marriage between psychology and history is possible. Thus, we have come full circle.

Psychohistory must divorce itself from fact, which often makes it reductionist. The discussion about accuracy then becomes one for the psychoanalysts, who do not believe the union with history is possible. This confusion within psychohistory suggests that a limited version of personality analysis may be more appropriate in most contexts.

A limited approach need not sacrifice the goal of effective historical interpretation. Eugene Genovese has concluded that the psychological element of interpretation, while perhaps correct, is essentially irrelevant.<sup>39</sup>

Knowing whether a guilt complex or a subconscious repetition is responsible for a leader's actions is unlikely to add much to our historical knowledge. Thus, many historians argue for a retreat to some sort of psychohistorical empiricism or cognitive dissonance.<sup>40</sup>

While personality can be extremely important in understanding historical events, divining why the personality came about is tangential to the task of historical explanation in most cases. What is required is the first stage of the Weinstein model, phenomenology, and half of the second, dynamics. Identifying the personality traits and organizing Stanton's display of them in situational contexts will serve as an adequate basis for

explaining his actions after the assassination.

Explanation of motive, or genetic analysis, will be avoided as unnecessary.

Psychohistorians might not accept this disavowal of their methods. Erikson noted that historians often disavow the use of psychology and then proceed to make superficial psychological statements throughout their work.<sup>41</sup> William Langer's call for the application of psychology to history in 1957 recognized that historians indulged freely in psychological interpretation, by virtue of a "general humanistic appreciation of personality."<sup>42</sup> Other writers agree that "a historian can scarcely compose a narrative line without committing himself, implicitly or explicitly, to some theory of personality and motivation."<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, historians should be able to identify personality traits and characteristics, based on available documentation, and explain their relevance to historical actions. Saying, for instance, that Napoleon refused to compromise because he was stubborn and ambitious should not require an application of theory and method. It permits testing and criticism from other historians who read the evidence differently. Of course, some topics may admit of no other alternative than motivational inquiry. But when, as with this topic, there is no need for such analysis, it can and should be avoided.

As we saw earlier, some psychohistorians like Greenstein have admitted the force of the argument that biographers can be more effective by leaving out the speculative genetic or developmental analysis. Traditional historians like Don Fehrenbacher feel that illuminating historical data with psychological insight can be useful, while data pressed into theoretical molds is of no use at all.<sup>44</sup> Psychological inquiries which describe instead of explain can be beneficial in historical research without the patent dangers psychohistory has traditionally presented. The historian must be careful not to allow the descriptive function to become a vehicle for "armchair theorizing." But if he limits himself to a descriptive study of personality traits, the historian should be able to explain most historical events requiring a look at personality.

Some readers might prefer to label this thesis a form of psychohistory, despite its limited objective. Nevertheless, what any psychohistorical work "ought to do depends, in turn, on what it aims to do."<sup>45</sup> This thesis seeks only to explain the actions of Secretary of War Stanton after the Lincoln assassination, based on identifiable personality traits observed over the course of his career. It argues that Stanton's behavior is consistent with his personality profile, thus alleviating the need for any motivational inquiry. In many ways, this

thesis parallels the work of Gamiliel Bradford at the turn of the century. In works like Union Portraits, Bradford produced what he called "psychographs." Whatever he might have meant by that, they were essentially personality portraits of historical figures, assimilating the many traits passed over by standard biographers. In some ways, too, this thesis will remind the reader of the work of Steven Allen and Peter Hoffer, who assembled personality traits of revolutionary Americans and linked them to public behavior during the 1770's.<sup>46</sup>

This thesis, in essence, stands on its own foundation. No other personality study will be exactly like it, nor should it be. Each study must depend for its form on the data available, the events explained, and the historical context. The Lincoln Assassination was a unique event. Some writers originally suggested that Stanton may have played a role in the conspiracy. Others (the vast majority today) refute this idea by accepting Stanton's behavior as rational and appropriate. Neither conclusion is satisfactory. This thesis will put to rest the conspiracy theory for good, while at the same time recognizing and explaining the vagaries of Stanton's character and how they related to his behavior. It will not involve still another belabored review of the assassination; rather it will assume a good deal of knowledge on the reader's part.

A few notes of caution are in order. The nature of this study does not allow a complete biography of Stanton, nor a completely balanced view of his tenure as Secretary of War. Stanton displayed several noble characteristics during his public career, for which he will receive little credit in this study. Only those traits relevant to the assassination period will be discussed. Also, to the extent possible, information about Stanton is included only if it appears in more than one contemporary source or is derived from Stanton's personal communications. Since the latter are rarely plentiful, his actions will be viewed primarily through the eyes of others. A sincere attempt has been made to screen the personal prejudices of those contemporaries and to use the accounts given by Stanton's political allies whenever feasible.

Finally, this thesis makes no grand claims. It seeks to light one candle of historical interpretation in the vast darkness that one hundred and twenty years have cast on the melancholy events of April, 1865. To the extent that it succeeds in doing so, the study of personality will emerge as a strong scholarly complement to biography and psychohistory.



## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER I  
STANTON AND THE HISTORIANS

As the gallows neared completion, the hammering must have seemed incessant to Anna Surratt. Each blow which reverberated through the Arsenal grounds represented another nail in the coffin of her mother, sentenced to hang for aiding and abetting the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. As Anna waited anxiously with friends under a hot July sun for news of a last-minute reprieve, the injustice of it all was too much for her. She could not help but wonder why. Was her mother the victim of a tragic judicial mistake? Was she the victim of an anti-Southern hysteria? Was she the victim of malevolent men in the War Department? Or was she the victim of her own knowledge, the kind of information which could implicate high Union officials in the assassination conspiracy?

The latter explanation has been repeated often in popular writings about the assassination, and has been the vehicle for implicating Edwin M. Stanton in the murder plot. Though whisperings were often heard about Radical complicity the first seventy-five years after the assassination, it was in 1939 that Otto Eisenschiml opened the debate about Edwin M. Stanton. In Why Was Lincoln

Murdered?, Eisenschiml suggested that Stanton may have been behind the assassination. All subsequent work on the subject has taken Eisenschiml's questions into account and therefore his thesis deserves close scrutiny.

Eisenschiml scoured the records concerning the assassination and found disturbing evidence. One line from John Wilkes Booth's diary was particularly interesting: "I have almost a mind to return to Washington and. . .clear my name, which I feel I can do."<sup>1</sup> Several things made this even more suspicious in Eisenschiml's eyes. Booth's diary was delivered to Stanton immediately after his capture and then "lost" or "hidden" by Stanton in the War Department files for two years, until the trial of John Surratt in 1867. Additionally, John Wilkes Booth was shot at Garrett's barn against strict orders to the contrary, and was not interviewed during his lingering death there.

Eisenschiml, moreover, felt that Booth's escape from Washington raised the most serious questions about Stanton's involvement. Stanton vigorously prevented his telegraph office Major Thomas T. Eckert, from attending Ford's Theater with Lincoln on the night of the assassination. Eckert was a very strong individual and would have provided Lincoln with extra protection. John F. Parker, who was to guard Lincoln's box and who left his post before the assassination to have a drink in a nearby tavern, remained on the White House guard force without any

investigation into his negligent behavior. He was dismissed, significantly, in 1868 after Stanton left office for minor violations of police protocol.<sup>2</sup>

Other strange things occurred on that fateful night. Booth was allowed to cross the Navy Yard bridge into Maryland without hesitation. His closest pursuer, a stableman chasing Davy Herold for stealing a horse, was turned back by a warning that he would not be allowed back across the bridge if he continued. This stableman's story, given to the authorities just after midnight, was not treated by them as a possible clue to Booth's escape route. His route, which was the most obvious one to the south since it had fewer troop garrisons stationed along it, was left unpatrolled. Moreover, the Federal forces in southern Maryland were the last to receive instructions concerning the pursuit of Booth. Stanton then delayed the transmission of Booth's name to the newspapers for a full two hours after it became clear that Booth was the assassin. Finally, when one officer found Booth's trail in southern Maryland, he was recalled to Washington, and Stanton's most trusted lieutenants, Lafayette and Luther Baker of the secret service, were given the task of completing the capture.<sup>3</sup>

To Eisenschiml, this suggested that Stanton may have facilitated Booth's escape and then had him killed to keep him from talking about his accomplices in Washington. In

support of this theory, the author offers Lafayette Baker's version of Stanton's reaction to the news that Booth had been captured (he did not yet know that he had been killed); "Secretary Stanton was distinguished during the whole war for his coolness, but I had never seen such an exhibition of it in my life as at that time. He put his hands over his eyes, and lay for nearly a moment without saying a word. Then he got up and put his coat on very coolly."<sup>4</sup>

This rather strange response was natural for a man about to be implicated in a crime, not for a man overjoyed at an assassin's capture. Eisenschiml argued further that Johnson (then presumed to be a Radical) had not been an intended victim after all, but that conspirator George Atzerodt's room at Johnson's hotel had been set up to give that impression.<sup>5</sup> This argument is buttressed by the fact that Booth and Herold never mentioned Johnson as a victim to anyone during their escape, just Lincoln and Seward. Since these two were considered to be the moderates of the Administration, Eisenschiml contended that the Radicals were behind the attacks, particularly, Edwin M. Stanton. Apparently, Atzerodt never knew of the murder plot.

Eisenschiml cited other assorted evidence to back up his suggestion that Stanton was involved. He argued that Stanton's implication of the Confederate leadership just after the assassination was designed to divert attention

from himself and that he deliberately misinterpreted the evidence in his possession in order to do it.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the author discovered that the picture of Booth's brother, Edwin, was used throughout the pursuit even though it bore only slight resemblance to the assassin. Eisenschiml found this error incomprehensible and attributed it to deliberate design.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most striking piece of evidence found by this historian is the fact that Stanton revoked the reward for the capture of John Surratt in late 1865 after he had received a petition from someone who knew where Surratt was and who wanted him extradited from Great Britain.<sup>8</sup>

Other suspicious tidbits were uncovered by Eisenschiml as well. Various portions of testimony were edited from the official records of the trial of the conspirators, including information which indicated that the War Office knew of plots by Booth and others as early as March, 1865. Also the author found it curious that Booth was buried secretly in a midnight ceremony, with minimal examination of the body for identification and few witnesses.

In the case of Mary Surratt, Eisenchiml went further in his accusations, using the same kind of circumstantial evidence, ironically, that was used to convict the conspirators at the trial. He claimed that Surratt, whom he considered to have been innocent, was executed because, on the day of the assassination, she was known to have



spoken to Booth twice. "This probably was the poor woman's real guilt in the eyes of the War Department. To remove her forever was doubtless considered a matter of self-preservation for the high Unknown [Booth's accomplice]--if there was such a person--who had used the assassin as his pawn."<sup>9</sup> Eisenschiml was careful to qualify his hypothesis with the following words: "There is not one point in this summary that can be proven; it is all hypothesis. . .In view of all facts known at this time, an indictment against Stanton cannot be sustained for lack of material evidence."<sup>10</sup> With that caveat, Eisenschiml initiated one of the most prolonged debates concerning the assassination since that event and one that continues in the public mind today.

Helen Jones Campbell, author of a book charging that Mary Surratt had been wrongfully convicted at the trial, picked up on Eisenschiml's theory about Stanton in 1943. Stanton's security measures with respect to the guarding of the conspirators were not extraordinary--they were unbelievable. Hoods were placed over the prisoner's heads and they were placed in irons under heavy guard throughout the trial. No guard ever patrolled the same spot more than once, and the prisoners were kept in full view of the guards at all times. After reviewing these procedures and others like them, Campbell asked the following questions: "What was it the Secretary of War feared these men might

see? Or hear? Or tell? Against what conversation were they hooded and bound?"<sup>11</sup>

Campbell reiterated Eisenschiml's theory that Mary Surratt was executed to keep her from talking about Booth's accomplices. The following is her version:

Booth loved the sound of his own voice. In the Surratt house it was more than likely he had talked with fervor and freedom. Booth had told Herold that thirty-five men high up in Washington were helping him. If he had told Herold, would he not tell the Surratts? If he told, might he not have named those thirty-five assistants? Did Mrs. Surratt know who they were? There was a chance.<sup>12</sup>

Campbell suspected that either Stanton did not elicit the information from Herold concerning the accomplices or had it destroyed. She claimed that some War Department clerk carefully neglected to record "who had conversed with Booth, who it was that had changed his purpose from capture to death, who it was that could profit from death who could not profit from capture and abduction."<sup>13</sup>

An interesting addition to the Stanton thesis was made in 1961 with the publication of secret ciphers allegedly written by Lafayette Baker, head of the United States Secret Service. These ciphers were discovered by Ray Neff, a New Jersey chemist and Civil War buff, when he bought an old copy of Colburn's United Service journal for 1864. In that volume, Baker had written in cipher that Stanton and other Union officials were behind the assassination.

Baker's writings suggested that he possessed papers which would implicate those Union officials and that attempts were made on his life to prevent their revelation. Neff's searches also revealed information which backed up Baker's claims that attempts were made on his life and that he possibly died from arsenic poisoning. Though Baker's papers have yet to be found, the ciphers contributed a key element to Eisenschiml's arguments. Baker wrote that Major Thomas Eckert arranged the tragic deed, and this was many years before anyone else suggested that Eckert was involved. Significance is thus added to Eisenschiml's story about Eckert's refusal to attend the theater with Lincoln.<sup>14</sup>

Theodore Roscoe's The Web of Conspiracy in 1959 picked up on the Eisenschiml theme as well. "We know there were unscrupulous leaders in Washington making a tremendous underground drive for power," Roscoe wrote. He argued that substituting a body for Booth's at Garrett's barn would have been quite possible. While contending that the case surrounding the assassination had not been fully accounted for by historians, Roscoe said that "when dealing with powerful and unscrupulous men who would connive at the murder of a President--with secret agents and hidden conspirators--with military opportunism and governmental secrecy--who can say an escape was not rigged, a substitution was impossible?"<sup>15</sup>

Other writers on the assassination have not been as quick to accept Eisenschiml's approach. Lloyd Lewis' Myths After Lincoln argued that strange events like the hasty autopsy of Booth on April 27th and the midnight burial were inevitable in such a chaotic situation. Booth's midnight burial was no more than an attempt to prevent further attacks by Southern fanatics, triggered by a formal burial of their martyr.<sup>16</sup> George S. Bryan's The Great American Myth, published in 1940, attacked the Eisenschiml thesis as well. Bryan faulted Eisenschiml for claiming that Stanton delayed on the night of the assassination: "The whole suggestion that the Secretary of War was particeps criminis in the accomplishing of Lincoln's death, and that he hoped to make it possible for Booth to escape before a general alarm could be given, is as inapt as it is malicious."<sup>17</sup> Bryan argued that Stanton was simply being careful in dispensing information because he knew of the wild excitement which prevailed throughout the city. Further, Stanton could not have kept Booth's name secret anyway as several wire services were sending in independent reports on the affair.<sup>18</sup>

Other historians concur in the two preceding interpretations. Hal Higdon exonerates Stanton of complicity in The Union vs. Dr. Mudd. Surratt and Mudd were not sacrificed to keep them quiet, Higdon argues, but they were the victims of a vengeful Stanton out to exact

retribution on those who aided the Confederate cause. Thus, Stanton's manipulation of evidence at the trial and other underhanded dealings were directed towards purely personal and partisan goals.<sup>19</sup> James Bishop's The Day Lincoln Was Shot sees a fearful Stanton trying "to stop the pending assassinations rather than apprehending the perpetrators."<sup>20</sup> As a result, Stanton's attempts to capture Booth might have seemed lackadaisical.

One of the most recent writers on the assassination, Thomas R. Turner, also takes exception to the Eisenschiml thesis. In Beware the People Weeping, Turner suggests that Eisenschiml "creates unwarranted doubts" by asking a series of provocative questions on minor aspects of the affair and thus "the question oftentimes becomes more important than the answer."<sup>21</sup> Turner addressed the question of whether Stanton delayed in sending out information on Booth the night of the assassination. "Rapid and ill-thought-out dispatches to the newspapers might have had the very effect on people that Stanton has been accused of fostering anyway, of arousing them to frenzy, especially the army."<sup>22</sup>

With respect to why Stanton endeavored to cover up the government's prior knowledge of plots against Lincoln, as Eisenschiml suggested, Turner claims that the War Department was simply embarrassed by its failure to follow up on all of the reports brought to it every day in large numbers.<sup>23</sup> Turner also defends Stanton's concealment of

Booth's diary. He accepts Stanton's 1867 claim that the Booth diary was not revealed for use at the trial because "there was nothing in the diary which I could conceive would be testimony against any human being."<sup>24</sup> Stanton and Turner are right, of course. The diary would not have testified against anyone, rather it would have effectively exonerated Arnold, McLaughlin, Surratt, and Mudd since it paints the assassination as a last-minute decision by Booth. Booth wrote in that diary on the 14th that "until today nothing was ever thought of sacrificing to our country's wrongs."<sup>25</sup>

Turner's major point was that Stanton had not stirred up anti-Southern sentiment and vengeance after the assassination. The North, in fact, believed that the Confederate leadership and its sympathizers in the North (Surratt and Mudd) had something to do with the assassination. "Under the circumstances, it is not likely that Stanton could have charged [sic] public opinion if he had wished to, and admittedly he had no such desire."<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, Turner contradicts himself later in the book. After discussing some of the flimsy evidence Stanton and his underlings had dredged up, including a cipher used by Confederate secret agents in Canada, Turner concludes that "the evidence given about the cipher convinced many people that there was a connection between Booth and the Richmond Government."<sup>27</sup> In short, Stanton played a large

role in forming public opinion. When Turner discusses the perjured evidence manufactured by Stanton to implicate the conspirators, he claims that "with the public so persuaded, it is not unusual that the military commission handed down the sentences that it did."<sup>28</sup> Turner contradictions do little to help Stanton's cause.

The most recent book on the assassination is William Hanchett's The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies, published in 1983. It is a much-needed and thorough attempt to demolish many of the theories and legends associated with the assassination. The Eisenschiml thesis was one of the targets Hanchett concentrated upon. Hanchett went far in pointing out the flawed basis of Eisenschiml's methodology and highlighted areas in which that author's speculations were groundless. Yet it is interesting that Hanchett found it most difficult to eliminate speculation about Stanton entirely. The problem consisted of explaining many of Stanton's actions within the context of rationality. Hanchett's conclusion, then, about Stanton was that a study of the man ought to be undertaken with a view towards explaining his actions, and thus strike the final blow to speculations about Stanton's actions.<sup>29</sup>

Other accounts involving Stanton have appeared from time to time, but many of them involve serious flaws and historical errors and need not be mentioned here. This thesis proposes to extend the debate summarized in this

chapter and perhaps end the arguments about Stanton's complicity forever. The historians since Eisenschiml have done a good job of eliminating some of the minor points against Stanton, but they have not succeeded in satisfactorily accounting for Stanton's behavior generally. This thesis offers a hypothesis that attempts to understand Stanton's actions without charging him with complicity in the murder of Abraham Lincoln.



NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. Otto Eisenschiml, Why Was Lincoln Murdered?. (New York: Halycon House, 1939), p. 138.
2. Ibid., p. 17.
3. Ibid., p. 137.
4. Ibid., p. 150.
5. Ibid., p. 172.
6. Ibid., p. 211.
7. Ibid., p. 265.
8. Ibid., p. 202.
9. Ibid., p. 306.
10. Ibid., p. 436.
11. Helen Jones Campbell, The Case For Mrs. Surratt. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1943), p. 114.
12. Ibid., p. 242.
13. Ibid., p. 250.
14. Robert H. Fowler, "Was Stanton Behind Lincoln's Murder," 3 Civil War Times 10 (1961).
15. Theodore Roscoe, The Web of Conspiracy. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Company, 1960), p. 532.
16. Lloyd Lewis, Myths After Lincoln. (New York: Grossett and Dunlap, 1929), p. 220.
17. George S. Bryan, The Great American Myth. (New York: Carrick and Evans, 1940), p. 191.
18. Ibid., p. 190.

19. Hal Higdon, The Union vs. Dr. Mudd. (Chicago: Follett Publishing, 1954), p. 71.
20. James Bishop, The Day Lincoln Was Shot. (New York: Harper Publishing, 1955), p. 244.
21. Thomas Turner, Beware the People Weeping: Public Opinion and the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 2.
22. Ibid., p. 54.
23. Ibid., p. 73.
24. Ibid., p. 75.
25. Osborn Oldroyd, Assassination of Abraham Lincoln. (Washington: Privately Printed, 1901), p. 93.
26. Turner, Op. Cit., p. 62.
27. Ibid., p. 211.
28. Ibid., p. 225.
29. William Hanchett, The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies. (Springfield, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1983), see concluding chapter generally.

## CHAPTER II

### STANTON AND THE PARANOID STYLE

"It is an indisputable though neglected fact that by the 1850's conspiratorial imagery had become a formalized staple in the political rhetoric of both North and South, appropriated by eminent statesmen and journalists as well as by fanatics."<sup>1</sup> Fear, insecurity, and paranoia, in many ways dominated antebellum America. Richard Hofstadter, author of the above quotation, and other historians have found periodic instances of this phenomenon throughout American history.

Obvious signs of fear and insecurity became apparent during the antebellum period. Anti-Masonic and anti-Catholic movements were symbolic of this fact, the political expression of the two being the Anti-Masonic party and the Know Nothing party. But the so-called Slave Power conspiracy of the 1850's was the most prominent indication of such paranoia. The Slave Power Conspiracy theory and other conspiratorial fears probably resulted from "anxiety over the problem of preserving a consistent sense of national identity in the face of rapid social change."<sup>2</sup> As a result, the evidence suggests that the image of an "expansive, subversive force was a means of

articulating individual and communal anxieties over being duped and slipping behind" in a rapidly changing world.<sup>3</sup>

The Northern fear of the Slave Power was often exhibited in Biblical imagery direct from the Book of Revelation, the Slave Power being a kind of anti-Christ. Run by a clique of 350,000 slaveholders, this "organization" was a "giant parasite, a plague, a poisonous plant, a dragon, a monster" to be eliminated at all costs.<sup>4</sup> Subtly controlling the nation's destiny and sapping it of its moral fiber, the Slave Power sought to extend its stranglehold over all the states of the Union.

On the part of Southerners, the fear of an abolitionist conspiracy was very real. The emigrant aid societies of Kansas, for example, "confirmed Southern fears that abolitionist conspirators had nearly gained control of the North and would not stop until they had seized the federal government."<sup>5</sup> The imagery was just as powerful too, the societies being described as "dark, hidden, and sly."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that out of this social milieu would arise a Union Secretary of War with an abiding fear of conspiracy directing against the national government. Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's Secretary of War, displayed several characteristics common to many of his countrymen. The Secretary was not unique when considered in the light of his environment, one permeated by fear and

insecurity. Using Stanton as a typical spokesman for the conspiratorial mindset of his day, we can better understand his own actions and those of his peers.

Hofstadter describes the spokesman of this "paranoid style" as finding such conspiracies "directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others."<sup>7</sup> Further

the exposé of conspiracies necessarily adopts a victimized self-righteous tone which masks his own meaner interests. . . . accusations of conspiracy conceal or justify one's own provocative acts. . . . still worse, they lead to overreactions, particularly to degrees of suppressive violence, which normally would not be tolerated.<sup>8</sup>

Stanton fits this description very well.

Contemporaries found him to be an inveterate believer in hidden conspiracies and shadowy enemies. Also, they described him as being a harsh, vindictive opponent of those he defined as enemies and conspirators against the Union. The extent of Stanton's fear of such conspirators, acts to a certain extent, as a barometer for the harshness and intolerable nature of Stanton's behavior. For if the threat was as widespread, dangerous, and ruthless as Stanton believed it to be, then it was necessary to tear up the roots of disloyalty and punish the conspirators so harshly that they would never do anything similar again. James G. Blaine, a Radical Republican ally, described Stanton in the following way:

The extinction of the Rebellion by force--that was his task, and no fateful destiny ever moved more inexorably than he in its performance. He could see and hear and know nothing else; whatever would help he used, and whatever would hinder was ruthlessly thrust by. Though the earth. . .was covered with dead men, he saw them not; though the bosom of the storm discharged fire and blood and gobbets of human flesh he seemed unconscious of it.<sup>9</sup>

Other contemporaries agree, to a surprising extent, on the many features of Stanton's personality. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, admittedly a political enemy, was the most perceptive observer of Edwin Stanton. He described the War Secretary as filled with panics and alarms, often dreading dark and hidden conspiracies. Moreover, Stanton was a harsh and vindictive man who rarely let the niceties of law and procedure stand in his way. Stanton was very energetic, too, and this contributed to his successful handling of the demanding chores of the War Department. This energy, of course, could be used in battering opponents and enemies as well.

Treachery was something nearly everyone saw in Edwin Stanton, and it appears to have been one of his favorite devices for destroying the pervasive rebel conspiracy. Described as "sly" by one of his biographers, Stanton often engaged in behind-the-scenes maneuvering to oust opponents like General George B. McClellan.<sup>10</sup> Politically moderate Hugh McCulloch remarked that "Stanton is false and treacherous, and. . .a steady spy upon all of us."<sup>11</sup>

Governor William Dennison of Ohio, a steadfast Radical, labelled Stanton a charlatan, having known him for twenty-five years.<sup>12</sup> General David Hunter, also in the Radical Camp, told Salmon Chase that he had seen Stanton but once, "and was then so treated that I never desired to see him again. [I] think from facts that have come to my knowledge that he is not sincere."<sup>13</sup> General McClellan, a mortal enemy of Stanton's after the Peninsula campaign, agreed in vivid language:

I think that he is the most unmitigated scoundrel I ever knew, heard or read of; I think that had he lived in the time of the Savior, Judas Iscariot would have remained a respected member of the fraternity of the Apostles, and that the magnificent treachery and rascality of E. M. Stanton would have caused Judas to have raised his arms in holy horror and unaffected wonder.<sup>14</sup>

Everyone agreed as well that Stanton could be cruel and vengeful towards those he defined as enemies of the nation. Perhaps the most impressive feature of the contemporary views of Stanton, however, is their striking similarity. In summary, one need only read the description of Stanton's trusted lieutenant and supporter General Ethan A. Hitchcock:

My chief is narrow-minded, full of prejudices, exceedingly violent, reckless of the rights of others, often acting like a wild man in the dark, throwing his arms around, willing to hit anybody, so he hits somebody, and makes a big stir. His idea of energy is altogether physical. He is coarse in

his use of language, and his dislikes are mere prejudices--not founded upon any proper knowledge of character or of the profession of which he is the legal head.<sup>15</sup>

These characterizations of Stanton, as developed in the following pages, can be attributed in part to Stanton's own personal qualities, as distinguished from the more generalized fears of his countrymen. Whitelaw Reid, for example, was one contemporary observer who attributed Stanton's "paroxysms of passion" in the War Department to his poor health. Reid noted that these outbursts of hate and anxiety had become more prevalent by 1865 as the chores of the Department weighed more heavily upon Stanton.<sup>16</sup> The following comment by Thomas Kirkbride, a psychiatrist, reveals the extent to which the labors of the War Department may have affected Stanton's mental capacity: "It was very touching to have him tell us, as medical men, devoted to brain troubles, how his head was often affected, after work that no man ought to have undertaken."<sup>17</sup>

Stanton suffered throughout most of his life from a severe case of asthma. Attacks often left him prostrated for days. When considering Stanton in light of the paranoid style characteristic of his day, it should be noted that his asthma may have played a major role in intensifying his anxiety about contemporary events. Psychiatric researchers have uncovered personality tendencies characteristic of asthma patients. One writer



has found that "personality patterns present in asthma patients indicate a greater than average incidence of personality problems."<sup>18</sup> In addition, asthmatics "showed a trend toward more anxiety, depression, guilt and disgust-shame."<sup>19</sup>

Psychiatric research has found that "intense emotional states, such as panic and fear, accompany acute asthmatic episodes" and continue in the general personality of the patient.<sup>20</sup> The patients with severe cases often

present themselves as more depressed. . . more suspicious and guarded than others, more likely to feel that their life is currently more of a burden than others, more likely to feel alienated from others, more likely to have a higher activity level than others and more likely than other patients to be socially introverted.<sup>21</sup>

As the rest of this thesis will demonstrate, Stanton possessed many, if not all, of these characteristics. The asthmatic basis for his personality of fear and paranoia can only be inferred or suggested. Stanton's medical history, however, can serve as one explanation for Stanton's personality.

Early in the War Secretary's life, several instances of peculiar behavior reflect demonstrable indications of paranoia and extreme anxiety. In 1833, cholera struck Stanton's community in Ohio and Ann Howard, one of his close friends, died less than two hours after coming down with the disease. She was buried immediately to prevent

the contagion from spreading. Stanton, who had seen Howard at lunch, could not believe, at dinnertime, that she was dead. "Requesting two young friends to assist him, he proceeded to her grave, and, with his life in his hands, exhumed and opened the casket in order to be sure that she had not suffered the awful agony of burial alive."<sup>22</sup> This account has not been fully corroborated, however.

The high level of irrational fear and insecurity demonstrated on that occasion was followed a decade later by another strange reaction to death. Stanton's child, Lucy, died, and William Stanton Buchanan, a relative, reported that Stanton, "after she had been buried about a year he exhumed the tiny remains, placed the ashes in a metal box made for that purpose."<sup>23</sup> This box he kept in his room until he buried it a year later with his wife. The death of his wife in 1844 threw Stanton into uncontrollable grief. One observer wrote that Stanton "sent his gardener, Alfred Taylor, to guard like a soldier the resting-place of his idolized wife."<sup>24</sup> A friend reported that Stanton at night "would leave his room, tears streaming from his eyes, and taking a lamp, search the house, crying over and over 'Where is Mary.'"<sup>25</sup>

Fear and depression, which psychiatrists have found to be intertwined in asthma patients, occurred at other times in Stanton's prewar career, especially when confronted with death. Stanton's brother committed suicide in 1846 by

stabbing himself in the throat. An observer of that awful scene recalled the moment:

Edwin M. Stanton came over at once, but on seeing how terrible the happening was, lost self-control and wandered off into the woods without his hat or coat. . . Dr. Sinclair, fearing a second suicide, ordered Know and Sam Filson to watch him every moment.<sup>26</sup>

William Brown eventually chased and caught Stanton in his flight through the woods and Stanton never tried suicide. The Mexican War provided the future War Secretary another opportunity to display intense depression. When the Steubenville Grays prepared to leave for the war, "Stanton drew wills for them, or gave advice as to arranging their personal affairs" in case of death in battle.<sup>27</sup>

If Stanton's prewar career exhibited problems with death, the onset of the war in 1861 triggered a tremendous amount of fear and insecurity. Beginning in December, 1860, Stanton pleaded with other officials to understand the potential danger secessionists posed to them personally and to the country. A. E. H. Johnson, a friendly subordinate, wrote that Stanton told President James Buchanan "that the ground was mined all around and under him, ready to explode, and, without prompt and energetic action, he would be the last President of the United States."<sup>28</sup>

Stanton's preoccupation with secessionist intrigue was quite remarkable and exceeded that displayed by any other

high Union official. Hyman and Thomas' account of a meeting between Charles Sumner and Stanton on January 25, 1861 is graphic:

Stanton drew Sumner into his office. Then glancing around at the clerks, he took him through six different rooms and finding them all occupied, finally led him into the entry. 'He told me that he was surrounded by secessionists--who would report in an hour to the newspapers any interview between us--that he must see me at some other time and place--that everything was bad as could be.'<sup>29</sup>

At about the same time, Stanton assured Salmon Chase that "while companies of armed men were indeed nightly drilling in the city and were 'ready at a signal to overthrow the government' the President did not believe there was danger."<sup>30</sup>

By June, 1861, Stanton was very afraid, writing an old friend in Ohio that he could not leave his home in Washington "with the enemy still at our gates."<sup>31</sup> Yet he saved his principal fears for his tenure as Secretary of War. One rigid policy of the War Department under his leadership was to prohibit Northern-born Southerners from fleeing the Confederacy into Union lines. The reason for this was that all of these people were the "very worst traitors and spies we have in the Northern states." Nearly every one "permitted to come North is now acting the part of copperhead and traitor and the women are the worst of all."<sup>32</sup> Stanton was overly concerned with possible

agitators and infiltrators, as he believed that a treasonable conspiracy conceived at the 1860 Charleston convention "existed to take over the North rather than merely remove the South from the Union."<sup>33</sup> Stanton's countrymen shared this particular fear with him, as evidenced later by exotic accounts of the Copperhead movement.

March, 1862 brought a terrified outburst from Stanton during the Merrimac incident. In the hours after the Merrimac's attack on the Union fleet in Hampton Roads, Lincoln met with his Cabinet. At this meeting, Stanton predicted that the Merrimac would destroy every Union naval vessel and "go to New York and Boston and destroy those cities, or levy from them contributions sufficient to carry on the war."<sup>34</sup> Gideon Welles, at whom Stanton raved for allowing such a disaster to happen, described the scene vividly:

There was throughout the whole day something inexpressibly ludicrous in the wild, frantic talk, action, and rage of Stanton as he ran from room to room, sat down and jumped up after writing a few words, swung his arms, scolded and raved . . . Both he [Lincoln] and Stanton went repeatedly to the window and looked down the Potomac . . . to see if the Merrimac was not coming to Washington.<sup>35</sup>

Orville Browning relates the Secretary's novel and truly ludicrous solution to the Merrimac problem: "He told me that he had. . .30 canal boats loading with stone to be sunk in the channel of the river."<sup>36</sup> Lincoln later

facetiously referred to this group of boats resting idly at the Potomac's edge as "Stanton's Navy." Stanton even telegraphed New York for the immediate construction of an ironclad at whatever cost to run down and sink the Merrimac, though one was already under construction.

Welles's assurances during the day that the Merrimac did not have the ability to leave Hampton Roads did little to assuage the War Secretary. It is perhaps fortunate for the Union Navy and Potomac River navigation that Welles was in charge of naval affairs, instead of the "fearfully stampeded Stanton," as John Hay described him.<sup>37</sup>

Other occurrences of a similar nature affected Stanton in the same way. On the morning of August 30, 1862, Stanton received word that General John Pope was wrapping up a victory on the battlefield of Second Manassas. Nevertheless, he had the more important papers in the War Department gathered into bundles, ready to be carted to safety. Moreover, the Secretary ordered the arms and ammunition in the Washington arsenal shipped to New York as soon as possible.<sup>38</sup> The fact that Stanton issued these orders while thinking Pope had won may be less remarkable than the fact that the munitions were essential for the defense of the capital.

Fear could also get in the way of logical decision-making. On June 30, 1863, Stanton sent a dispatch to Chief of Staff Henry Halleck to "see that every possible means of

security is adopted against any sudden raid or incursion of the enemy, by day or by night." Stanton suggested that increased security could be had by planting batteries along the roads to and within Washington.<sup>39</sup> Halleck's answer reflected the sheer irrationality of the suggestion, noting the elaborate fortifications and artillery positions already in place: "I know of no military officer who would approve of such a disposition."<sup>40</sup>

One minor instance in the fall of 1863 exhibits the panic which could sweep over Stanton's personality at any moment. Travelling west to confer with Grant, Stanton stopped at a Tennessee hotel, the arranged meeting place. Though nothing of military importance was occurring, Stanton became excited upon not finding Grant at the hotel. In Grant's words, "finding that I was out, he became nervous and excited, inquiring of every person he met--including guests of the house--whether they knew where I was, and bidding them find me."<sup>41</sup>

Other isolated instances exhibit panic reactions on the part of the Secretary. When John Yates Beall and others captured The Philo Parsons on Lake Erie in September, 1864, Stanton erupted. Welles wrote that the Secretary feared "all our vast shipping on the Lakes was at its mercy." That he overstated the problem posed by this merchant vessel was obvious to Welles, who wrote in his diary that Stanton was "always in an excited panic, a

sensational condition, at such times."<sup>42</sup> The complexity of Stanton's character, however is such that not every critical event would set off a panic reaction. For instance, in July of 1864, when Jubal Early's raid on the capital posed the greatest threat to the city since First Manassas, Stanton approached the situation soberly. In fact, he did so to an extent that Welles felt compelled to comment on it.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps, however, such instances could be explained by attributing them to depression on Stanton's part (one characteristic found in severe asthmatics), which made disaster often seem inevitable.

Stanton's paranoia was most evident with respect to his personal safety. This became especially apparent toward the end of the war. John Hay and President Lincoln, for example, were surprised one October night in 1864 when they arrived at the War Department and found that building "in a state of preparation for siege," it being impossible even to send a card to Stanton.<sup>44</sup> A remarkable message from General Grant to the Secretary in March, 1865, reveals the extent to which Stanton felt insecure, both about himself and the city of Washington. Grant's dispatch questioned whether "there was not a great mistake made in keeping a large number of Cavalrymen posted through the city of Washington." He went on to comment that at least half the cavalry in the district of Washington was being wasted in duties "in no way tending to the protection of



the place." Grant assured Stanton that there was not the slightest need for apprehension, that "there is not the slightest danger of the enemy attempting to cross the Potomac."<sup>45</sup>

The events of April, 1865, only served to redouble Stanton's fear of being assassinated by the great, hidden, treacherous conspiracy that he had fought so hard for four years. He obviously feared that, as a consistent and unbending foe, he was targeted for death. General Sherman learned from his brother Senator John Sherman, a neighbor of Stanton's, that Stanton had been frightened by the assassination. When the general appeared at Stanton's house a month after the assassination, he found a strong military guard around it and the houses of other prominent officials. "A sense of insecurity pervaded Washington, for which no reason existed."<sup>46</sup>

Just weeks after the assassination, Stanton ordered the prosecution of Horace Greeley and the owners of the New York Tribune for suggesting that a vacancy was about to occur in the War Office. Stanton described Greeley's editorial remarks as an effort "to incite assassins to finish their work by murdering me and. . .I shall not allow them to have me murdered and escape responsibility without a struggle for life on my part."<sup>47</sup> Gideon Welles was privy to many of Stanton's irrational comments in Cabinet meetings and described him at this time as "full of

apprehension and stories and plots and conspiracies."<sup>48</sup> As late as August 18, 1865, Welles wrote in his diary that Stanton had a guard around his house and rarely ventured out without a stout man to accompany him. In addition, Stanton sought to impose his fears on President Andrew Johnson, bringing forward "singular papers relating to conspiracies, and dark and murderous designs in which he had evident faith."<sup>49</sup>

Clearly, Stanton felt that rebel conspirators and their allies surrounded him, even after the war was over. He also overestimated their potential power, as is revealed in Grant's March, 1865 dispatch. These two facts led the War Secretary to be intensely secretive in all of his actions. The treatment of state prisoners is a case in point. When Samuel Bowles, a leader implicated in treasonous activities in the Northwest, was arrested, he was not only placed in irons but his guards were ordered to "take every precaution necessary to prevent escape or rescue."<sup>50</sup> This dispatch, typical for War Department orders of this kind, reveals an inordinate concern with rescue. Considering the strict security with which such prisoners were kept, only a paranoiac would be concerned with rescue. Even Jefferson Davis' private secretary, Burton Harrison, was prevented "from having communication, verbally or in writing, with any person whomsoever, without permission from this Department."<sup>51</sup> Again, in Harrison's

case, the war was over. Apparently, the powerful hidden conspiracy remained potent in Stanton's mind, enough to stage rescues behind Union lines.

With potent conspirators still at large, secretiveness was indispensable. The arrival of the captured Confederate President at Fort Monroe in May, 1865, provides a good example. In a conference with Grant and Welles, Stanton urged them to tell no one of Davis' arrival. "Stanton said no word could get abroad. He had the telegraph in his own hands and could suppress everything. Not a word should pass."<sup>52</sup> The interrogation of the conspirators and others involved in the assassination of Lincoln was also highly secretive. Stanton chastised Provost Marshal MacPhail of Baltimore for allowing "an examination of Samuel Arnold to be taken and made known to any one, before it was reported to this Department."<sup>53</sup> Subordinates were allowed little freedom and all information gathered had to be given to the Secretary before the case against the conspirators proceeded further.<sup>54</sup> Of course, Mary Surratt and her fellow prisoners were not allowed to speak without permission.

Stanton revealed his secretiveness in other ways. He told one subordinate that certain men could not be trusted, and that he watched and studied everybody. This distrust could lead to absurd extremes. Stanton's hold on the telegraph system was so tight and jealously guarded that he

fired an operator in Tennessee upon learning that the officer had turned over, on direct orders, the telegraph key to the Commanding General of Union Armies, Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>55</sup> In addition, War Department papers were so confidential that they had to be hidden from other government officers. In August, 1866, Attorney General Hugh McCulloch received a letter informing him that Stanton had abstracted important papers from the War Department and had hidden them at the Soldiers Home.<sup>56</sup> During his famous struggle with President Johnson, the War Secretary instructed his subordinate, A. E. H. Johnson, to store the telegraphic record in a vault in Ford's Theatre and hide the key.<sup>57</sup>

A remarkable manifestation of Stanton's suspiciousness was his belief that the Slave Power conspiracy had infiltrated the Union Army high command. In Stanton's mind, personal and political enemies quickly became traitors to the Union. His friend Blaine freely wrote in his memoirs of Stanton's penchant for accusing loyal officers of treasonous activity: "He was subject to unaccountable and violent prejudice, and under its sway. . . many officers of merit and of spotless fame fell under his displeasure and were deeply wronged by him."<sup>58</sup>

The treatment accorded Colonel Charles F. Stone after the disaster at Ball's Bluff in October, 1861, set the pattern of injustice. After Stanton had Stone arrested for

allegedly allowing personal mail from secessionists to pass through his lines, he rejected a military trial for Stone's case. Instead, he let Stone take a beating before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, whose meetings were held in secret and controlled by Radical Republicans. Stone was not allowed to hear the charges against him and never stood a chance against his Radical accusers on the Committee.<sup>59</sup> Stone languished in prison for an extended period of time without any finding of guilt. Stanton let this happen because he prejudged Stone to have been engaged in traitorous actions. When asked about the injustices inflicted on Stone, Stanton replied coolly: "Individuals are nothing; we are contributing thousands of them to save the Union."<sup>60</sup>

The case of General George B. McClellan is a celebrated one. T. Harry Williams has constructed a convincing argument that Radicals in Washington, including Stanton, wanted McClellan to fail during the Peninsula campaign because they feared that his success might lead to a Presidential bid (McClellan being a moderate Democrat). To that end, General Irvin McDowell, more in line with Radical ideology, was given a separate command and crucial forces were withheld from McClellan to cripple his effectiveness. McDowell told Major General William B. Franklin as much at the time. Whatever the extent of the accuracy of Williams' argument, one point he makes is

completely true: "the radicals sincerely believed that McClellan was a traitor."<sup>61</sup> Again, political enemies were considered ipso facto traitors.

Stanton led his colleagues in holding these beliefs. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase wrote in his diary that Stanton had believed for some time that McClellan "ought not to be trusted with the command of any army in the Union."<sup>62</sup> Closer examination of Stanton's attitude toward McClellan makes it apparent that the Secretary believed McClellan was a Southern sympathizer. Browning noted that Stanton "said that he did not think McClellan could emancipate himself from the influence of Jeff Davis, and feared that he was not willing to do any thing calculated greatly to damage the cause of secession."<sup>63</sup> Stanton picked up this fear from rumors that Jefferson Davis had initiated McClellan into the Knights of the Golden Circle before the war. The Knights of the Golden Circle was a highly secretive organization believed to have been in league with Southern secessionists. That McClellan was a traitor in Stanton's mind is clear from a letter to an old friend in Ohio in November, 1862, which described McClellan and his friends as "enemies of the country."<sup>64</sup>

In many ways, it was McClellan's incompetence and failure which Stanton consistently pointed to when speaking of the general's treason. The Secretary could easily have said what Senator Joseph McCarthy said during the Korean

War in 1951, further demonstrating the conspiracy and paranoia link throughout American history:

How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy. . . What can be made of this unbroken series of decisions and acts contributing to the strategy of defeat? They cannot be attributed to incompetence. . . The laws of probability would dictate that part of. . . the decisions would serve this country's interest.<sup>65</sup>

General Robert Milroy suffered in this way when his command was captured during Lee's advance into Pennsylvania in June, 1863. Upon learning of the capture, Stanton remarked to several officers in the War Office that Milroy had not seen a fight or an enemy before surrendering. This came in spite of the fact that an officer from the scene had just told Stanton differently. Observer Welles wondered why the Secretary "wished to misrepresent and belittle Milroy."<sup>66</sup>

General William S. Rosecrans faced similar accusations after the Battle of Chickamauga. John Hay reported in his diary that while telegraph operators were deciphering the first news of Roscrans' defeat, Stanton burst out with his own judgment: "I know the reasons well enough. Rosecrans ran away from his fighting men. . . He (McC--) and C-- both made pretty good time away from the fight to Chattanooga, but Rosecrans beat them both."<sup>67</sup>

Perhaps it should be mentioned in connection with Rosecrans the allegation that Stanton was violently anti-Catholic. Knowing as we do the social milieu from which Stanton came, the charge is hardly exceptional. Catholicism was viewed as a great conspiracy by many in the 19th century, perhaps second only to the Slave Power as a dangerous force sapping the strength of the Republic. Catholics were pawns of the Pope, an anti-democratic manipulator of a world-wide network. The Republican Party gained much of its strength from those who displayed violent nativistic sentiments just before the war, anti-Catholicism being one such sentiment. Though Stanton was not a formal member of the Republican Party, he shared many of its views. It would not be surprising if he saw Catholics linking their conspiratorial aims with those of the rebels, thus making the treasonous conspiracy against the Union all the more hideous.

General Rosecrans was a Catholic and his orderly, M. J. Patton, has written that his superior was refused more men and then relieved after Chickamauga because Stanton feared that a Rosecrans victory could make him the first Catholic president. Patton relates a conversation between Stanton, Halleck, and a Colonel Moose in which Stanton and Halleck disapproved of "too many priests" around Rosecrans and that "it would be better to have a defeat than have a



Catholic President."<sup>68</sup> Corroboration is scarce on this, however.

Another general wronged by Stanton was General Sherman, whom the Secretary thought to have designs upon the government (again, Sherman was a moderate). When Sherman submitted his initial agreement with General Joseph Johnston in April, 1865, for the latter's surrender, Stanton and the Cabinet felt that it had gone beyond mere military questions. Stanton's official response, however, was inexcusable. Releasing to the press the information that the agreement had been disapproved, Stanton included only the first part of Grant's dispatch discussing the problems with the agreement. He omitted the last part explaining why Sherman had granted Johnston such favorable terms. In addition, Stanton's own dispatches to the press indicated that the faulty agreement had given Jefferson Davis time to escape.<sup>69</sup> Sherman rightly protested this action to Grant, claiming that it had "invited the dogs of the press to let loose upon me."<sup>70</sup>

But that was not all. Stanton had Halleck send Generals Meade, Sheridan, Wright, Wilson and others orders "to pay no regard to any truce or orders of General Sherman respecting hostilities."<sup>71</sup> Sherman was effectively removed from command. Why did this happen? The word traitor again made an appearance, and Stanton was the primary initiator of the attack. It appears he believed that a

loyal officer was involved in treasonous actions, even though the war was ending. Welles wrote that Speed, "prompted by Stanton. . .expressed his fears that Sherman at the head of his victorious legions had designs upon the government."<sup>72</sup> Since Stanton felt that moderates were at least soft on rebels if not in league with them, slighting Sherman's loyalty came easily for Stanton. Again, the fear of conspiracy remained the basis for the Secretary's actions.

If Stanton's implication of loyal Union officers in the rebel conspiracy was appalling, surely his attitude that President Johnson had traitorous tendencies was worse. Much of the treachery attributed to Stanton's actions as a Cabinet officer can be traced to a fear of conspiracies and hidden deals on behalf of Southern traitors. As Alphonse Miller, a biographer of Radical Thaddeus Stevens, has written, Stanton managed "to reconcile patriotism to his country with treachery to his superior officer."<sup>73</sup> Biographers Thomas and Hyman have accurately interpreted this tendency as resulting from Stanton's belief that Johnson "was Jeff Davis in another form."<sup>74</sup> In fact, by December, 1866, Stanton feared that President Johnson himself "might lead a revolutionary movement to use the Army for the purpose of unseating the Republican congressional majority."<sup>75</sup>

Treachery was just one way that Stanton could attack and defeat the Slave Power conspirators, which, in his mind, continued to beset him and the country long after the war. Stanton's biographers have written that when faced with the very survival of the Union, he "would not have scrupled to employ deceit."<sup>76</sup> For several years, Welles had been obsessed with Stanton's deceitful ways, always claiming that the Secretary was "an intriguer, courts favor, is not faithful in his friendships, and is given to secret underhand combinations."<sup>77</sup> Welles also claimed that Stanton had Johnson surrounded most of the time by his detectives, or men connected with the military service who were "creatures of the War Department." Thus Stanton obtained Johnson's confidential conversations, so that he could detect treason without delay.<sup>78</sup>

By the end of 1865, Stanton was openly working against the President. His eloquent denunciation of the Tenure of Office Act in a Cabinet meeting in early 1867 seemed comic to Welles. What Stanton said during that meeting is very interesting: "He protested with ostentatious vehemence that any man who would retain his seat in the Cabinet as an adviser when his advice was not wanted was unfit for the place. He would not, he said, remain a moment."<sup>79</sup> Yet a few months later he would invoke the same statute to stay in office. The ludicrous spectacle of the War Secretary barricading himself in the War Department in defiance of

Johnson shows the extent to which he believed himself to be beset by the minions of the Slave Power conspiracy even as late as 1867.

It also showed the extent to which Stanton could display atrocious duplicity. To understand the true depth of Stanton's insincerity, one must return to the case of General McClellan. Stanton began his efforts to remove McClellan sometime in February, 1862. Failing initially, Stanton tried sending General Burnside to the Peninsula to act as second-in-command, in "reality to control him [McClellan]."80 Then he offered command of the Army of the Potomac to General Ethan Hitchcock, who refused. Still, Stanton sent periodic reassurances of support to McClellan, many of which were believed by that officer until June, 1862. The following, written in early July, is a good example: "there is no cause in my heart or conduct for the cloud that wicked men have raised between us for their own base and selfish purposes. No man had ever a truer friend than I have been to you and shall continue to be."81 Even more ironic was Stanton's earnest restraint of Senator Zach Chandler when that person was attacking McClellan in early July: "that while the campaign was in active progress, there was yet some hope of a change for the better, and that to destroy confidence in a commanding officer under such circumstances might injure the army in the field."82

If Stanton's characteristic deceitfulness was related to his all-consuming desire to fight the great conspiracy with whatever means were available, then so too was his penchant for usurping power. Grant recorded in his memoirs that Stanton had a "natural disposition to assume all power and control in all matters that he had anything whatever to do with."<sup>83</sup> Stanton often defied the President or usurped the powers of his office, generally when he believed Lincoln was being too lenient towards those who obstructed the goal of Union victory.

By 1863, for example, Lincoln had agreed to let Stanton review all of his requests for pardons before issuing any of them. While Lincoln was fond of making light of the Secretary's defiance, Stanton assumed many of the functions of Lincoln's office to a dangerous extent. As Grant remarked after the war, the Secretary felt no hesitation in assuming the duties of the Executive, or acting without consultation with Lincoln. To this end, as we have already seen, Stanton offered command of the Army of the Potomac to Hitchcock without consulting Lincoln. McClellan even wrote after the war that Stanton "often advocated the propriety of my seizing the government and taking affairs into my own hands" (early in 1862).<sup>84</sup> So much contempt for Lincoln's authority did Stanton have that when criticized for working behind the President's back for McClellan's removal, he blurted out that "he knew of no

particular obligations he was under to the President."<sup>85</sup>  
In that comment, one grasps the essence of Stanton's commitment, which was not to the President, but to the defeat of the great rebel conspiracy. Whatever would hinder him as Hitchcock remarked, was ruthlessly thrust aside.

While grasping for the power of others, Stanton also abused much of the power he rightfully possessed. Again, it was directed at suspected enemies of the state. When faced with the possibility that Maryland might reject an abolition policy in 1864, Stanton used army troops to intimidate the opposition at the polls. They were stationed at the polling places to keep tabs on the voting habits of each voter, easy enough when color-coded ballots were used. Biographer Hyman credits skillful maneuvers of this kind with the Administration party winning eighteen seats in the House elections of the fall of 1862.<sup>86</sup>

Stanton also took the lead in punishing newspapers or alleged conspiratorial activity. On February 10, 1862, Stanton ordered Dr. Malcolm Ives of the New York Herald to be arrested "and held in close custody. . . as a spy" for interrupting a War Department conference.<sup>87</sup> Note that he was not arrested for violating Department restrictions, but as a spy (the paranoia is clearly evident). A month later, he suppressed the Washington Sunday Chronicle for reporting troop movements, directing that all persons connected with

the paper, including its compositors, be arrested.<sup>88</sup> Note that Stanton ordered all of the laborers connected with the paper arrested, as if a widespread, pervasive conspiracy existed.

A classic example of this same paranoia occurred in May, 1864, when the New York World, an opposition paper, published a forged Presidential proclamation, calling for more troops, which the editors believed to be genuine. Stanton's orders to General Dix to close the paper down declared that the proclamation had been "wickedly and traitorously. . .published with the design to give aid and comfort to the enemies of the United States."<sup>89</sup> In addition, Stanton jumped to the conclusion that the telegraph company had planned the affair and had all its employees thrown in jail. No real evidence ever existed to corroborate such wild hallucinations, highlighting Stanton's intense fear of conspiracy and treason.

Another way in which Stanton abused his power demonstrates the extent to which he believed that the Slave Power had a firm grip on every aspect of society. On November 30, 1863, Stanton ordered that "all houses of worship belonging to the Methodist Episcopal Church South in which a loyal minister, appointed by a loyal bishop of said Church, does not now officiate, are placed at the disposal of the Right Rev. Bishop Ames."<sup>90</sup> Instructions were given as to their listing and the finding of

replacements. This latter process caused some problems for Stanton, for in March, 1864, Bishop Edwards and others of the United Brethren Church protested Ames' "monopoly of churches. . .and seemed to have a hankering after a share of the plunder."<sup>91</sup> Lincoln, in this case, sent a curt note to Stanton disapproving of his unauthorized policy, saying the government could not undertake to run the churches.<sup>92</sup> Stanton continued the policy anyway.

Stanton no doubt believed that the Southern churches were one of the primary sources of the Slave Power conspiracy and needed to be cleansed of traitorous clergy. For those individuals against whom was brought some specific charge of disloyalty, Stanton advised severe penalties. As Hyman has noted, "the internal security problem was deadly serious and intensely personal" for Stanton.<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately, disloyalty was defined within bounds of what some contemporaries labelled Stanton's violent prejudices, hastily formed and frequently unjust. Welles wrote that Stanton was a Radical sensationalist, "ready to believe anything bad of those to whom he is opposed."<sup>94</sup> Stanton's strong actions against those accused of being disloyal must be seen in the light of his personal hatred of those involved in the conspiracy. Also, the fact that the conspiracy was much more widespread to Stanton than to others seemed to call for harsher penalties and greater deterrence.



His reaction to a Coles County, Ohio, riot in 1862 is typical: "Every damned one of them [rioters] should be hung."<sup>95</sup> On another occasion, when General Dix reported that a certain Union spy named Wood had failed to appear at his headquarters as ordered, Stanton sent the following reply: "You should have sent Wood to the guard house. When you think any man deserves it shoot him on the spot."<sup>96</sup> This kind of harsh treatment extended to Stanton's treatment of Southern prisoners.

While Stanton often cut rations for the prisoners in so-called retaliation for the treatment of Union prisoners in the South, he also restricted rations for another reason. On February 15, 1864, Stanton issued orders that no food would be allowed the prisoners from sources other than the government issue (i.e., sutlers, friends, etc.), an act which caused needless outbreaks of scurvy and other diseases. The ostensible reason was that such activity "gives opportunity for sympathizers to show their interest in rebels."<sup>97</sup>

Stanton wanted to suppress such interest and leniency, for it encouraged the great conspiracy. Attorney General Bates writes of one instance in which Stanton opposed letting courts decide the ownership of confiscated Southern property, as required by law. Speaking with Bates about it, Stanton argued that a judge could not give property to a rebel, so no cases should be heard. Bates' rejoinder

that rebels could only be identified in courtroom proceedings infuriated Stanton: "He resumed (rather in furore) if the Judge should give land to a traitor he ought to be shot and I would give the order."<sup>98</sup>

The Secretary also engaged in widespread efforts to round up traitors and bring them to account for their activities. Arrests were widespread (as was the conspiracy) and arbitrary, especially in the period after the assassination. Stanton's dispatches in April, 1865 are instructive. On April 21, 1865, for instance, Stanton seems to have targeted the wife of Confederate General Richard Ewell whom he personally ordered arrested in Nashville.<sup>99</sup> Junius Booth was arrested by the War Department for no other reason than that he was a relative of the assassin, and thus probable conspirator. George Gayle, a respected Alabama politician, was arrested in April for allegedly inciting the murder of Lincoln in an Alabama publication. He and Booth were not released until the end of June.<sup>100</sup>

Not only do Stanton's irrational arrests testify to the terror which he felt over the pervasive, widespread conspiracy, but his continued efforts after the trial of the Lincoln conspirators illustrate his belief that it was not yet dead. As late as June 15, 1865, Stanton persuaded the President to agree to a new order directing the Military Governor of the District of Columbia to

arrest, examine, or hold in custody any person or persons in your command against whom you may have evidence or reasonable grounds of suspicion of treasonlike acts or correspondence with. . . enemies of the United States.<sup>101</sup>

Writing letters south, it seemed, was too conspiratorial even after the end of hostilities. Stanton also came close to instituting executions as a first blow towards reconstruction, according to Radical Charles Sumner. Sumner wrote John Bright in England that "it was Stanton who wished to hang three or four in a state; I think even he is more moderate now."<sup>102</sup>

As is apparent, punishment for rebels in the years after the war was not unusual, for Stanton believed that the conspiracy continued to be potent. It is a fact that Stanton deliberately withheld a telegram from General Absalom Baird in New Orleans in 1866 which asked Johnson for advice concerning the possibility of violence following a Union meeting. When a riot subsequently occurred, Stanton immediately "in great excitement, repeatedly spoke of the Attorney General of Louisiana and the Mayor of New Orleans as pardoned rebels who had instigated the murder of the people in the streets of the city, that they are guilty of this terrible bloodletting."<sup>103</sup> Quite probably, Stanton was willing to sacrifice innocent lives to place odium on the "rebels" in Louisiana. In the same year, Stanton opposed efforts to provide protection for the people of Texas from Indian attacks. Welles saw a "lurking

inclination on his [Stanton's] part to slight Texas to permit the people to be harassed--that spirit of Radical hate and oppression."<sup>104</sup> More correctly, Welles could have seen it as an unwillingness on the part of Stanton to show kindness for rebels, or be lenient in ways which might give new life to the rebel conspiracy.

As seen in the preceding pages, Stanton's personality displays an overall theme: the fear of conspiracy. Out of this fear arose hate, secrecy, vindictiveness, deceit, arbitrary grasping for power, and general distrust of almost everyone. Thus, the many facets of the Secretary's personality relate to the whole. While many of his characteristics can be found in other strong Unionists of the day, who also feared the pervasive conspiracy, Stanton exhibited them to a greater degree. This is reflected in the comment of fellow Radicals related in this chapter. Also, the Secretary's fears may have developed partially out of personal factors, asthma merely being one of them. This chapter has shown the abiding and deep-rooted fears that encompassed Stanton's personality. In part, they were understandable given the context of the war. More than that, however, they were exceptional and unique as well. The preceding development of the Secretary's "paranoid-style" personality permits us to examine his strange and suspicious actions after the assassination in the light of that unique personality.

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CHAPTER III  
STANTON AND THE ASSASSINATION

With this clear perspective on many aspects of Stanton's character and personality, it is possible to assess the questions raised by many historians with respect to the Secretary's behavior in the wake of the Lincoln assassination. Due to the brief nature of this thesis, it is not practical to reach conclusions on every point made by Eisenschiml and others. A general view of the prominent aspects of Stanton's behavior, however, clearly reveals that his behavior was consistent with that exhibited on many previous occasions, especially during 1861-1865. Actions which may have initially struck historians as strange and suspicious can be understood in the light of Stanton's personal experience and the political environment of his time, which spawned similar traits and attitudes among others striving to save the Union.

Given Secretary of War Stanton's fearful nature, his reaction to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln could be expected to contain paranoiac elements endemic to his three years in the War Department and perhaps his formative years in Ohio. This man believed that spies and traitors had infiltrated the White House, the War Department, and Union

Army high command, the churches, and the newspapers and swarmed through Washington and its environs. Wholesale assassinations were constantly on Stanton's mind as well, so much so that he feared the White House might have been mined in January, 1861.

The assassination of Lincoln on April 14, 1865, no doubt convinced Stanton that his worst-case scenarios had been correct and that the situation called for decisive action. That action contained many of the elements already discussed with respect to the paranoia in the War Department--secrecy, deception, insecurity, overreaction, and vindictiveness. Decisive action also meant assuming power and using it harshly, in order to blunt the seemingly rekindled flames of rebellion and conspiracy. For Stanton, Lee's surrender at Appomatox did not end the great conspiracy; rather it was alive, active, omnipresent, and still extremely dangerous. As late as 1867, the Secretary had fears that President Johnson, whom he had come to see as a leading conspirator, might lead a revolutionary movement of some kind. Thus, swift measures were needed more than ever to save the Union and root out the remaining elements of the great Slave Power plot.

Fear and insecurity were obvious reactions on Stanton's part, as we noted in his response to Greeley's editorial. Other conspirators and traitors doubtless stood ready to finish the grisly work Booth had started. In

fact, James Bishop has written that "Stanton's function, as he saw it, was to stop the pending assassinations rather than to apprehend the perpetrators of the Lincoln shooting."<sup>1</sup> For this reason, one of Stanton's prime concerns became the disposal of Booth's body. If Booth was the martyr Stanton believed him to be, "every hair of Booth's head will be a valued relic to sympathizers with the South in Washington."<sup>2</sup>

Stanton ordered a hasty autopsy of Booth's body on board the ironclad Montauk and instructed the commanding officer of the Navy Yard to "have the body placed in a strong box, and deliver it to the charge of Colonel Baker--the box being carefully sealed."<sup>3</sup> (emphasis mine) Then the Secretary ordered Baker to have Booth's body buried at a secret place (the Arsenal grounds) at midnight. Thus Stanton rid himself of the danger that sympathizers might use Booth or his effects as relics and symbols to begin further assassinations or depredations. The Catholic imagery (relics and symbols) was an ominous sign of Stanton's fears.

These same concerns revealed themselves in the treatment of the Lincoln conspirators, especially when it came to the possibility of their rescue by fellow rebel sympathizers. Throughout the war, political prisoners had been kept under heavy guard for fear of rescue by co-conspirators in the North. If the Slave Power organization

remained intact after Appomattox, then rescue was a possibility that Stanton had to foreclose. Jefferson Davis, captured May 10, was already being kept under heavy guard at Fort Monroe, including round-the-clock observers and manacles. The conspirators saw it get heavier in Washington. Since even a whisper from Mary Surratt or the others might ignite attacks or rescue attempts, hoods were placed over their heads to prevent conversation. Each prisoner was placed within sight of a guard at all times to protect against the same thing. When one realizes the number of men (16,000) surrounding the Arsenal grounds, one realizes the extent of Stanton's fear of rescue.

Secrecy, as throughout the war, was a second hallmark of Stanton's reaction. Only his trusted lieutenants were allowed to handle certain aspects of the case. Things were often hidden from fellow government officials. The apprehension of Booth by the Bakers is a good example, and the intense secretiveness was the probable reason why Booth was not interrogated as he lay dying at Garrett's Barn. We have seen what such unauthorized action might bring in the case of Sam Arnold and Marshall MacPhail of Baltimore. Stanton controlled all aspects of the government's response to the assassination, as was his custom in similar crises, and he attempted to make the conspiracy trial secret as well, but failed. His object would be to thwart the hidden enemies that surrounded the War Department and controlled

the press, preventing them from betraying his actions to Southern sympathizers.

As mentioned above, Stanton naturally assumed power in Washington after Lincoln was shot, and exercised much of that power for the next several months. With an unsure Johnson at the helm, it was relatively easy for Stanton to take control of affairs. One of his first tasks was to arrange for a military trial of the conspirators. Since Stanton apparently was convinced of their guilt anyway, this was the surest and quickest way to dispense with them and get the provocative conspirators out of the public spotlight. As Welles wrote, "I regret they are not tried by the civil court. . .but Stanton, who says the proof is clear and positive, as emphatic."<sup>4</sup> Even if the civil courts had been quicker, Stanton no doubt believed that Slave Power conspirators could connive for acquittal of the defendants, and possibly lay new rescue plans.

Stanton also believed, however, that Davis and the Confederate leadership were directly involved in the assassination. The nature of the vast conspiracy told him so, and at the least, the Confederate leaders were equally guilty by their prominent role in carrying out that vast conspiracy. In fact, by five o'clock on the morning of April 15th, Stanton ordered officials along the Canadian border to arrest Jacob Thompson, Confederate commissioner to Canada.<sup>5</sup> By the end of April, with the persuasiveness of a

true believer, he had convinced most of the Cabinet that the assassination was just part of the gigantic conspiracy which Davis had directed for four years.

Problems began to crop up, however. The Booth diary captured on the 26th of April revealed the murder plot to be a last-minute decision: "until today nothing was ever thought of sacrificing to our country's wrongs."<sup>6</sup> Stanton concealed this diary during the trial of the conspirators. When it was revealed in 1867, Stanton violently opposed its publication, for by that time his use of perjured evidence at the trial had become a great liability.<sup>7</sup> He had, on other occasions, engaged in similar types of legal fraud. Stanton apparently used doctored evidence during a famous patent case in 1859, to deprive Cyrus McCormick of his right to the reaper design.<sup>8</sup>

The Secretary did find witnesses willing to testify against Davis and Thompson, but quickly learned that their testimony was fraudulent. He decided to persist in his efforts, on the assumption that the Confederates must have had some role in the plot; yet many Radicals like Charles Sumner openly believed his former Southern colleagues incapable of such a deed. In part, this stemmed from the Secretary's belief in the pervasiveness of the great conspiracy. Thus, the absence of a connection to the Confederate leadership would nearly have been incomprehensible to Stanton. If there were no direct



involvement of Davis and the others, as the leaders of the Slave Power, they were responsible for its actions anyway, and were as guilty as Booth of the murder of Lincoln. Those who did not understand this would be enlightened if he could establish the direct connection to the Rebel leadership. To this end, Stanton used the perjured evidence of Sanford Conover and others in the conspirators' trial to build his case against Davis. But when their testimony leaked to the public, it was quickly proven false by Jacob Thompson and others, using Canadian hotel records and other information.

Seymour Frank's study of this issue has found that the Secretary used bribes and rewards to construct his story at the trial. Moreover, his vendetta against Davis continued into 1866. Naturally, Stanton and other Radicals did not believe the Slave Power could be crushed for good until some form of "justice" was dealt its leadership. Stanton had Holt actually hire Conover to dig up witnesses against Davis, even though the man was a known perjurer and liar. In 1867, the true dimensions of the witchhunt were revealed. Two of Conover's witnesses admitted that they had received up to \$6000 from the War Department for their testimony. Conover, for his part, felt "some consolation from the fact that several illustrious heads are as deep in the mud as we are in the mire."<sup>9</sup> It was to prevent these facts from coming to light in court that Stanton initially

rejected petitions for John Surratt's extradition to the United States in 1865-66.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to his desire to implicate Davis and get the trial of the conspirators over with quickly, Stanton wanted convictions, as an example of what might happen to other potential assassins. Not only was the conspiracy still alive after Appomattox, but Stanton feared personal injury enough to have constant bodyguards as late as August, 1865. Mary Surratt was the absolute epitome of what Stanton wanted to punish and discourage. She symbolized the Southern sympathizer and Northern traitor, working behind the lines on behalf of the Slave Power. Moreover, she was a Catholic and a woman, the latter group described in one of Stanton's dispatches as the worst internal traitors. Beyond the fact that a friend claimed that Stanton did not care for women generally, Surratt could be made an example to all the other females carrying out the tradition of Rose O'Neal Greenhow, who worked on behalf of the conspiracy under the protection of their femininity.<sup>11</sup>

Surratt lived where at least the kidnapping plot against Lincoln was hatched and it was plausible to suspect her of being involved. But Stanton, an able lawyer, knew the evidence against her was insufficient and most probably non-existent. Nevertheless, he got what he needed. The Secretary had the cowardly Weichmann frightened into "remembering" additional facts about the Surratt case.

Weichmann wrote Assistant Judge Advocate Henry Burnett on May 5th that "you confused and terrified me so much yesterday that I was almost unable to say anything."<sup>12</sup> Weichmann's testimony, combined with that of the equally terrified John Lloyd, doomed Mary Surratt. Again, fraud was not out of the question if rebels and traitors could be brought to justice. It was sad testimony indeed against Stanton when Weichmann told a friend after the executions that "it would have been very different with Mrs. Surratt if he had been let alone."<sup>13</sup>

Conviction was not quite enough for Stanton in his desire to make Surratt an example. He probably saw to it that the military commission's appeal for a commutation of Surratt's death sentence was never seen by President Johnson, though there is some dispute on this. Knowing as we do Stanton's penchant for controlling everything, it is likely that he made such efforts through Judge Advocate Holt. Surely a Secretary who could defy President Lincoln at will could engage in keeping information from Johnson. This coincides with Hyman's appraisal, which noted that the appeal was omitted from Pitman's official record of the trial, a fact that Stanton must have known.<sup>14</sup> General Augustus V. Kautz, a member of the military commission observed that "the Judge Advocates, under the influence of the Secretary of War, evidently, were very persevering and wanted to have the seven prisoners all hung."<sup>15</sup> Harsh

punishment for traitors was not new to Stanton and he apparently felt that anyone conspiring in so dangerous and heinous a rebellion must deserve the just and prudent punishment of death.

Too often historians have tried to gloss over the unpleasant aspects of the Secretary's behavior, because it tarnishes the view we would like to have of Radicals like Stanton. But in this case it has undermined our understanding of the assassination for many years. Modifying our view of Stanton's actions and personality has not sullied the mandate of Union victory, nor glamorized the images of Booth, Surratt, and Mudd. It has taught us, however, how good intentions are often pushed beyond their rational or justifiable limits and become national tragedies. Human behavior often has a dynamic of its own, and can generate impulses which deny the basic principles of truth and justice. While unacceptable, such impulses deserve profound contemplation.

In many ways, our examination of Stanton raises as many questions as it answers. For example, under the American social and political system, do those who rise to power reflect broader currents of psychological phenomena (in this case paranoia)? Can we infer from men of Stanton's nature that a common psychology exists? Does the eventual rejection of these paranoiacs (whether they be the

extreme Radicals or McCarthyites) suggest that the paranoid element is only dominant in times of perceived crises or danger? These and other questions, though outside the scope of this thesis, can be crucial to both the study of individual and collective psychology in American history, especially in eras for which there is no polling data. Perhaps, then, our interpretive framework for Stanton and the Lincoln assassination suggests similar lines of inquiry on a wide variety of topics in American history.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. James Bishop, The Day Lincoln Was Shot, p. 244.
2. Lloyd Lewis, Myths After Lincoln, p. 220.
3. Stanton to Commanding Officer of Washington Navy Yard, April 27, 1865, Stanton MSS.
4. Welles, II, p. 303.
5. OR, Series II, Volume 8, p. 493.
6. Osborn Oldroyd, The Assassination of Lincoln, p. 93.
7. Welles, III, p. 95.
8. Frank Flower, Edwin McMasters Stanton, p. 64.
9. Seymour Frank, "The Conspiracy to Implicate the Confederate Leaders," 40 Mississippi Valley Historical Review 629, 648, 649 (1954).
10. Alfred Isaacson, "John Surratt and the Lincoln Assassination Plot," 52 Maryland Historical Magazine 321, 329 (1957).
11. Flower, p. 51.
12. Otto Eisenschiml, Why Was Lincoln Murdered?, p. 280.
13. Ibid., p. 281.
14. Thomas and Hyman, p. 432.
15. Charles Cooney, "At the Trial of the Lincoln Conspirators," 12 Civil War Times Illustrated 9, 30 (1973).

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