

A Readers Theater–Based on a Letter of Robert Yates and John Lansing to Governor George Clinton Explaining their Early Departure from the Philadelphia Convention

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Primary Source Used for the Reader’s Theater: [Philadelphia Convention Delegates Robert Yates and John Lansing to Governor George Clinton, Albany, 21 December 1787.](#)

The following is a fictional conversation based upon the letter sent to Governor George Clinton from Robert Yates and John Lansing explaining their departure from the Philadelphia Convention. New York sent Yates, Lansing, and Alexander Hamilton as delegates to amend the Article of Confederation. When the discussions at the convention turned toward creating a much stronger national government, Yates and Lansing left leaving Hamilton as the sole delegate from New York. This essentially meant Hamilton, an avowed nationalist in favor of a more powerful central government, could not vote since New York did not have a quorum among its delegates.

The “we” in the original letter to Clinton is deconstructed into individual comments addressed to Clinton. Clinton’s part of the conversation responds and leads the dialog and is entirely historical license. Bracketed words do not appear in the selected primary source materials but have been added to clarify or create a conversational style.

Four Parts:

- *Narrator (S)
- *Governor Clinton (S)
- *Yates (L)
- *Lansing (L)

The Script

Narrator: It seems we have stumbled upon a lively discussion between Robert Yates and John Lansing, Convention delegates from New York, and Governor George Clinton pertaining to the reasoning of the aforementioned pairs’ earlier departure from the Philadelphia Convention. Let’s pause a moment and attempt to deduce the legitimacy and advisability of Mr. Yates’ and Mr. Lansing’s abrupt leave of their appointment.

Gov. Clinton: [Mr. Yates and Mr. Lansing, do you care to enlighten me on the reasoning for your departure from your duly appointed duties at the Philadelphia Convention?]

Yates: Your Excellency, upon Honorable Senate and Assembly resolutions, Mr. Lansing and I, along with Alexander Hamilton, did attend with the intention of revising the Articles of Confederation as directed.

Lansing: With sincere concern, we observed that [we were between a rock and hard place.]

Gov. Clinton: [Go on.]

Lansing: In the prosecution of the important objects of our mission, we seemed to be faced with two very disagreeable alternatives.

Yates: Yes, yes. You see, we could either exceed the powers delegated to us, by giving our assent to measures which we conceived destructive of the political happiness of the citizens of the United States. . . .

Lansing: . . . or opposing our opinion to that of a body of respectable men, to whom those same citizens had given the most unequivocal proofs of confidence.

Gov. Clinton: [A conundrum, indeed. Which ideas were the most difficult for you?]

Yates: Where a majority of the Convention sanctioned the principles of the Constitution, we registered our decided and unreserved dissent.

Lansing: And I candidly confess, that we equally opposed any system, however modified, which consolidated the United States into one Government.

Gov. Clinton: [What is your reasoning for such strong opinions against a consolidation of the States?]

Yates: They are easily reducible into two heads: First, we acted under limited and well defined powers which could not allow us to embrace an idea of such magnitude as to assent to a general Constitution in subversion of that of the State. Secondly, there is no practicality in establishing a general Government, pervading every part of the United States, and extending benefits to all.

Lansing: I must repeat, our powers were explicit, and confined to the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation. A system of consolidated Government, to my belief, could not, in the remotest degree, have been the contemplation of the Legislature of this State when entrusting us with these duties.

Gov. Clinton: [I can definitely see your concern for the rights and powers for states.]

Yates: [Yes, yes.] Adopting these measures would tend to deprive the State Government of its most essential rights of Sovereignty and place it in a dependent situation. In our opinion, the leading feature of every amendment ought to be the preservation of the individual States, in their uncontrolled constitutional rights. Secondary to these rights would be consideration of raising monies for revenue, powers to regulate commerce, and enforcing the observance of Foreign treaties.

Gov. Clinton: [To what did you object concerning the effect of such governance on the citizens of the United States?]

Lansing: [Oh, the power in this general Government! They planned to] guard it with declarations of rights or cautionary provisions! [Psh!] In a short time would be the destruction of the civil liberty of such citizens who would be effectually coerced by it!

Yates: [And the list goes on. Can you imagine?] Governing the extensive territory of the United States . . . understanding the dispersed situation of its inhabitants . . . controlling or counteracting the views of a set of men possessed of all the powers of Government . . . [impossible!]

Lansing: [Not to mention] the remoteness from constituents, permanency of office, and either too numerous a body of men as to represent the interest of all or too few invested with a power of legislation so as the interests of a great majority of inhabitants of the United States be unknown.

Gov. Clinton: [It seems you two did not take this appointment lightly.]

Yates: We intended to explain our conduct in the discharge of the trust which the Honorable Legislature reposed in us.

Lansing: Our strong apprehension concerning a Government so organized as that recommended by the Convention was the object of our pursuit.

Gov. Clinton: [So you left?]

Yates: [Yes, and] we were not present at the completion of the New Constitution.

Lansing: Our further attendance seemed fruitless and unavailing.

Yates: We feel we have made our opposition to the adoption of the National Constitution clear and have dutifully communicated it to Your Excellency.

Lansing (bowing): With greatest respect, we leave as your obedient and very humble Servants.

Narrator: And with that, we may take our leave with a bit more insight surrounding the abrupt departure of Robert Yates and John Lansing from the heated summer debates surrounding the creation of the Constitution.