



The Conspirator



Synopsis

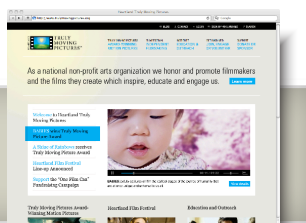
Against the backdrop of post-Civil War Washington, Frederick Aiken, a newly-minted lawyer and Union war hero, reluctantly agrees to defend Mary Surratt, the only woman accused in the assassination of President Lincoln. As her trial unfolds before a hostile military court, new details about the plot emerge, and questions are raised about her guilt and her ability to receive a fair trial.

Discussion Questions

- How was Lincoln’s assassination portrayed in the film? What would have been handled differently if a similar situation occurred today, considering how medicine, technology, communications and security have changed since the Civil War?
- The film shows how newspaper headlines reacted to the aftermath of the assassination. What role did they play in shaping how the public (and even Aiken himself) felt about the trial and Mary Surratt? Do the media play a similar role today?
- How were women treated during the Civil War era? How might Mary Surratt’s gender have played into her trial? How might her gender have affected a similar trial these days?
- What sort of struggle did Aiken go through when deciding to represent Surratt? Why was he so conflicted between punishing those who murdered Lincoln and upholding the values of the Constitution?
- What did Aiken risk by defending Surratt and going against the wishes of the Secretary of War and even the President? What principles did he stand by even at the risk of losing his career and damaging his relationships? Was it worth it for him? Would you do the same today?
- At one point Surratt talks about her son, and says that she acts the way she does because she cares for something greater than herself. Aiken responds by saying that he fought for four years for something greater than himself. How does this connect the two of them, and what is different about their situations?

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Do Your Research

- Read the U.S. Constitution and the first thirteen amendments. How do they apply to Mary Surratt's trial? How do you think the matter should have been settled? Did Surratt receive a fair trial according to the rights promised her in the Constitution?
- Look up other trials in U.S. history that have dealt with similar Constitutional situations. How are they similar to or different from Surratt's trial? Does the fact that Surratt's trial took place in war time change her predicament and the way the trial unfolded?
- Learn more about Mary Surratt's trials. How do history books reflect what happened? Is it any different from the way the film presented the trial? Why did the filmmakers strive for such an accurate reproduction of the actual events?
- Stage a mock recreation of Surratt's trial. Appoint a defense attorney to play Aiken, someone to play Surratt, a panel of military-minded judges and a prosecuting attorney. With details you've researched about the trial, present evidence both for and against Surratt. How do your judges feel about the situation with the details you've researched?

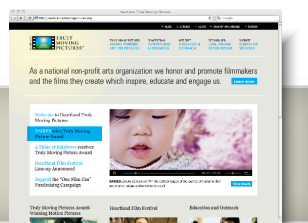
Get Involved

- Do you see any correlations between the way Surratt was tried and current laws that affect you or people you know? Are there laws that differ based on the defendant's gender, as Surratt had to endure, that you would like to see changed? Much of her trial hinged on the fact that she was tried in a military court and not a civilian court. Is there any danger of this happening today, in your community? If not, perhaps there are more general ways that the current law fails to uphold the values and rights established in the Constitution. If so, write to your local, state, and federal representatives to share your concerns and advocate to ensure future generations have the same freedoms.



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