Killing Lincoln

THE

SHOCKING ASSASSINATION
THAT CHANGED AMERICA
FOREVER

BILL O’REILLY

and

MARTIN DUGARD

Henry Holt and Company
New York
For Makeda Wubneh,
who makes the world a better place
A NOTE TO READERS

The story you are about to read is true and truly shocking. It has been 150 years since the beginning of the Civil War, the bloodiest war in our nation’s history, a conflict so full of horror it is almost impossible to describe. The assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, only days after the end of the war, was a terrible tragedy. Much has been speculated about the events leading up to the murder and immediately afterward, but few people know what really happened.

Before historian Martin Dugard and I began writing this book, I thought I understood the facts and implications of the assassination. But even though I am a former teacher of history, I had no clue. The ferocious assassination plan itself still has elements that have not been clarified. This is a saga of courage, cowardice, and betrayal. There are layers of proven conspiracy and alleged conspiracy that will disturb you. You will learn much in these pages, and the experience, I believe, will advance your understanding of our country, and how Lincoln’s murder changed it forever.

This book is a departure from the
contemporary nonfiction I have written for more than a decade and from the daily news analysis that I do on television. But the lessons you will learn within these pages are relevant to all our lives. For those of us who want to improve the United States and keep it the greatest nation in the world, we must be aware of the true heroes who have made the country great as well as the villains who have besmirched it.

Finally, this book is written as a thriller. But don’t let the style fool you. What you are about to read is unsanitized and uncompromising. It is a no spin American story, and I am proud of it.

BILL O’REILLY

April 3, 2011

Long Island, New York
PROLOGUE

Saturday, March 4, 1865
Washington, D.C.

The man with six weeks to live is anxious.

He furls his brow, as he does countless times each day, and walks out of the Capitol Building, which is nearing completion. He is exhausted, almost numb.

Fifty thousand men and women stand in pouring rain and ankle-deep mud to watch Abraham Lincoln take the oath of office to begin his second term. His new vice president, Andrew Johnson, has just delivered a red-faced, drunken, twenty-minute ramble vilifying the South that has left the crowd squirming, embarrassed by Johnson’s inebriation.

So when Lincoln steps up to the podium and delivers an eloquent appeal for reunification, the spiritual message of his second inaugural address is all the more uplifting. “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations,” the president intones humbly.

Despite his exhaustion, Lincoln is charismatic. And momentarily energized.
Suddenly, the sun bursts through the clouds as he speaks, its light enveloping the tall and outwardly serene Lincoln. But 120 miles away in the Virginia railroad junction of Petersburg, any thought of serenity is a fantasy. The Confederate army, under the command of General Robert E. Lee, has been pinned inside the city for more than 250 days by Union forces under the command of General Ulysses S. Grant. Though living in trenches and reduced to eating rats and raw bacon, Lee’s men will not surrender. Instead, Lee is making plans to slip out of Petersburg and escape south to the Carolinas. If he succeeds, Lincoln’s prayer for a reunified United States of America may never be answered. America will continue to be divided into a North and a South, a United States of America and a Confederate States of America.

Lincoln’s inaugural speech is a performance worthy of a great dramatic actor. And indeed, one of America’s most famous thespians stands just a few feet away as Lincoln raises his right hand. John Wilkes Booth is galvanized by the president’s words—though not in the way Lincoln intends.

Booth, twenty-six, raised in Maryland, is an exceptional young man. Blessed with a rakish smile and a debonair gaze, he is handsome, brilliant, witty, charismatic, tender, and able to bed almost any woman he wants—and he has bedded quite a few. It’s no wonder that the actor has known success on the Broadway stage.

His fiancée stands at his side, a sensual young woman whose senator father has no idea that his daughter is secretly engaged to a man of Booth’s lowly theatrical calling. Lucy Hale and John Wilkes Booth are a beautiful young couple quite used to the adoration of high society and the opposite sex. Yet not even she knows that Booth is a Confederate sympathizer, one who nurses a pathological hatred for Lincoln and the North. Lucy has no idea that her lover has assembled a crack team of conspirators to help him bring down the president. They have guns, financing, and a precise plan. At this point, patience is their watchword.

Standing in the cold Washington drizzle in the shadow of the Capitol dome, Booth feels nothing but hot rage and injustice. The
actor is impulsive and prone to the melodramatic. Just before Lincoln’s speech, as the president stepped out onto the East Portico, Booth’s carefully crafted conspiracy was instantly forgotten.

Though he had no gun or knife, Booth lunged at Lincoln. An officer from Washington’s Metropolitan Police, a force known to be heavily infiltrated by Confederate sympathizers, grabbed him hard by the arm and pulled him back. Booth struggles, which only made Officer John William Westfall grasp him tighter. Like everyone else in the city, Westfall is well aware that there are plots against Lincoln’s life. Some say it’s not a matter of if but when the president will die. Yet rather than arrest Booth, or even pull him aside for questioning, Westfall accepted Booth’s excuse that he merely stumbled. Arresting a celebrity like Booth might have caused the policeman problems.
But Booth is definitely not finished. He seethes as he listens to Lincoln's speech. The grace and poetry of the words ignite his rage. The sight of so many black faces beaming up at Lincoln from the crowd makes him want to vomit. No, Booth is most definitely not finished. If anything, his determination to knock Lincoln off his “throne” becomes more intense.

Lincoln isn’t finished, either. The president has epic plans for his second term in office. It will take every one of those four years, and maybe longer, to heal the war-torn nation. Healing is Lincoln’s one overriding ambition, and he will use every last bit of his trademark determination to see it realized. Nothing must stand in his way.

But evil knows no boundaries. And it is a most powerful evil that is now bearing down on Abraham Lincoln.
Part One

TOTAL WAR

Lincoln with Union troops at Antietam
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SATURDAY, APRIL 1, 1865
CITY POINT, VIRGINIA

The man with fourteen days to live is himself witnessing death. Lincoln (he prefers to go by just his last name. No one calls him “Abe,” which he loathes. Few call him “Mr. President.” His wife actually calls him “Mr. Lincoln,” and his two personal secretaries playfully refer to him as “the Tycoon”) paces the upper deck of the steamboat River Queen, his face lit now and again by distant artillery. The night air smells of the early spring, damp with a hint of floral fragrance. The River Queen is docked at City Point, a bustling Virginia port that was infiltrated by Confederate spies last August. Yet Lincoln strides purposefully back and forth, unprotected and unafraid, as vulnerable as a man can be to sniper fire, the bombardment serving as the perfect distraction from his considerable worries. When will this war ever end?

As one Confederate soldier will put it, “the rolling thunder of the heavy metal” began at nine P.M. Once the big guns destroy the Confederate defenses around Petersburg, the Union army—Lincoln’s army—will swarm from their positions and race across no-man’s-land into the enemy trenches, hell-bent on capturing the city that has eluded them for ten long months.

What happens after that is anyone’s guess.

In a best-case scenario, Lincoln’s general in chief, Ulysses S. Grant,
will trap Confederate general Robert E. Lee and his army inside Petersburg, forcing their surrender. This is a long shot. But if it happens, the four-year-old American Civil War will be over, and the United States will be divided no more. And this is why Abraham Lincoln is watching the battlefield.

But Marse Robert—“master” as rendered in southern parlance—has proven himself a formidable opponent time and again. Lee plans to escape and sprint for the North Carolina border to link up with another large rebel force. Lee boasts that his Army of Northern Virginia can hold out forever in the Blue Ridge Mountains, where his men will conceal themselves among the ridges and thickets. There are even bold whispers among the hardcore Confederates about shedding their gray uniforms for plain civilian clothing as they sink under-
cover to fight guerrilla-style. The Civil War will then drag on for years, a nightmare that torments the president.

Lincoln knows that many citizens of the North have lost their stomach for this war, with its modern technology like repeating rifles and long-range artillery that have brought about staggering losses of life. Anti-Lincoln protests have become more common than the battles themselves. Lee’s escape could guarantee that the northern states rise up and demand that Lincoln fight no more. The Confederates, by default, will win, making the chances of future reunification virtually nonexistent.

Nothing scares Lincoln more. He is so eager to see America healed that he has instructed Grant to offer Lee the most lenient surrender terms possible. There will be no punishment of Confederate soldiers. No confiscation of their horses or personal effects. Just the promise of a hasty return to their families, farms, and stores, where they can once again work in peace.

In his youth on the western frontier, Lincoln was famous for his amazing feats of strength. He once lifted an entire keg of whiskey off the ground, drank from the bung, and then, being a teetotaler, spit the whiskey right back out. An eyewitness swore he saw Lincoln drag a thousand-pound box of stones all by himself. So astonishing was his physique that another man unabashedly described young Abraham Lincoln as “a cross between Venus and Hercules.”

But now Lincoln’s youth has aged into a landscape of fissures and contours, his forehead and sunken cheeks a road map of despair and brooding. Lincoln’s strength, however, is still there, manifested in his passionate belief that the nation must and can be healed. He alone has the power to get it done, if fate will allow him.

Lincoln’s top advisers tell him assassination is not the American way, but he knows he’s a candidate for martyrdom. His guts churn as he stares out into the night and rehashes and second-guesses his thoughts and actions and plans. Last August, Confederate spies had killed forty-three people at City Point by exploding an ammunition barge. Now, at a rail-thin six foot four, with a bearded chin and a nose only a caricaturist could love, Lincoln’s unmistakable silhouette makes
him an easy target, should spies once again lurk nearby. But Lincoln is not afraid. He is a man of faith. God will guide him one way or another.

On this night Lincoln calms himself with blunt reality: right now, the most important thing is for Grant to defeat Lee. Surrounded by darkness, alone in the cold, he knows that Grant surrounding Lee and crushing the will of the Confederate army is all that matters.

Lincoln heads to bed long after midnight, once the shelling stops and the night is quiet enough to allow him some peace. He walks belowdecks to his stateroom. He lies down. As so often happens when he stretches out his frame in a normal-sized bed, his feet hang over the end, so he sleeps diagonally.

Lincoln is normally an insomniac on the eve of battle, but he is so tired from the mental strain of what has passed and what is still to come that he falls into a deep dream state. What he sees is so vivid and painful that when he tells his wife and friends about it, ten days later, the description shocks them beyond words.

The dream finally ends as day breaks. Lincoln stretches as he rises from bed, missing his wife back in Washington but also loving the thrill of being so close to the front. He enters a small bathroom, where he stands before a mirror and water basin to shave and wash his hands and face. Lincoln next dons his trademark black suit and scarfs a quick breakfast of hot coffee and a single hard-boiled egg, which he eats while reading a thicket of telegrams from his commanders, including Grant, and from politicians back in Washington.

Then Lincoln walks back up to the top deck of the River Queen and stares off into the distance. With a sigh, he recognizes that there is nothing more he can do right now.

It is April 2, 1865. The man with thirteen days left on earth is pacing.