

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S LAST RECORDED WORDS

Abraham Lincoln's last recorded words have been brought to mind on the eve of departure by the editor of *Lincoln Lore* for the Pacific Coast. They were addressed to Hon. Schuyler Colfax at the White House on the evening of April 14, 1865, just as the Speaker of the House was about to start for a trip to the western country. The President said to Colfax as he left for Ford's Theatre, "Don't forget, Colfax, to tell those miners what I told you this morning. A pleasant journey to you. I will telegraph you at San Francisco. Good-bye." This was Abraham Lincoln's last good-bye and except for some traditional conversation, carried on with members of the theatre party, the last words that he uttered.

We are able to create from Colfax's own statements, the scene which led up to this exclamation by the President and orient him in those last few moments, before he departed from the White House for that fateful theatrical performance. Colfax states with reference to his visit with the President on April 14:

"I went there to see our President, whom I believed I had a right to call friend as well as President, and whom I loved as I never loved man before, to ask him whether public duties would allow my long absence from home; whether there was any danger or prospect of any extra session of Congress being called during the summer. It so happened—and I shall always rejoice, sad as it was, that I stood by his bedside during that night and saw his life ebbing hopelessly away—that I was there to have the last interview had with him on public affairs. . . . After conversing familiarly for some time on matters of public interest, he suddenly turned to me and asked if I was not going to the Pacific. I told him I was going if there was no danger of an extra session of Congress this summer."

The President then advised the Speaker of the House that there would be no extra session, Colfax continued that it was on that very day Lincoln "gave to me a message which he desired me to communicate to the toiling miners of the west, wherever I might happen to see them."

Colfax claimed that at the time of this morning visit the President rising "and with much more than his usual emphasis, he made what seemed to be a speech which he had thought over in regard to the miners and their interests, and he impressed it upon me that I should communicate it to them. I told him I was happy to be his messenger, and to bear such a message as this. He asked me to come again in the evening, as he was going to the theatre on that night and desired me to accompany him. I told him then, and again in the evening, that as I had engagements for the whole evening, and intended to leave the city the next morning to return home, it would be impossible for me to accompany him. After that we sat and conversed for three-quarters of an hour. Finding that the time had arrived when he should leave, he rose, and, as Mrs. Lincoln took the arm of Mr. Ashmun, of Massachusetts, he took mine, and we walked to the doorway together—the last steps he ever took in the Executive mansion. And then, as we arrived at the doorway, he stopped, and repeated substantially, though somewhat condensed or abbreviated, the message he had given me in the morning. And again, as he was going out of the door, he turned, and said to me: "Don't forget, Colfax, to tell those miners what I told you this morning. A pleasant journey to you. I will telegraph you at San Francisco. Good-bye."

The main object of the trip according to Speaker Colfax was to learn if the resources and status of the western country demanded that the construction of the Pacific Railroad should be rushed. The exploratory party consisted of Speaker Colfax, Lieut. Gov. Bross of Illinois, senior editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, Samuel Bowles, editor of the *Springfield, Mass. Republican*, and Albert D. Richardson of the *New York Tribune*. George K. Otis of New York, special agent for the Overland Stage Line also accompanied the party.

When the group reached Virginia City, Nevada, Colfax addressed the miners and the *Daily Territorial Enterprise*, published at that place, carried in its issue of June 28, 1865, a phonographic report of Colfax's message one June 26. Some of his speech, especially that part which contained Lincoln's message was copied by the *Daily Morning Chronicle* of Washington, D. C. and printed in their paper for August 7, 1865.

Colfax had this to say about the authenticity of the speech and the accuracy of its recording at the time Lincoln intrusted him with this message: "After his death (which occurred the next morning) I thought I would write it down, as it was fresh in my recollection, instead of trusting his communication to my memory for delivery some months afterward. I think I wrote it down in nearly his own words."

Inasmuch as the address is not included in the *Uncollected Works of Abraham Lincoln* nor in its entirety in any other compilation of Lincoln writings, it seems appropriate to include the complete text in this issue of the bulletin.

"Mr. Colfax, I want you to take a message from me to the miners whom you visit. I have very large ideas of the mineral wealth of our nation. I believe it practically inexhaustible. It abounds all over the western country—from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific, and its development has scarcely commenced. During the war, when we were adding a couple of millions of dollars every day to our national debt, I did not care about encouraging the increase in the volume of our precious metals. We had the country to save first. But now that the rebellion is overthrown, and we know pretty nearly the amount of our national debt, the more gold and silver we mine makes the payment of that debt so much the easier. Now I am going to encourage them in every possible way. We shall have hundreds of thousands of disabled soldiers, and many have feared that their return home in such great number might paralyze industry by furnishing suddenly a greater supply of labor than there will be demand for. I am going to try to attract them to the hidden wealth of our mountain ranges, where there is room enough for all. Immigration, which even the war has not stopped, will land upon our shores hundreds of thousands more per year from over-crowded Europe. I intend to point them to the gold and silver that waits for them in the West. Tell the miners for me, that I shall promote their interests to the utmost of my ability, because their prosperity is the prosperity of the nation, and we shall prove in a very few years, that we are indeed *the treasury of the world.*"

The extent of the literal fulfillment of this last formal statement about America becoming "the treasury of the world" Abraham Lincoln could not possibly have anticipated.