

INSIDE THE EARLY DAYS OF THE CRIME OF THE CENTURY

In March 1932, the Lindbergh baby was kidnapped. The investigation got off to a chaotic start.

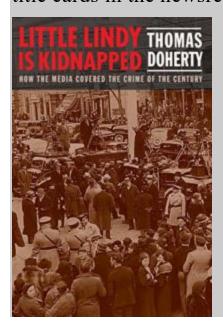
NOVEMBER 4, 2020 BY <u>THOMAS DOHERTY</u>

VIA COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

On March 1, 1932, at 10:46 p.m., a blunt teletype from the New Jersey State Police transmitted the word:

Colonel Lindbergh's baby kidnapped from Lindbergh home in Hopewell, New Jersey, some time between 7:30 p.m and 10:00 p.m. this date. Baby is nineteen months old, and a boy. Is drest in a sleeping suit. Request that all cars be investigated by police patrols. Authority State Police, Trenton, New Jersey, 10:46 p.m.

Within minutes, in newsrooms across America, the urgent bells on wire service machines were clanging madly, the signal that five-alarm news was breaking. Within the hour, the information was being flashed on radio. Before midnight, newsboys were hawking extras emblazoned with seventy-two-point Bodini bold headlines. "Lindbergh Baby Kidnapped!" they yelled, stopping pedestrians in their tracks. "Little Lindy Kidnapped!" A day later, the final pillar of the media triumvirate weighed in with an all-points bulletin. "Nation Aroused at Revolting Kidnapping of Lindbergh Baby!" exclaimed the title cards in the newsreels.



The news that the son of the most beloved couple in America had been stolen from his crib sent the police of New Jersey and New York, state and local, into frenetic action. Shocked, outraged, and determined, the authorities in both states mobilized virtually every uniformed cop and plainclothes detective on the payroll. "You must work on your time off and sacrifice your sleep," New York police commissioner Edward P. Mulrooney told his 17,183-man force. "Devote all of your attention to this case." The New York auxiliaries would be needed: the enormity of the case overwhelmed the resources and outpaced the skills of New Jersey's finest.

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Also hoping to ride into the breech, and grab the media spotlight, was a contingent from J. Edgar Hoover's Bureau of Information, not yet elevated to acronym fame as the FBI. In 1932, Hoover was already beginning to make the investigation of crime a matter of scientific method, data collection, and bureaucratic procedure, but the instinctive reliance on Washington, D.C., when confronted by crisis was not yet a national reflex. Crime fell under the jurisdiction of local law enforcement—the county sheriff, the state troopers, the cop on the beat. Hoover arrived in Hopewell to share his expertise, but the New Jersey police told him to take a hike. Jealous of their turf, the local cops neither sought help nor shared information. The Lindbergh case would change all that forever.



On the day after the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby, the police attempt a reconstruction of the crime, March 2, 1932.

Equally energized by the crime—maybe even more energized—were the legions of journalists working in print, over the air, and behind the newsreel cameras. For the three branches of the American media, the Lindbergh kidnapping presented unique challenges and new opportunities. Each played to its strengths: the print press for comprehensiveness of coverage, offering column inch after column inch of detailed reporting and lavishing full-page spreads on maps, diagrams, and photographs for a readership whose appetite for Lindbergh news was insatiable; the radio for immediacy and speed; and the newsreels for the visual allure of motion pictures on a big screen. The Lindbergh story was a transformative moment for each lane on the information highway. The responses set the patterns for

the media coverage of every shock wave that would rock American culture for the rest of the century, and beyond.

What happened in the second-floor nursery of the Lindbergh home in Hopewell during the mid-evening hours of Tuesday, March 1, 1932, would be forever disputed—every piece of evidence, every notation on the timeline, and every eyewitness account dissected, turned over, second-guessed, and gainsaid. As in any criminal case, agreed-upon facts vie with contested evidence, plausible speculation with bizarre theories. The Lindbergh baby kidnapping generated more than its share of stranger-than-fiction plot twists that might be coincidental the loose ends that will never be tied up because that is the way life is—or that, when added up and weighed together, are too suspiciously odd to be mere happenstance, hinting at darker possibilities and conspiratorial hands. Surely, most thought at the time and many have thought since, what transpired was so uncanny and awful that the tentacles of sinister forces must have been at work, that so foul a deed could not have been the act of a lone perpetrator. Some of the mysterious blanks would never be filled in, but the questions all circled back to the same heart-stopping absence: the baby was gone.

SOME OF THE MYSTERIOUS BLANKS WOULD NEVER BE FILLED IN, BUT THE QUESTIONS ALL CIRCLED BACK TO THE SAME HEART-STOPPING ABSENCE: THE BABY WAS GONE.

As if to heighten the murky tonalities, the scene of the crime came shrouded in the trappings of a Gothic novel: a vista gray, gloomy, dank, and foggy. Situated in the dreary Sourland Mountain region of New Jersey, eight miles from Princeton, fourteen miles from the state capital in Trenton, and three miles from the hamlet of Hopewell, the nearest town, the Lindbergh residence, grandly christened Highfield, was isolated by design, chosen for the seclusion not the scenery. The remote location would ensure a measure of privacy for a man who had enjoyed precious little since May 20, 1927.

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Highfield was staffed by a husband-and-wife pair of servantcaretakers: the English butler, Oliver Whately, and his spunky wife Elsie, housekeeper and cook. Twenty-five-year-old Betty Gow, a pretty nurse-nanny from Scotland, helped Anne care for the baby. All the servants, and many more peripheral players, would become household names far beyond New Jersey. The Hopewell residence was still under construction, so during the weekdays the Lindberghs typically stayed with Anne's mother at the regal Morrow estate on the outskirts of Englewood, "an enormous Georgian mansion set in wooded slopes," as Anne remembered it, known as Next Day Hill. Presided over by Mrs. Dwight Morrow—her husband had died the previous October, less than a year after being elected to the U.S. Senate—the Englewood manor was a monument to extravagance that most Americans glimpsed only in MGM movies. Twenty servants were employed to keep the grande dame and her family in the style to which they were accustomed.

The Lindberghs reserved the Hopewell site for settling-in stays on the weekends, allowing the family to get a feel for the house while supervising the final stages of construction. That weekend, however, Charles Jr. had contracted a cold and, not wanting to expose him to the chilly winds, the couple decided to extend their stay in Hopewell and not return to Englewood as per custom. On Monday, Anne summoned Betty Gow from the Morrow estate to come to Hopewell to help with the baby.

Another departure from the usual pattern was that Lindbergh, though scheduled to attend a banquet in his honor that night at New York University, had forgotten about the commitment—something that had never happened before to the man who always charted his movements with precision. On the fateful night, the baby and his father were both in a place neither would normally have been.

Charles Jr.'s nursery was on the southeast corner of the second floor of the house; his father's study was directly below. At 7:00 p.m. Betty and Anne put the child to sleep. He was dressed in a woolen sleeping suit and tucked under a blanket, fastened to the mattress with safety pins. A thumb guard, to prevent the child from sucking his thumb, was put on each thumb.

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At 7:30 p.m., Betty peeked in to the nursery to check on the child. He was sleeping peacefully. Sometime later, reading in the study below, Lindbergh heard a sharp crack, as if a tree branch had broken, but, on such a windy night, he thought nothing of it.

At 10:00 p.m., before retiring, Betty returned to the nursery for a final check on the baby. He was not in his crib. She assumed Anne or the colonel must have picked him up for comfort or play.

Betty checked first with Anne and then with the colonel. Neither had seen the child.

Dreading the worst, panic escalating, the three rousted the household and swept the rooms. Lindbergh grabbed a rifle and checked the grounds. A frantic search turned up nothing.

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At 10:25 p.m., Lindbergh called the New Jersey State Police. "This is Charles Lindbergh," he told a disbelieving Lt. Daniel J. Dunn. "My son has been kidnapped." Suspecting a crank, Dunn called back to confirm the identity of the caller. When he heard the same voice, he assured Lindbergh, "Men are on their way."

Only then, going back to the nursery, did Lindbergh spot, overlooked in the first panic, a note lying on the radiator case by the window.

By midnight, dozens of uniformed police and plainclothes detectives were swarming around the house and trampling about the grounds. They were joined by squadrons of reporters working the story and curiosity seekers drawn by the lights.

Col. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of the New Jersey State Police, a man who looked as formidable as his name, arrived and took command. Colonel Schwarzkopf would be the face of law enforcement during the Lindbergh case, the man who issued statements on the Lindberghs' behalf and answered questions from

the press. Yet he was not truly in charge of the investigation. No ordinary crime victim, the father of the kidnapped child called the shots. Afraid of making a decision that might jeopardize the safety of the baby, and overawed by America's national hero, Colonel Schwarzkopf and the law enforcement authorities in both New Jersey and New York deferred to Lindbergh throughout the ordeal.



Newspaper- and cameramen inspect photographs of the Lindbergh baby, displayed against a shutter of the Lindbergh home, March 2, 1932.

For generations raised on the *CSI* and *Law and Order* franchises, when every junior G-man knows the crucial importance of securing a crime scene and observing the protocols of gathering and preserving

evidence, the staggering level of investigative incompetence by the local constabulary will seem like professional malpractice or intentional sabotage. No crack forensics team wearing latex gloves scoured the grounds, carefully putting evidence into ziplock bags with tweezers; no yellow police tape cordoned off the area. Even by the sleuthing standards of 1932, it was amateur hour. The New Jersey police did not even have a crime lab. J. Edgar Hoover suspected that Colonel Schwarzkopf had spent the funds allocated by the state legislature on fancy new police uniforms.

Three pieces of evidence on the lawn beneath the nursey window were too conspicuous to be missed by the state troopers: a jerry-built wooden ladder, in three pieces, rigged to come apart, presumably to fit into an automobile; a chisel, presumably to jimmy open the shutters and window of the nursery; and a footprint, with the imprint of a sock around it, presumably to soften the footfall of the wearer, visible in the mud.

The person or persons who left behind the implements and made the impression had vanished into the blustery New Jersey night.

For all the shock of the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, the crime was but the highest-profile instance of a criminal enterprise that had become all too common by the early 1930s, a shameful consequence of Prohibition, the ignoble experiment that spawned a nation of scofflaws and seeded the ground for organized crime. "The kidnapping is only the climax of a wave of such cases," lamented the *New York Daily News*. "Chicago civic leaders estimate that 2,000

persons have paid ransom to kidnappers in this country in the last two years." The plague of kidnappings was reminiscent of "feudal days when barons kidnapped one another for ransom" and a sign that "we are headed back toward the Dark Ages."

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To crime reporter Edward Dean Sullivan, the Dark Ages had already returned. "For the last five years in America, kidnapping has been an accepted and important factor in the 'big money rackets' of this crime-ridden country," warned Sullivan in 1932. "Although in itself the Lindbergh kidnapping was the most spectacular smirk yet registered by the underworld at law and police power, it was a crime of the old school in its details." Sullivan estimated that since 1929 some 2,500 kidnapping cases had been reported, almost all committed by "regularly organized and gang-supported" hoods seeking to expand their empire from bootlegging to another profit center. The name on the street—and in the tabloids—for the system of exchange was "the snatch racket."

In context, then, the familiarity of the crime in Hopewell was almost reassuring. The course of events would follow a series of predictable act breaks: the victim is snatched, the ransom is demanded, a clandestine meeting is arranged, the money and the victim are exchanged, and the kidnapper is caught and brought to justice. That is, if all went well.

Yet little about the Lindbergh case played out according to script. Cruel hoaxes, oddball characters, bungling investigators, red herrings and blind alleys, suspects and leeches, crime bosses and low-level thugs, and innocents caught in the backwash would sidetrack the linear trajectory before the final stop shattered all hopes for a happy ending.

In the weeks that followed the bolt from Hopewell, as the press screamed and speculated, the real news was going on behind the scenes, only bits and pieces of which leaked out through the media. When the full tale was told, it beggared belief.

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The first bizarre turn came with the entry into the case of Dr. John F. Condon, a Mr. Micawber–like character who would bask in the glow of Lindbergh-fueled celebrity for the rest of his life. A vigorous seventy-one years old, six feet tall and powerfully built, he was a retired Bronx high school principal and professor of education at Fordham University. An immaculate dresser and a bit of a dandy, known on sight throughout his home turf of the Bronx, Condon had a Teddy Roosevelt–like faith in the spiritual benefits of physical fitness and enough peculiar quirks and rough edges to lend color and whimsy to a case deficient in both. He was a raging blowhard and an insufferable egotist, but he was also, almost certainly, just what he appeared to be: a man incensed that the baby of the American hero had been snatched from his crib in the dead of night. He stood ready to do all he could to get back the child—to spend his fortune, to risk his life.

Dr. Condon had an opinion on everything and the firm belief that everyone wanted to hear it. For years, he had written letters, articles, and poetry for his local paper, the *Bronx Home News*, to share his

wisdom and vent his gripes. On March 8, 1932, the paper published a letter from Condon in which he made a proposal with slim chance of ever being accepted. He personally offered a \$1,000 reward for the safe return of the Lindbergh baby—and volunteered himself as the intermediary for the ransom exchange.

Unbelievably (and many would never believe it), Condon got a quick response. The next day, a letter arrived at his address. Written in second- language English and strewn with misspellings (was the sender an ill- educated foreigner? a sly native speaker trying to misdirect the police?), the letter designated Condon as the go-between in the ransom negotiations for the Lindbergh baby.

The *Bronx Home News* was a hometown paper with a circulation of around 150,000. Condon's correspondent had to be part of a limited readership.

Condon contacted Highfield and got through to Col. Henry Breckinridge, the high-powered lawyer and family friend who was acting as all-purpose handler and first-line buffer between crank callers and the Lindberghs. The parents had a sure way to tell if a caller really had possession of their child: Charles Jr. had two overlapping toes on his right foot, a piece of information never revealed to the public.

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Dr. John F. Condon, the eponymous Jafsie, with his friend, former boxer Al Reich (right), leaving the Bronx Courthouse on May 14, 1932.

The kidnapper's note did not mention the toes, but it contained solid proof that the writer was no crank: an envelope within the letter to Condon contained a letter addressed to Lindbergh and the letter printed an exact reproduction of a telltale symbol the kidnapper had left at the bottom of the original ransom note to verify his identity—a peculiar design made up of three overlapping circles with holes in the center of each. Neither the existence of the three-circled sign nor its description had been made public. Only the kidnapper or an accomplice could have duplicated the image. The letter to Lindbergh also upped the ransom from the \$50,000 demanded in the original note to \$70,000. It included instructions, with a drawing and dimensions, for the construction of a wooden box to hold the ransom money.

Condon was driven out to Highfield that very night. He persuaded Lindbergh that he was on the level and, despite the evident danger, not out for personal gain. That night, he slept on the floor in the baby's nursery, the only vacant room in the house. Upon waking, Condon poked about the crime scene, heedless of the still-extant evidence—footprints on the floor, a palm print on the windowsill, and the placement of items in the baby's crib, from which he took two safety pins. Cowed by Lindbergh, the New Jersey police had not taken even the most elementary precautions to secure the premises.

With the entrance of the erratic and eccentric Dr. Condon, a sequence of novelistic turns and spins took the case into weird terrain, the details of which were kept under wraps by a press corps respectful of Lindbergh's request for discretion and terrified that their zeal for a scoop might endanger the child. Henceforth, a narration of the pivotal events of the crime—the first meeting with the kidnapper to discuss the terms of the ransom payment and a second meeting to exchange the money—is based solely on Condon's uncorroborated account of what he did, heard, and witnessed.

Following instructions, and in constant consultation with Colonel Breckinridge and Lindbergh, Condon put an advertisement in the *New York American* to alert the kidnapper that negotiations should proceed. On a self-aggrandizing whim, he took the phonetic pronunciation of his initials— JFC—and signed himself "Jafsie," a moniker that came to outshine his surname.

The *Bronx Home News* and the *New York American* were the most important newspapers in the Lindbergh case, not because of any news they broke but because they served as secure hotlines between Condon and the kidnapper of the Lindbergh baby.

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On March 11, the *New York American* published Condon's cryptic message:

Money is ready. Jafsie.

In truth, the message was only semi-cryptic. The Lindbergh case was on the mind of every reader, professional journalist or not. Anyone who read the fine print suspected a connection.

That same day at noon—the *New York American* was a morning paper— Condon received a phone call. He was out of the house, and his wife took the message from a man she described as having "a

rather guttural voice, with a quite strong accent; I would say it was a German voice."

That night the man called again—same voice, same accent. "I saw your ad in the *New York American*," he said. Contact had been established. The caller told Condon to stay home at night and "you will hear from us." Then he clicked off.

The man was as good as his word. The next night, March 12, at around 8:30 p.m., a taxicab driver, Joseph Perrone, rang the doorbell at Condon's home and delivered an envelope addressed with the now-familiar penmanship of printed block letters and numerals. Perrone said a man had hailed him just south of the spacious greenery of Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, told him to deliver the letter, and handed him a dollar. Perrone took careful note of the man's appearance and thought he acted funny.

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The letter contained instructions for a clandestine meeting that very night. Condon's good friend and business partner, Al Reich, a former professional boxer, chauffeured Condon, a nondriver, to the meeting place. They were first led to a hot dog stand, where further instructions were left under a rock. The pair were then guided to a street bordering the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. "When they shoot you tonight, they won't have to carry you far," cracked Reich.

Condon got out of the car and made himself conspicuous, walking about, fiddling with the kidnapper's letter. Between the bars of the cemetery gate, a man suddenly appeared waving a white handkerchief. Condon approached. "Have you *gottit* the money with

you?" he rasped in the same German-accented voice Condon had heard over the telephone.

Before too much conversation had ensued, the man heard a sound and panicked. He agilely vaulted over the cemetery fence and ran off down the street. A cemetery guard had approached. Condon covered for the runner. "He's with me," he told the guard. The fit septuagenarian ran after the man and caught up with him in a clump of trees near a little shack in Van Cortlandt Park, the wooded area adjacent to the cemetery.

Condon grabbed the man by his left arm. In full schoolteacher mode, he berated him for fleeing. "You should be ashamed of yourself!" The two then sat down on a bench facing 233rd Street. Condon asked the man his name and the man told him "John," so Condon dubbed the stranger "Cemetery John," a perfect alias for a shadowy bogeyman. But was the contact man the mastermind? A coconspirator? A paid intermediary?

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Cemetery John demanded the ransom, but Condon said that no money would be handed over without proof that he had possession of "the package." "Vat if the baby is dead?" Cemetery John blurted out. "Vould I burn if the baby is dead?"

"VAT IF THE BABY IS DEAD?"
CEMETERY JOHN BLURTED OUT.
"VOULD I BURN IF THE BABY IS DEAD?"

The question rattled Condon, but the man insisted that the baby was safe and well. Reassured, Condon now needed to be convinced that Cemetery John was the actual kidnapper and not just a middleman. He showed him the two safety pins he had taken from the baby's crib. Cemetery John identified them ("Those pins fastened the blankets to the maddress in the baby's grib.") and told where they had been placed ("Near the top. Near the pillow.") Only someone who had been in the nursery on the night of the crime could have known that. For an hour and fifteen minutes, Condon and Cemetery John sat together on the bench talking. In the semidarkness, Condon studied the man's face: he was smooth shaven, with a small mouth and deep-set eyes above high cheek- bones, about thirty-five years of age, five feet nine inches in height, and of medium build. The accent was obviously German, and Condon tried to trip him up by suddenly asking, "Bist du Deutsch?" but Cemetery John did not take the bait. The two agreed on more messages via the newspapers, and the man promised to send Condon "a token" of possession—the baby's sleeping suit. He then slipped into the darkness of the woods.

On Wednesday, March 16, after three tense days of waiting, Condon received in the mail an oblong package wrapped in brown paper. He did not open the package, but notified Colonel Breckinridge. Lindbergh would come to Condon's house as soon as he could dodge the press staked out around Hopewell.

It was not until 1:30 a.m. that Lindbergh, disguised in amber-colored glasses and wearing a cap, entered Condon's home. He opened the package and tenderly examined the contents—a gray, woolen sleeping suit, size two, his son's outfit. "I wonder why they went to the trouble

of having it cleaned?" he puzzled. The package also contained a letter, with the symbol of the three overlapping circles with three holes in the center of each. The letter told Condon to put an ad in the *New York American* and the *Bronx Home News* saying the money was ready. The kidnapper also complained about the three dollars in postage he had to pay to mail the sleeping suit.

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Condon confirmed receipt in an ad the next morning:

I accept. Money is ready. John, your package is delivered and is O.K. Direct me. Jafsie.

Later that day, Colonel Breckinridge arrived at Condon's house with a package containing \$50,000 in ransom money. Condon took the package to his local bank for safekeeping where, unbeknownst to him, agents from the U.S. Treasury recorded the serial numbers of the banknotes. The serial numbers from an additional \$20,000 that J. P. Morgan and Company had added to the sum to make up the balance of the \$70,000 were also recorded. Most of the bills, in five-, ten-, and twenty-dollar denominations, were "gold certificate" notes issued in 1928. It was to be the smartest and most crucial intervention by law enforcement in the entire case, done with Lindbergh's reluctant acquiescence at the insistence of the Treasury men.

At this point, the prolific letter-writing kidnapper went suddenly, maddeningly silent. To roust him, Condon ran a series of increasingly desperate ads in the *Bronx Home News*. On March 26, in all caps, Condon pleaded:

MONEY IS READY. FURNISH SIMPLE CODE FOR US TO USE IN PAPER. JAFSIE.

"Our nerves were near the breaking point by this time," recalled Condon. Finally, the kidnapper relieved the tension by mail. "There is absolutely no fear about the child," the letter assured him. "All is well."

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Condon still wanted proof of life, but he was overruled by Breckinridge and Lindbergh. On March 31, Condon placed an ad agreeing to the kidnapper's terms: \$70,000 up front.

I ACCEPT. MONEY IS READY. JAFSIE

Condon received a letter the next day saying that instructions for a meeting would be forthcoming. He was told to place a final ad reading "Yes everything OK." In incorrect grammar but with a good understanding of when the local papers went to press, the kidnapper said: "If it is too late we put it in the *New York American* for Saturday morning. Put it in *New York Journal*." Condon complied. On April 2, 1932, Condon and Colonel Breckinridge prepared the money in two bundles: \$50,000 in a wooden box as per instructions and an additional \$20,000 in a separate bundle. Lindbergh later arrived at Condon's house and helped cram the money into the wooden box. Then the three men waited.

At 7:45 p.m. the doorbell rang and a taxi driver (this second driver was never heard from again) delivered a letter from the kidnapper. It gave instructions to drive to a greenhouse on Tremont Avenue in the

Bronx where further directions would be found. Lindbergh insisted on driving Condon to the rendezvous. Condon noticed a revolver under Lindbergh's jacket.

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For the second time, Condon would be led to a graveyard, St. Raymond's Cemetery in the Bronx. The scene chosen for the ransom exchange might have been lifted from the first reel of a Universal horror film: a meeting with a body snatcher in a cemetery at night.

Lindbergh waited in the car, within earshot. From behind one of the monuments, Condon was beckoned by a familiar Teutonic voice.

"Hey Doktor! Over here!"

Still hoping to see the baby before handing over the money, Condon had left the box with the ransom money in the car with Lindbergh. However, Cemetery John refused to show Condon the baby. In turn, Condon refused to turn over the money without, of all things, a receipt. The kidnapper left to write out a receipt and Condon returned to the car for the ransom money. Condon had bargained him down from \$70,000 to the original \$50,000 demanded in the first ransom note, a well-intentioned gesture that infuriated Treasury agents who wanted as much ransom money as possible in circulation.

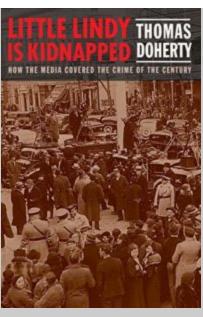
Condon returned with the \$50,000 and waited for Cemetery John to come back with the receipt. Cemetery John showed up precisely thirteen minutes after the pair had parted. Condon turned over the money and pocketed the receipt; the kidnapper gave him a note with

information about the whereabouts of the baby. "Don't open that note for six hours," he ordered. Then he sped away.

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Back in the car, Condon directed Lindbergh to a small house and told him to stop. They sat on the stoop and opened the note. It said the boy was on a boat—written "boad"—called the *Nelly*, being cared for by two people who knew nothing about the kidnapping. The boat was docked between Horseneck Beach and Gay Head near Elizabeth Island, north of Martha's Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts. To Condon's consternation, Lindbergh did not go immediately to Elizabeth Island but to a residence off Central Park owned by the Morrow family. Two Treasury agents were waiting. The men debriefed Condon. Following his description, they produced a drawing of a man who, said Condon, "bore an amazing resemblance to the John of Woodlawn and St. Raymond's Cemeteries."

The T-men told Condon they already had a profile of the likely perpetrator: "When we find our man, we expect to find a German carpenter who lives in the Bronx."



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Covered the Crime of the Century by Thomas
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