

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S EULOGY ON ZACHARY TAYLOR

Abraham Lincoln's eulogy on Zachary Taylor delivered in the Chicago City Hall on July 25, 1850 is one of his little known speeches. It seems timely to make available some excerpts from it just now at the opening of school, as in two or three places it shows the influence of Lincoln's early education. The spirit of the address is also in keeping with the military atmosphere of today, with Lincoln's commendation of certain characteristics observed in General Taylor's military career.

Lincoln started for Chicago on the fourth of July 1850 where the United States District Court was in session. The patent case Lincoln was trying continued until July 24 and on this day Lincoln accepted an invitation to deliver an address in memory of the late President. In his letter of acceptance he wrote:

"The want of time for preparation will make the task for me a very difficult one to perform, in any degree satisfactory to others, or to myself. Still I do not feel at liberty to decline the invitation; and therefore I will fix tomorrow as the time."

Weems' Washington, placed in the hands of Lincoln when he "first began to read" as he so stated, exerted a tremendous influence in his early literary style. Quite often we find him very much under the spell of the dramatic biographer of Washington.

In drawing the picture of the battle of Concord, Weems describes the challenge of the Minute Men and the retreat of the British in this language:

"Then throwing aside the implements of husbandry, and leaving their teams in the half-finished furrows, they flew to their houses; snatched up their arms; and bursting from their wild shrieking wives and children, hastened to the glorious field where Liberty, heaven-born goddess, was to be bought for blood. Pouring in now from every quarter, were seen crowds of sturdy peasants, with flushed cheeks and flaming eyes, eager for battle! Even age itself forgot its wonted infirmities: and hands, long palsied with years, threw aside the cushioned crutch, and grasped the deadly firelock. . . . Like some tremendous whirlwind, whose roaring sweep, all at once, darkens the day, riding the air in tempests; so, sudden and terrible, amidst clouds of dust, and smoke, and flame, the flight of Britain's warriors thundered along the road."

Lincoln in his eulogy comments on General Taylor's attack at Fort Brown with these words:

"And now the din of battle nears the fort and sweeps obliquely by; a gleam of hope flies through the half-imprisoned few; they fly to the wall; every eye is strained—it is—it is—the stars and stripes are still aloft! Anon the anxious brethren meet; and while hand strikes hand, the heavens are rent with a loud long, glorious, gushing cry of victory! victory!! victory!!!"

It is customary for one to admire in others those characteristics which he may himself endeavor to achieve and one is impressed with the fact that the virtues Lincoln himself later came to glorify, he had already discovered in General Taylor a decade before. Lincoln stated:

"In connection with Gen. Taylor's military character, may be mentioned his relations with his brother officers, and his soldiers. Terrible as he was to his country's enemies, no man was so little disposed to have difficulty with his friends. During the period of his life, duelling was a practice not quite uncommon among gentlemen in the peaceful avocations of life, and still more common, among the officers of the Army and Navy. Yet, so far as I can learn, a duel with Gen. Taylor, has never been talked of. He was alike averse to sudden, and to startling quarrels; and he pursued no man with revenge.

"Gen Taylor's battles were not distinguished for brilliant military maneuvers; but in all, he seems rather to have conquered by the exercise of a sober and steady judgment, coupled with a dogged incapacity to understand that defeat was possible. His rarest military trait, was a combination of negatives—absence of excitement and absence of fear. He could not be flurried, and he could not be scared."

Possibly the allusions to Taylor, as the Chief Executive, are of greater interest to us today, because ten years before Lincoln himself was nominated for the Presidency he gave us a good picture of how Taylor reacted in a like situation in these words:

"Up to this time I think it highly probable—nay, almost certain, that Gen. Taylor had never thought of the Presidency in connection with himself. And there is reason for believing that the first intelligence of these nominations rather amused than seriously in-

terested him. Yet I should be insincere, were I not to confess, that in my opinion, the repeated, and steady manifestation in his favor, did beget in his mind a laudable ambition to reach the high distinction of the Presidential chair.

"The Presidency, even to the most experienced politicians, is no bed of roses; and Gen. Taylor like others, found thorns within it. No human being can fill that station and escape censure. Still I hope and believe when Gen-Taylor's official conduct shall come to be viewed in the calm light of history, he will be found to have deserved as little as any who have succeeded him.

"In Gen. Taylor's general public relation to his country, what will strongly impress a close observer, was his unostentatious, self-sacrificing, long enduring devotion to his duty. He indulged in no recreations, he visited no public places, seeking applause; but quietly, as the earth in its orbit, he was always at his post. Along our whole Indian frontier, through summer and winter, in sunshine and storm, like a sleepless sentinel, he has watched, while we have slept, for forty long years. How well might the dying hero say at last, 'I have done my duty, I am ready to go.'"

In the final words of his address Lincoln again falls into the strange eloquence of Weems who said in this eulogy on Washington "They bore him to his long home and buried him in his own family vault near the banks of the great Potomac. And to this day, often as the ships of war pass that way, they waken up the thunder of their loudest guns, pointed to the spot, as if to tell the sleeping hero, that he is not forgotten in his narrow dwelling."

Lincoln drew the argument of his address to a climax with these words:

"But he is gone. The conqueror at last is conquered. The fruits of his labor, his name, his memory and example are all that is left us—his example, verifying the great truth, that 'he that humbleth himself, shall be exalted' teaching, that to serve one's country with a singleness of purpose, gives assurance of that country's gratitude, secures its best honors, and makes 'a dying bed, soft as downy pillows are.'"

The eulogy of Zachary Taylor was concluded by Lincoln repeating his favorite poem "Mortality."