

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S REACTION TOWARDS A LECTURE ON RUSSIA

Possibly the laudable sentiment "Peace on Earth", so closely associated with the Christmas season, is just as appropriately related to the hopes and aspirations entertained during the early days of the new year. A conference of Russian, French, English and American statesmen, looking towards a lasting peace, has been announced for January 25. This event should make President Lincoln's reaction towards a lecture on Russia, which he heard in 1863, of some interest to us now.

Among the personal notes in the *Washington Morning Chronicle* for December 18, 1863 there appeared this interesting item:

"The President attended Bayard Taylor's lecture last night, and his entrance was greeted with loud applause. The Russian ambassador, several of the legation, and some officers of the fleet were also present."

Bayard Taylor was a world traveller long before that term became a hackneyed expression. His literary ability allowed him to contribute, especially through letters written to the *New York Tribune*, accounts of his journeys on foot through Europe and Asia. He was primarily a poet and much of his writing reflects a highly creative mood. He was in Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan and after his return his attention was directed to publishing his voluminous creations in both verse and prose.

When Simon Cameron was serving as minister to Russia, Bayard Taylor was appointed, in May 1862, as secretary of legation. Often left in complete charge of affairs during Cameron's absence, he was influential in securing Russia's friendship for the United States during the Civil War. At Novgorod he wrote an historical poem on Russia, dated September 20, 1862, which he entitled "A Thousand Years." He expressed a hope in one of the verses which we wish might set forth Russia's objective in the coming conference. The poem appeared in a compilation of Taylor's poems published in 1866:

"She bids the nomad's wanderings cease;  
She binds the wild marauder fast;  
Her ploughshares turn to homes of peace  
The battle-fields of ages past."

Taylor's brother having been killed in the battle of Gettysburg, the author returned to his home at Kennett Square, Chester County, Pa. in the autumn of 1863. He immediately turned his attention to lecturing and it was in this capacity that he appeared in Washington on the night of December 17. The *Chronicle* refers to the fact that there was "a thronged house last night at Willard's Hall" for this third lecture of the course. It was here that the President heard the address on Russia from which country Taylor had recently returned. The Washington papers were very generous with their space in reporting the event, one paper using nearly a whole column.

The speaker in his introduction said "he proposed treating of Russia, her people, and place in history." Stressing the fact that Russia comprised one seventh of the world's surface, he advanced the proposition that "her vastness was her protection, for though Europe might injure, it could not vanquish her. It secures her against dismemberment. She was destined to be a fact in the future as well as now." The lecturer made much of the point that "Her ethnology was peculiar, embracing but three races through a hundred tribes . . . a homogenous population of similar habits, laws, and language." With reference to the political structure of Russia Mr. Taylor described it as "an Autocracy resting

on a Republican basis." He continued that their veneration for their chief is extreme but they flouted the burdens of feudalism. . . . Their domestic habits were easily moulded into political subordination." The speaker also emphasized that "There were two marked vices in the Russian system, inadequate salaries and concentration of power on one pair of hands."

President Lincoln must have been meditating on Bayard Taylor's address on Christmas Day, one week after hearing the famous lecturer as on December 25, 1863 he wrote this brief note:

"Executive Mansion  
Washington, Dec. 25, 1863

Hon. Edward Taylor

Mr dear sir

I think a good lecture or two on Serfs, Serfdom, and Emancipation in Russia would be both interesting and valuable. Could not you get up such a thing?

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln."

Three days later Taylor replied to the President and the letter which is preserved in the Robert Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress is of sufficient importance to reproduce in full:

"Kennett Square, Penn.  
Dec. 28, 1863

His Excellency the President

My Dear Sir:

"I have just received your Christmas suggestion, and with all the more pleasure because I think quite as you do with regard to the interest and importance of the subject you propose. I intended, at first, to devote a part of my present lecture to Russian serfdom and abolition, but found that it would make my discourse altogether too long. I therefore decided to give, first of all, a general account of Russia and her people concerning which I have many things to say which are not only new to our people, but advantageous for them to know, my own short experience has satisfied me that no country (except perhaps our own) has been so misrepresented as Russia.

"It is rather late, this winter, to prepare a new lecture, especially as I have engaged to deliver that one 'Russia and Her People' in some thirty different cities, but I fully understand the interest of the subject you propose, and desire to present it, in some way, to the public. There are only slight resemblances between Russian serfdom and slavery in the Southern states although they rest on the same basis—property in man—but the complete success of the scheme of Emancipation in Russia has much significance for this nation at the present time.

"I am very much gratified by your personal interest in the subject, and hope that I may be able to contribute, though so indirectly, to the growth of truer and more enlightened views among the people.

"Permit me to add in conclusion, the expression of my great admiration of the policy indicated in your recent Message to Congress—a policy which I believe will save the nation.

Very respectfully yours  
Bayard Taylor."

Among the voluminous writings of Bayard Taylor was his "Ballad of Abraham Lincoln" published in 1869, one of the earliest compositions in verse about Lincoln, prepared especially for children.