

# The Conspirator: The Plot to Assassinate Lincoln



THE AMERICAN FILM COMPANY

## Documentary Discussion Guide

## Pre-Viewing Guidelines for *The Conspirator: The Plot to Assassinate Lincoln*

1. On the board or on chart paper, write the word “POLARIZE.” In a large group discussion, elicit definitions and connotations from the group and chart them as a word web.
2. Once you have a number of associations and definitions listed, offer this dictionary definition of the word:

Polarize: to divide into sharply opposing factions or groups.

3. Explain that groups or people who are considered “polar opposites” behave like the North and South Pole – they have no common ground.
4. Conduct a large group discussion on this topic, using the following questions as a guide.
  - Give an example from your life of two people, or two concepts, that are “polar opposites.”
  - How are you affected when you need to deal with people or concepts that are polarizing?
  - What happens when people or groups of people are polarized? What sorts of behaviors or emotions follow?
  - Why do people become polarized?
  - What good could come from a group of people who have become polarized by an issue or cause?
  - What bad could come from that?
5. On each of four walls of the classroom, post a large piece of chart paper. Each piece of chart paper should have one of the following written at the top:
  - List some historical causes or issues that were polarizing.
  - List some contemporary causes or issues that are polarizing.
  - List some causes or issues in your personal or home lives that are polarizing.
  - List some causes or issues in your community or school that are polarizing.
6. Provide each person with a marker and split everyone into four small groups. Each small group will be assigned one of the pieces of chart paper to begin. The small groups will have four minutes at each piece of chart paper to respond to the questions silently. At the end of the four minutes, the groups will circle clockwise to the next poster. They will silently read the previous group’s responses for 30 seconds. Then, the four-minute timer will begin again. People will have time to respond to the previous group’s responses. This pattern will continue until each group returns to the poster at which they began where they can read what the other groups wrote for 30 seconds.

7. Reconvene for a large group discussion. Use the following questions as a guide:
  - What makes these issues polarizing? Describe the two “sides” in each issue or cause.
  - Can you think of a polarizing issue that does not have two valid sides to the argument? Explain.
  - How do these issues or causes affect society?
  - What are the positive outcomes when there are polarizing issues in society?
  - What are the negative outcomes when there are polarizing issues in society?
  - What is “collateral damage?” What sort of “collateral damage” is caused in the name of polarizing issues?
  - What is government’s responsibility in dealing with polarizing issues? Explain.
  - What are individuals’ responsibilities in dealing with polarizing issues? Explain.
8. Tell the group that the film they are about to see is a documentary about a series of polarizing events in American history – the Civil War, emancipation, and the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.
9. Before the group views the film, provide the following brief introduction:

Mary Surratt was the only woman convicted in Lincoln's assassination, the first female to be executed by the U.S. government, and now the basis for Robert Redford's *The Conspirator*. This companion documentary takes a closer look at her role in the 16th president's death. *The Conspirator: The Plot to Kill Lincoln* weaves together excerpts from the movie with historical records and expert interviews to tell the dramatic story.

10. Distribute *Handout: Viewing Chart*. Explain that while individuals watch the film, they may choose to chart some of their observations on the handout, to share during the post-viewing activity.

## Post-Viewing Guidelines for The Conspirator: The Plot to Assassinate Lincoln

1. On a piece of chart paper, re-create the table from the handout:

Polarizing Concept or Belief	Reasons the Concept/Belief was Polarizing	Actions Taken in Service of this Concept/Belief	Sacrifices Made in Service of this Concept/Belief	Collateral Damage Caused in Service of this Concept/Belief

2. Lead a post-viewing discussion about the documentary. Participants can use the information they logged on their *Viewing Chart* as fodder for the discussion. Encourage participants to identify specific people who had a cause that they gave up everything for. Ask participants to describe the cause, actions, and sacrifices made in service to the cause, and the collateral damage that their actions caused, if any. Fill in the responses on the board.
3. Direct the group to divide back into their small groups and give participants a few minutes to discuss causes they listed while they watched the documentary. Small groups should also discuss how the people could have supported their causes differently to minimize collateral damage. Allow time as a whole group to share and discuss. If desired, continue to fill out the table with participant responses.
4. Once the chart is complete, evaluate the results as a group, with the goal of establishing the importance of perspective, diplomacy, and consequences. Feel free to bring in the contemporary examples that were listed on chart paper during the pre-viewing activity. Use the following question as a guiding inquiry for the concluding discussion:

*How can we as a society mediate polarizing beliefs to minimize the damage caused?*

## Questions for Further Discussion

Compare and contrast the depiction of Mary Surratt in the narrative film version of *The Conspirator* vs. the documentary. Discuss the evidence brought against her in both versions.

Historians cannot agree on the depth of Mary Surratt's involvement in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Was Surratt really guilty? Could she have prevented the assassination of Abraham Lincoln? How so? Should her sentence have been different from that of the other conspirators?

The 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution prevents cruel and unusual punishment. The way the Conspirators were contained, including the shackles they wore around their wrists, was torturous. Using what you know about today's justice system how do you know that the Constitution is a living document?

Is an owner/manager of a facility ultimately responsible for the goings on at that facility? Why or why not?

Mary Surratt was a devout Catholic. What role does religion play in her character throughout the trial? How do you think her religious beliefs affected the outcome of the trial? Discuss her religious behavior and the opinions of the military tribunal on Catholicism.

Describe how your understanding of the trial against Mary Surratt and the other conspirators changed by watching the documentary.

What impact do you think Mary Surratt's gender had on her trial? How might public perceptions of her have been different because she was a woman? How might the outcome of the trial have been different because she was a woman?

What contemporary parallels can you draw from this piece of history?

What did Frederick Aiken risk by defending Mary Surratt? Why was he willing to take these risks?

## Handout: Viewing Chart

<b>Polarizing Concept or Belief</b>	<b>Reasons the Concept/Belief was Polarizing</b>	<b>Actions Taken in Service of this Concept/Belief</b>	<b>Sacrifices Made in Service of this Concept/Belief</b>	<b>Collateral Damage Caused in Service of this Concept/Belief</b>