

Film Review: ‘The Conspirator’ Has Lessons That Resonate Today

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 15, 2011 - 5:23pm

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CHICAGO – The Latin term “Inter arma silent leges.” (There is no law on the battlefield) is coldly stated in “The Conspirator,” directed by Robert Redford. In plain truth, the new film recreates one of the most controversial military trials in American history.



Today, April 15th, is the 146th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s death, assassinated by Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth. This is also the week of the 150th anniversary (April 12th) of the start of the American Civil War. Both these events reverberate to the consequences of trading in our freedoms during wartime, which centralizes power and legitimizes fear. The Conspirator is about Mary Surratt, a southerner who ran a boarding house in Washington, D.C., where the plot was hatched to murder President Lincoln.

The film begins on a battlefield during the Civil War, where two friends lie injured. Frederick Aiken (James McAvoy) insists that his comrade Nicholas (Justin Long) be treated first. Fast forward two years later to April 14th, 1865, the two friends are reunited at a party in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the end of the war only days earlier. A courier interrupts the proceedings to bring the news that President Lincoln has been shot while attending a play at Ford’s Theater right down the street.

Aiken rushes to the scene, and sees the mortally wounded Lincoln being laid in a small bedroom in the Peterson House across from the theater. He also sees Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (Kevin Kline) moving his way through the crowd, to take the reins of government while participating in Lincoln’s death watch. Across town, Secretary of State William Seward is being attacked, but survives, and Vice President Andrew Johnson dodges an assassin’s attempt because the shooter has lost his nerve.

Booth and the two other men are part of a plan to murder the upper echelon in Lincoln’s cabinet, but only Booth succeeds. This plot was hatched in the Surratt boarding house in Washington, and Mary Surratt (the overseer of the property, portrayed by Robin Wright) is arrested, along with the other conspirators. Booth is shot and killed while on the lam.

What follows is the trial of Mary Surratt, defended by Frederick Aiken. The war veteran is a young attorney, and he is appointed by Senator Reverdy Johnson (Tom Wilkerson) to defend against what is essentially a railroading of justice. The military tribunal, hand-picked by Stanton for quick prosecution, hears the arguments for Surratt’s innocence – her assertion is that she ran the boarding house but knew nothing of the plot – but the guilty verdict seems forgone.

“The Conspirator” opens everywhere on April 15th. Featuring Robin Wright, James McAvoy, Evan Rachel Wood, Justin Long, Tom Wilkinson and Kevin Kline.. Screenplay by James D. Solomon, directed by Robert Redford. Rated “PG-13”

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Defense Rests: Robin Wright (Mary Surratt) and James McAvoy (Frederick Aiken) in ‘The Conspirator’
Photo credit: Claudette Barius for Roadside Attractions

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