Battle for the War Department
Rewards for the Capture
of John Wilkes Booth

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Almost two weeks elapsed before the news of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination reached the northern Virginia tobacco farm of Richard Garrett. Although located just sixty miles south of Washington, it might well have been on the other side of the world. One Garrett family member would later recall that a lack of mail service, no telegraph wires to speak of, and few travelers making their way through conspired to keep news under wraps.¹

A day earlier a stranger was left at Garrett’s front door. Identified as an injured Confederate soldier headed home, the handsome man appeared rough and haggard. Most likely thinking of his own two sons recently returned from the war, Richard Garrett graciously offered his hospitality. As the Garrett family and the stranger sat down for lunch the next day, the family had no idea their guest already knew what had happened to the president. Amidst the clamor of a large family partaking of its noonday meal, the talk soon turned to the War Department’s $100,000 reward offered for the assassin’s capture.

“I wish he would come this way. I’d like to get that amount,” William H. Garrett recalled saying. Without betraying a hint of emotion, John Wilkes Booth, known to his host as James W. Boyd, asked William if he would really betray the assassin for that amount. “He’d better not tempt me, for I haven’t a dollar in the world,” William replied. Richard Garrett harrumphed that his son was “young and foolish. He does not mean what he says.”²

As Booth enjoyed what would be one of his final meals, Lafayette Baker was in Washington, D.C., paying the price for the poor reputation he had among his fellow soldiers. Called to the capital by Secre-


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tary of War Edwin M. Stanton to help find Lincoln’s assassin, Baker was met with stiff resistance from fellow investigators. His luck would change, however, when word came from southern Maryland that two men matching the description of Booth and David Herold were seen crossing the Potomac River on Sunday, April 16, headed into the area of Virginia known as the Northern Neck.

That this information proved wrong would become irrelevant. Until investigators learned that Booth had suffered a broken leg, they feared he could have been as far south as Mexico. Baker, prompted by the supposed crossing, called in a former Civil War officer who at one time had field command of the cavalry unit that Baker created in 1863 to help with the investigations he undertook on behalf of the War Department. Everton Judson Conger was a diminutive fireball who had been shot twice during the war and was finally declared unfit for service in 1864. He left the First District of Columbia Cavalry to become a detective in Baker’s National Detective Police.

Baker sent Conger to General Christopher Columbus Augur to request a detachment of soldiers to accompany Conger and Baker’s cousin, Luther Byron Baker, on the expedition. Byron Baker had served under Conger as quartermaster of the First District of Columbia Cavalry and was now also a detective with the National Detective Police. Soon, the pair was joined by Lieutenant Edward P. Doherty of the Sixteenth New York Cavalry, who had been dispatched to Baker’s office. Plans were discussed, and the posse, composed of twenty-five cavalrymen and the two government detectives, soon boarded the steamer John S. Ide, taking one day to get to the same spot it had taken Booth twelve days to reach.

Riding through northern Virginia, Conger and Byron Baker sometimes impersonated soldiers looking for a lame man with whom they had served during the war. Although that ruse didn’t work, the patrol hit a streak of luck when they found a fisherman, William Rollins, who the previous day had seen two men fitting the description of Booth and Herold. Rollins’s wife, Bettie, helpfully informed the men that they were taken across in the company of three Confederate soldiers, one of whom, Willie Jett, she knew to have a girlfriend farther up the road. William Rollins, fearful what neighbors might think, only agreed to help the patrol if he was placed under arrest. The party also interrogated a free black, James Thornton, who operated the ferry which had taken Booth, Herold, and their new-found Confederate compatriots across the Rappahannock.3

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The patrol stopped at a roadside house where ladies of the evening had entertained some soldiers earlier. The ladies were hesitant to talk lest it be bad for business. Conger broke their silence by telling the madam, a Mrs. Carter, that they were searching for some men who had horribly violated a woman. With that news, she suddenly became helpful, telling the soldiers that the men who visited her house were not lame, meaning that they must have deposited Booth somewhere in the area. They rode further south to Bowling Green, Virginia, where Jett received a rousing wake-up, staring down the barrel of Conger’s pistol. Jett decided he had better talk. Asking if he could speak to Conger alone, Jett told him that he had left Booth at Richard Garrett’s farm. Assuming that Conger had come up from Richmond, Jett said he had no way to know if Booth was still there.\textsuperscript{4}

Booth was still there, although the Garretts, suspicious of their guest after seeing his reaction to the federal troops who had passed by earlier, had locked him in a tobacco barn to keep him from stealing their horses. Surrounding the Garrett house shortly after midnight, Conger, Byron Baker, and Doherty scattered the twenty-four soldiers at various points around the farm. For the next few hours, Byron Baker talked with Booth, demanding that the fugitive give himself up. The ordeal finally proved too much for Herold, who surrendered. By this time, convinced that Booth was not coming out, and likely in intense pain due to his wounds, Conger set fire to the barn. Booth at first attempted to see if he could put the flames out, but failing that, he headed toward the door. Saying he was fearful that Booth planned to shoot his way out, Sergeant Boston Corbett immediately fired one shot that hit Booth in the neck, dropping him. Paralyzed and slowly, painfully choking to death, Booth attempted to talk with Conger. “Tell mother I die for my country,” he whispered. Looking at his hands, he muttered “Useless, useless.” Later that morning Booth died.\textsuperscript{5}

Not only did the Garrett family not get any of the reward money, the family’s brief encounter with Booth and Herold almost put Richard Garrett at the end of a rope. While Lafayette Baker would receive part of the money, he got far less than he believed he deserved, as did Byron Baker and Doherty. The promise of $100,000 from the War Department filled the Virginia and Maryland countrysides with thousands of of-

\textsuperscript{4} Testimony of Everton J. Conger in Benjamin Perley Poore, \textit{The Conspiracy Trial for the Murder of the President} (Boston: J. E. Tilton, 1865), 1:312.

ficial and non-official searchers. The reward, however, had no effect in capturing the two fugitives, and, it could be argued, allowed them to remain free for twelve days given the hesitancy of many to share information that they believed might have lessened their claim to the money. Paradoxically, because so many people hungered to line their pockets, their usually worthless tips tied up investigators who might have better spent their time on more promising leads.

In 1866 Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt found that “no party is strictly entitled to any reward for information which conduced to the capture of Booth and Herold, inasmuch as no claimant is found to have furnished on or after April 20 . . . any such intelligence as can be deemed to have led to the arrest as actually made.” For most historians who have written on the subject, questions surrounding the War Department rewards ended on July 28, 1866, when the United States Senate passed a bill allotting the shares to the twenty-seven men who made up the Garrett Farm Patrol. Over the next several years, however, those who participated argued, fought, and slandered one another to the point where the details of how Booth and Herold were captured became fuzzied.

Very few academic historians have studied Lincoln’s assassination in any depth. While not the only professor holding this view, one only has to remember James G. Randall’s stern intonation that he focused on “the living Lincoln” to see how the field was opened to all kinds of cranks, pseudo-historians, and other charlatans. Many of those latched onto the story of the battle for the War Department rewards as a cudgel used to slam the character and motives of those who sought to capture Booth, mistaking their actions after the capture for their motives before.

In the meager number of volumes dealing responsibly with Lincoln’s death, the main question that has interested historians is the fight between Conger and Byron Baker against Doherty over who held primacy in the expedition and therefore was entitled to the largest share of the money. A secondary study is the contempt of many for Lafayette Baker and how that led to his share of the reward being gutted. From there, interest has waned. The most logical reason for this, says Mark Neely Jr., is that the parties involved were at the outset obscure figures who went on to lead obscure lives in a time when great social movements, and the people behind them, became the focus of historians. Even those who have contributed to the historiography in a responsible manner don’t dwell very long on the question of the rewards.6

As the field of study into Lincoln’s murder continues to expand into a more scholarly arena, it should come as no surprise that the questions do not end where originally believed. Just how was the reward money distributed? What later happened to it, and how would that lead to the disputed facts as to what happened when Booth was killed and Herold captured? What effect, if any, did the offer of the reward have on the Garrett Farm Patrol before Booth was captured?

While the offer of $100,007 brought thousands of people into the search, too much has been made of the effect the offer of the rewards had on the Garrett Farm Patrol before the capture. At the time, it would have been hard to foresee just how the reward would be distributed, or even if any money would be forthcoming. Indeed, after Booth was killed, a number of governmental agencies that offered rewards went back on their promises, prompting at least one unsuccessful lawsuit.8 Given the excitement of the chase and the utter exhaustion it brought (no one, except possibly Conger, rested over a sixty-hour period), it is doubtful that the reward money was uppermost in anyone’s mind at the time the events played out.

One explanation for the belief that the reward was a factor to the searchers before Booth was killed is yet another remnant from Otto Eisenschiml’s grand conspiracy theory proffered in his 1937 “Why Was Lincoln Murdered?” Eisenschiml, trying to prove that Conger shot Booth on orders from Secretary of War Stanton, attempted to make something of Conger getting the largest portion of the reward (conveniently forgetting that Lafayette Baker got much less than his subordinate). Later, in questioning why Booth had not been taken alive, Eisenschiml asked, “Was it fear that the rewards would have to be shared with reinforcements, which might arrive, that made the two detectives take such precipitate action?”9

Edward J. Steers Jr. notes the rewards in conjunction with the commission set up to receive claims. Blood on the Moon, xii; Michael Kauffman devotes just two pages to the reward fight. American Brutus (New York: Random House, 2004), 281–2; George S. Bryan discusses the myth that the rewards were never paid in The Great American Myth (New York: Carrick & Evans, 1940), 284.

7. While the War Department offered $100,000, it was broken down by fugitive, so there was an offer of $50,000 for the capture of Booth, $25,000 for the capture of Herold, and $25,000 for the capture of John Surratt. Thus the actual amount under consideration was $75,000.


9. Otto Eisenschiml, Why Was Lincoln Murdered? (Boston: Little Brown, 1937), 157–60. For refinements of Eisenschiml’s view that Conger shot Booth, see also Eisenschiml, Historian Without an Armchair (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 159–68, and Eisen-
While Eisenschiml was the first to raise the issue for dubious if not downright false accusations, he certainly wasn’t the first to stress the influence the rewards had on the Garrett Farm Patrol. In 1909 Clara Laughlin wrote (in a reference also found in Eisenschiml’s research material) that Conger “was in mad haste to get to Secretary Stanton and tell him the reward of $75,000 had been earned.” David DeWitt, whose history was also published in 1909, was one of the first to document the bitter battle between Conger and Doherty, as well as the utter contempt of many congressmen for Lafayette Baker. DeWitt, in a note in his appendix concerning the rewards, writes, “a perusal of the testimony that has come down to us gives a sickening sense of the unreliability of witnesses when striving with each other for the biggest share of a large reward. Every one appears unable to resist the temptation to magnify his own exploits at the expense of those of his competitors. In the clouds of dust raised by the ignoble contention, the truth is either obscured beyond recognition or disappears altogether.”

Most recently, in Manhunt, James Swanson repeats the old canard against the Garrett Farm Patrol. After Booth was killed, Swanson writes, “Thousands and thousands of dollars were exactly what Conger, Baker, Doherty, and the men of the Sixteenth New York had in mind.” Yet, like all others before him, Swanson provides no evidence other than his opinion. While there can be no doubt many people were seduced by the lure of a large cash prize, to insinuate that soldiers who only weeks before were willing to die for Lincoln were now trying to find his killer just to line their own pockets demands further evidence before such views can be sustained. We are asked to believe it simply because it fits in with the prejudices and personal beliefs of the authors, who provide no documented proof of their assertions. It is relegated to that darkest of Lincoln corners—the thing that everyone knows.

Historically, the idea of a reward as a tool of law enforcement has produced a general ambivalence from some portions of the populace. Ideas of “blood money” and the lack of honor amongst thieves often


made people look down on those who would use the promise of a cash award to induce them to turn someone in. Legally, a reward at the time Booth was captured was viewed as a contract. As is the case with all contracts, offer and acceptance were required before it was considered valid. In the case of government-sponsored rewards, offer was simply the proclamation that a reward was available for a particular act. Acceptance was the fulfillment of the requirements set out in the announcement.12

On November 24, 1865, the War Department issued an order announcing that anyone who felt entitled to a share of the rewards had to file a claim by the end of the year. Because of the numerous claims submitted, the decision on how to distribute the rewards was left to the commission headed by Holt and his assistant, E. D. Townsend. Scores of people claimed they had in some way earned a portion of the money. Many members of the Sixteenth New York Cavalry, several of whom had been nowhere near Washington, applied in the mistaken belief that every member of the regiment would be eligible. Most hired agents to help facilitate their claims, and it seems likely that many of the agents were simply after a share of any money forthcoming. The widow of the veterinary surgeon of the Sixteenth New York, who had died in November 1865, even claimed that she should receive her husband’s share, if any was to be distributed.13

While most of the applicants were people who in good faith thought they should be compensated, one stands out as a blatant attempt at theft. Captain James B. Smith of the Sixth West Virginia Cavalry, whose unit arrived in Surratsville, Maryland, the day after Booth had been killed and Herold captured, wrote to West Virginia Congressman George R. Latham, promising Latham a “handsome reward” if he used his influence to get some of the money for Smith’s company. “My Company, as you are aware, received comparatively small bounties and I would like to add something from this ‘sick bay’ as a reward for their arduous services elsewhere,” Smith wrote. Obviously, his request was ignored.14

After the application deadline passed, Holt and Townsend went to

14. Letter from James B. Smith to George R. Latham, January 1, 1866, microcopy 619, roll 455, frame 557, RG 94, National Archives.
work. Reflecting the commissioner’s military background, the tradition of distributing prize money by rank was favored as the fairest arrangement. Using that logic, the reward scheme favored Doherty, who was awarded $7,500 compared to Lafayette Baker’s $3,750 and the $4,000 each given to Conger and Byron Baker.15

Doherty worked hard to get that share. He first submitted his official report to his commanding officer on April 26, 1865. On May 9, 1865, he submitted his claim for the reward to J. H. Taylor, assistant adjutant general and chief of staff in Washington. “My command and myself claim the honor of having effected the capture of the assassins and we respectfully ask that the reward offered be properly distributed where it belongs,” Doherty wrote. A number of Doherty’s men supported the general claim that he was the first to get information about Booth and Herold’s whereabouts.16

Clearly concerned that all of the credit (not to mention a good chunk of the money) would be going to Doherty, Lafayette Baker had Conger and Byron Baker issue a report that he submitted to Stanton on December 27, 1865. The detailed report, which appears in Lafayette Baker’s autobiography, had attached to it his own “observations.” In it, he said regardless of whether those involved were “citizen, soldier, or alien,” whoever participated in the capture deserved a share commensurate with that person’s role. Since it was his plan, and since he sent the men into the field, Lafayette Baker said he was entitled to the largest portion of the reward, followed by Conger and Byron. Doherty and his men were mere subordinates, “though necessary, instruments” to his own detectives.17

When he learned of this attempt to downplay his role, Doherty wrote to Stanton on March 24, 1866. “As the award is still kept open in order to do justice to all claimants, and as I understand that arguments have been filed by other parties in support of their claims I hope that you will give the following from me your consideration.

An effort is made to show that I was only an escort to two detectives and that they commanded.”

Doherty made his case that this was a “fallacy” based on several points. First, as the writ of habeas corpus had been suspended by President Lincoln, Doherty argued it would have been “beyond precedent” for a citizen to be in command of military forces. He had been ordered to report to Lafayette Baker, and only Baker had given him orders and pictures. Doherty pointed out that the captain of the _John S. Ide_ was given written instructions to report to Doherty, and Doherty had given the captain orders directing his movement after arriving at the Belle Plain landing. Finally, it was Doherty’s belief that had he only been an escort, “there would have been no necessity of my receiving instructions from Captain [sic] Baker as to the route” the party was to take.

Doherty’s objections were not just the rants of a greedy soldier. He was trained as a lawyer. Of all his objections, the only one that might have merit is the first—the argument that martial law would put the military in charge of all legal procedures in the District of Columbia and elsewhere. For all his legal training, Doherty, who was a Canadian, seriously misread the intent and letter of martial law and did not appear to be familiar with an opinion written in 1854 by then-Attorney General Caleb Cushing, who argued that members of the army could be used as a posse comitatus under the command of civilian officials. “The posse comitatus comprises every person in the district or county above the age of fifteen years, whatever may be their occupation, whether civilians or not and including the military of all denominations, militia, soldiers, marines, all of whom are alive bound to obey the commands of a sheriff or marshal. The fact that they are organized as military bodies, under the immediate command of their own officers, does not in any wise affect their legal character,” Cushing wrote.

Herein lies one point of rebuttal to Doherty’s argument: even though the men of the Sixteenth New York Cavalry were under the immediate command of Doherty, it would have been legal for the entire unit, organized as a posse comitatus, to be under the field command of the civilian Conger, who was under Lafayette Baker, head of the civilian National Detective Police (although he held the rank of colonel) and in overall command under the direction of the secretary of war, himself.

18. Doherty to Edwin M. Stanton, March 24, 1866, Doherty Papers.
a civilian. Even in times of martial law, which Washington, D.C., had been under since 1863\textsuperscript{20}, there is no change in the fact that the military remains under civilian control.

In his memoirs, Baker claimed he had informed Doherty that his men would be operating under the orders of Conger and Byron Baker, although it seems likely that Lafayette Baker included his cousin only as added insurance to his own reward claims. In this expedition Conger had complete command. As an officer, Conger had field command of the First District of Columbia Cavalry, in the place of Lafayette Baker. For all his faults, Baker realized that the success of the regiment came because of Conger’s leadership, and he wanted that leadership available to those men on their pursuit of Booth. That can be the only logical explanation why Lafayette Baker would allow a man like Conger, who had been wounded twice and was in no shape to ride, on the hunt.\textsuperscript{21}

When the Holt-Townsend report was finally issued in April 1866, Doherty surely breathed easier, finding his claim had been upheld. However, his joy must have been short-lived. On May 7, 1866, less than a month after the Holt-Townsend report was issued, Pennsylvania Congressman William D. Kelley introduced a resolution asking the Committee of Claims to “inquire into the fairness and propriety of the distribution of the rewards offered for the arrest of Jefferson Davis and the conspirators to murder President Lincoln.”\textsuperscript{22}

The Committee of Claims investigated and on July 24, 1866, issued its report. Baker’s argument that he, and not Doherty, was entitled to the bulk of the money fell on more favorable ears because the committee wrote that it did not “regard the capture of Booth and Herold as purely military service, and do not feel bound to award compensation to mere rank, without regard to the extent and merit of the service performed.” Politics would soon trump all else.\textsuperscript{23}

The committee suggested that Lafayette Baker receive $17,500 and Conger, since he was by all official accounts except Doherty’s, in charge of the field unit, should also get $17,500. Byron Baker would get $5,000 and Doherty would get $2,500. It also recommended that Major James O’Beirne, whose erroneous report of two men crossing the Potomac put Baker on the right track, receive $2,000.\textsuperscript{24}

23. Ibid., 3.
24. Ibid.
When the bill came before the full House two days later, Representative Columbus Delano of Ohio amended the proposal to cut Conger’s share to $15,000 while substantially decimating Lafayette Baker’s share to $3,750 and raising Doherty’s to $5,250. Michigan Congressman John F. Driggs offered an amendment to return Doherty’s share to $7,000 and cut Conger’s to $4,000. Driggs explained his action saying, “I do not want to see two or three men have $40,000 of the reward.” He added that Lafayette Baker was in the process of building a hotel outside of Lansing, Michigan, “with the money he has made off the Government, and yet it is proposed to pay him $17,500!”

Even though Hotchkiss questioned the fairness of what Driggs and others who despised Lafayette Baker were trying to do, he presented only a token support of his own reward scheme. Hotchkiss said that if the House chose to deprive Baker of the money based on Driggs’s argument, they would have to answer for it without him. Conger, however, was another matter. “If personal sympathy was to be allowed to have anything to do with this matter, I should say that Lieutenant Colonel Conger was the most meritorious man who had aught to do with this whole affair,” Hotchkiss said. “And with my consent he shall never be ignored in this matter with the paltry sum given to him under the rule prevailing in prize cases.”

Driggs’s amendment was voted down while Delano’s was approved with eighty-seven affirmative votes. What was unknown to many people is that at what one observer termed as “the eleventh hour” a compromise was worked out which would allow the bill to be passed. It was spearheaded by future president Rutherford B. Hayes, who was from Conger’s hometown of Fremont. Hayes, who knew Conger through Hayes’s uncle, Sardis Birchard, told Conger if he could be patient, he could get him a large portion if he would be willing to take just a bit less. Conger, tired of the battle, agreed. Hayes hammered out a deal that got Conger the $15,000. Debate moved to the Senate, which took up the question on July 28. With much less fanfare and vitriol than had marked its passage in the House, the Senate voted unanimously to pass the bill. The battle, it appeared, was over.

What has been left largely unexplored is what developed between the Bakers and Conger after the reward was distributed and how that

27. Ibid, 4188; Delano must have worked with Hayes on the compromise, as his amendment provided Conger with the $15,000. Hayes’s role in this is spelled out in an unpublished typescript provided to the author by Conger’s grandson, Everton Ellsworth Conger.
affected the story of the capture. From the available evidence it appears that a rift began to grow between the three men, although it wouldn’t reach its full fruition until sometime around 1868, after Lafayette Baker’s death. It also appears that Lafayette Baker was able to recoup some of the money he lost on the floor of the House.

After Conger received his money, he put some of it into Baker’s hotel. Just how much he loaned Baker is unknown, but the best estimate would be nearly $12,000. This figure comes from a newspaper article published in 1874 after Conger was admitted to practice law by the Illinois Supreme Court. The *Carmi Weekly Times*, quoting the *St. Louis Democrat*, reported that “Among the foregoing names will be found that of E.J. Conger; a name with a story appended, he being the identical Conger that effected the capture of John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln.” Although the paper erred when it reported Conger received $12,000 instead of $15,000, the remainder of its account was remarkably detailed, leading one to believe that the source of the unsigned article could have been Conger.28

Conger loaned the money “to a friend, Col. Baker, who secured the loan by a mortgage on a piece of land in Michigan. Shortly after the execution of the mortgage, Baker died, and Conger, after the maturity of the debt, proceeded to.foreclose. Unfortunately the land was not correctly located in the mortgage, and the Baker heirs contested the foreclosure. After a protracted series of efforts to recover, Conger was finally beaten and left penniless.”29

Unfortunately the hotel venture in Lansing proved a bitter failure. In addition to Conger’s loss of life savings, many of the investors also lost money, thus contributing to the already poor reputation of Baker. What effect did that have on the relationship between Conger and the Bakers? No record exists of a suit filed in Lansing during 1868 or 1869 by Conger. The only evidence of a breach comes in how the stories told by Conger and Byron Baker differed as the years passed.

To illustrate the rift, one need only look at the accounts written by the two men long after the rewards were distributed. The first official account was given aboard the monitor *Montauk* on April 27, 1865, just after the events transpired. While Baker later complained that his version had been mysteriously destroyed (to deprive him, he said, of a proper share of the reward), it was actually located in the Judge Advocate General’s files on the assassination, next to Conger’s report. In his report, Conger told Judge Advocate General Holt and John A.

29. Ibid.
Bingham that he had heard Baker’s statement and called it “in the main, accurate. . . .” There was, however, the first hint of a discrepancy.30

Recall that Conger and Byron Baker initially submitted a joint report to bolster their own roles in the battle for the reward money. There is no mention in that report as to how Conger came to be in the detail, although in his autobiography, Lafayette Baker said he sent for both men independently of each other after he had spoken to “an old negro” who he claimed gave him the lead he was looking for. In the Montauk statement Conger said he had been summoned by Lafayette Baker on April 24, 1865, and that Byron Baker never entered the room until after Conger had spoken with General Augur to secure soldiers to make up the patrol. In their report, the two men were working independently preparing for the mission.31

After the reward question had been settled, however, Byron Baker changed his story. Not called to testify at the trial of the conspirators, his only other official account was given (other than his own statement aboard the Montauk) during the impeachment investigation against President Andrew Johnson. At the end of his testimony Byron Baker said he had started out in command of the party but felt that Conger’s feelings had been hurt. “Colonel Conger is a good officer and a peculiar man,” Baker said. “I knew he was experienced, and was familiar with the country about Belle Plain, and as we came up on the bluff, it being then very dark, I said, ‘Colonel Conger, you take charge of the cavalry; you have been over the ground.’” In later years, the story changed even more, with Conger begging Byron Baker to make him a part of the detail. Byron Baker hesitated, he said, because of Conger’s two battle wounds.32

Whose account is accurate? The weight of the credible evidence must be given to Conger and Lafayette Baker. Even if one dismissed Lafayette Baker as the ultimate and consummate liar (as many did), Conger corroborated Lafayette’s account with his statement aboard the Montauk. Given that no one knew how the rewards would be

distributed, what possible reason would Conger have for lying? Even Byron Baker’s statement to the impeachment committee—forty-two years before publication of the article claiming Conger begged to be on the expedition—spoke only of the two’s role in the field and not before the expedition took place.

Also, the Baker family papers included an “Eyewitness Account” that served as the basis for an article written by Ray Stannard Baker in *McClure’s Magazine* in May 1897. Using the Jett account as an example, Byron Baker puts himself in the room while Jett agrees to tell what he knows, even though Conger and Doherty corroborate that Conger was the only one in the room. In 1960, Jacob Moglever wrote one of the few biographies of Lafayette Baker, using as his main source “manuscripts and unpublished letters held in the Baker family for nearly a century and unread by anyone except descendents of the brothers, sisters, and cousins of the detective chief.” In his acknowledgements Moglever presents his biases early when he calls Byron Baker “the true hero of the events at Garrett’s farm.” Careful not to overstate the case in his narrative, however, Moglever presents the two as working together, although only through the kindness of Byron Baker who took pity on his old friend. Only after Corbett shot Booth was it “time for [Conger] to assume command.”

Conger’s memory could, at times, be selective. In none of his accounts does it mention his having to stop and rest for a time or the constant pain he was in because of his hip wounds. Both Doherty and Byron Baker mention this in their accounts, using it to imply that Conger was too hobbled to be an effective leader. There is ample evidence to show that Conger did indeed need a break from the action, although despite the severity of his wounds, his stamina was keen.

What one gathers from the actions of the three men during the remainder of their lives is what one often sees between military men after the war—a continual effort to refight the battle, making claims for one’s own efforts and downgrading others. Both Doherty and Byron Baker mounted speaking tours, although Baker’s was by far the better known. Conger, whether suffering from his war wounds


34. In his testimony in the trial of John H. Surratt, Conger admitted to being “a little lame” which, according to his medical records, completely understated the severity of his wounds. Throughout his life, Conger would suffer from their effects, turning at times to morphine and alcohol as palliatives. See *The Reporter: A Periodical Devoted to Religion, Law, Legislation, and Public Events* (Washington, D.C.: R. Sutton, 1867) 3:262. Conger’s medical files are located in his pension application file, RG 92, National Archives.
or content in his knowledge of his role, never mounted a national
tour. Byron Baker died in 1896 followed by Doherty in 1897. Conger
outlived his two rivals by nearly twenty years, dying in 1918.

As to the effect that the rewards had on the men before the capture,
the claim that their minds were focused on the money as they entered
the field cannot be sustained. It would be beyond human nature to
suggest that in those two days no one thought in the back of his mind
how much money he might see should the patrol be successful. But
that is a far cry from the claims of many writers that there was some-
how a “mad scramble” to kill or capture Booth before anyone else
could arrive and have a legitimate claim to the money.

There is little doubt that Conger received the largest portion of the
reward through the influence of political allies. In the final analysis,
there can also be little doubt that each man contributed to the suc-
cess of the capture of Booth, but in any expedition of this scope there
has to be one person in charge. Lafayette Baker wanted that person
to be Conger. To bypass healthier men and place on the expedition
someone whose wounds made the simple act of walking difficult
shows either a determined faith in Conger’s ability or an utter lack
of intelligence. Whatever one feels about Lafayette Baker, very few
people questioned his intelligence. Conger’s role doesn’t take away
from the contributions of those others, but neither should Conger’s
political connections take away from his unqualified leadership. All
can coexist peacefully.