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**American Association of
Community Theatre AACT
NewPlayFest Winning Plays:
Volume 2 (2016)**

Lighthouse by
WILLIAM BAER

Laguna Beach, Ohio by
MALCOLM MACDONALD

Wash, Dry, Fold by
NEDRA PEZOLD ROBERTS

Gracefully Ending by
A.J. DELAUDER

The Emperor of North America by
THOMAS HISCHAK

Shades of Valor by
KAREN L. LEWIS

Get Out of Dodge by
JEANNE DRENNAN



Dramatic Publishing Company

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INTRODUCTION

The American Association of Community Theatre (AACT) is proud to present the seven winning scripts and playwrights of the second AACT NewPlayFest cycle. AACT NewPlayFest is an initiative by AACT to address the critical need for new, high-quality plays for community theatre audiences around the globe. It has been embraced by playwrights and theatres across the country, bringing exciting theatrical journeys to producing companies and joyful realization and anticipation to playwrights and their work.

AACT is pleased to partner with Dramatic Publishing Company for this program. AACT NewPlayFest is unparalleled in new play competitions, providing full productions of the winning scripts, plus publication and rights representation by a major theatrical publisher. Also thanks to Texas Nonprofit Theatres, Inc., for pioneering the way. Its TNT POPS! New Play Project served as the model for AACT NewPlayFest.

This second cycle of AACT NewPlayFest, ending in 2016, proved even more successful than the first. More scripts were submitted, and seven theatres across the country produced world premieres of winning scripts. This festival continues to benefit the producing theatres by giving them the excitement of bringing new works to their patrons, and the playwrights by experiencing quality productions of their work, and publication and representation by Dramatic Publishing. The benefits of AACT NewPlayFest will expand as additional theatres produce these top-notch plays.

We hope you will consider one of these plays for your next season.

Break a leg,

Julie Crawford, Executive Director
American Association of Community Theatre

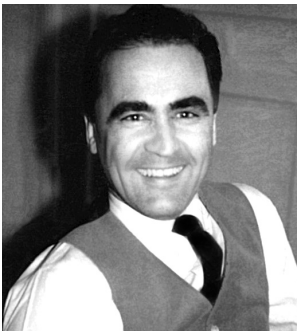
The American Association of Community Theatre is the resource connection for America's theatres. AACT represents the interests of more than 7,000 theatres across the United States and its territories, as well as theatre companies with the U.S. Armed Services overseas. To learn more about AACT NewPlayFest and AACT go to aact.org.

FOREWORD

Jack K. Ayre, born in Pittsburgh on July 9, 1921, celebrated his 90th birthday before passing away in December 2011. At his birthday party in Sunnyvale, Calif., he sang with a barbershop quartet—one of his favorite activities—and celebrated with his cousin and lifelong friend, Frank Ayre Lee. Though as adults they lived on opposite sides of the country, the cousins kept in touch through letters that displayed a love for the written word and an irreverent sense of humor. Jack had participated in theatre productions at Drew University in New Jersey and at a community theatre in Connecticut in his younger years, and continued that interest when he moved to California.

Frank, a chemical engineer by profession, was also an avid aficionado of theatre and had dabbled in playwriting, adapting Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* for a children's theatre production, and penning *McSteg*, a tongue-in-cheek discourse ribbing his cousin Jack and based on a scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

The Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation has been created by the children of Frank as a tribute to their father, who passed away in August 2012, and a legacy for the creative endeavors of Jack, who was an advertising executive and public relations director. The family is pleased to honor both men through a lasting legacy promoting new works for theatre.



Jack K. Ayre



Frank Ayre Lee

Photos: Courtesy of the Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation.

The Emperor of North America

By
THOMAS HISCHAK

The Emperor of North America was first produced by the Silver Spring Stage in Silver Spring, Md., on September 16, 2016, with the following cast:

Norton I..... Ted Culler
LeoBrendan Murray
Sylvia Pamela Northup
Rita..... Lena Winter
Molly..... Lenora Spahn

Production:

Director Scott Bloom
Scenic Design..... Andrew S. Greenleaf
Costume Design Erin Bone Steel
Lighting..... Jim Robertson

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“The Emperor of North America was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by the Silver Spring Stage in Silver Spring, Md.”

The Emperor of North America

CHARACTERS

JOSHURA NORTON: the emperor.

LEO: a writer.

SYLVIA: his agent.

RITA: his lover.

MOLLY: his daughter.

NOTE: All except the actor playing Leo also appear as other characters. These characters can be played by additional actors if a larger cast is desired.

PLACE: Upstate New York and New York City. Today.

PRODUCTION NOTES: The action takes place in various locales, most of which do not require any specific set pieces or furniture. The most frequently recurring location is Leo's home, a cider mill now rustically but comfortably converted into a country house. Only the living room/study is seen. It can remain visible throughout the whole play. Lights, sound effects and sometimes a costume will indicate other locales and time periods.

The names of movie stars throughout the script should be changed, if necessary, so that they are current. There is no such thing as a translation of Tolstoy by Ellery. The passages from *War and Peace* in the script are adapted by the playwright.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Joshua Norton did exist, as did his proclamations, letters to and from famous people, promissory notes, plans for a bridge and other details. The rest of the play is fiction.

The Emperor of North America

ACT I

(Lights rise on JOSHUA NORTON, a bearded old man in a shabby 19th-century dress suit.)

NORTON. *San Francisco Bulletin*. September 17, 1856. At the peremptory request and desire of a large majority of citizens of these United States, I, Joshua Norton, formerly of Algoa Bay, Cape of Good Hope, and now for the nine years and ten months past of San Francisco, California, declare and proclaim myself Emperor of these United States; and in virtue of the authority thereby in me vested, do hereby order and direct the representatives of the different states of the Union to assemble in Musical Hall, of this city, on the first day of February next, eighteen hundred and fifty-six, then and there to make such alterations in the existing laws of the Union as may ameliorate the evils under which the country is laboring, and thereby cause confidence to exist, both at home and abroad, in our stability and integrity. Signed: Norton the First, Emperor of the United States.

(Lights down on NORTON, who exits, and lights up on LEO and SYLVIA sitting at a table in a crowded, noisy restaurant in present day New York City. LEO is late 40s, casually dressed and always a bit hyper when visiting the city. SYLVIA is late 30s, fashionably dressed, blunt of speech and a sharp native New Yorker.)

LEO. And the numbers are so confusing! They're like SAT scores. Math and verbal.

SYLVIA. I remember those tests. You never passed or failed. You just never did well enough.

LEO. Same thing with cholesterol. There's numbers for good cholesterol and numbers for bad cholesterol.

SYLVIA. Math and verbal. Sure.

LEO. If you have low numbers for the good cholesterol, it doesn't count if you have high numbers for bad cholesterol.

SYLVIA. I was always high in verbal. I'm a verbal person.

LEO. It's cockeyed math, that's what it is. One and one don't necessarily add up to two.

SYLVIA. But because my math was low it screwed up my chances for a scholarship.

LEO. I've worked with the numbers. You can't win!

SYLVIA. What are you saying, Leo?

LEO. I'm a heart attack waiting to happen. If I was fifteen years older and thirty pounds heavier, I'd already be dead.

SYLVIA. Get a better doctor, Leo. A New York doctor. Isn't that what I told you?

LEO. This woman is the best in the city.

SYLVIA. She's in Staten Island. How good can she be? Get a Manhattan doctor.

LEO. I think I'm afraid of her. She's some kind of Asian, no more than four feet high, yet she intimidates me.

SYLVIA. Get someone in Manhattan. Someone taller and not so frightening. Then you don't have to drive in. One train ride and you can see your doctor and me in one trip.

LEO. I don't know. Maybe I should get some horse doctor near home, and you can drive out to my place once in a while.

SYLVIA. I'm allergic. The one time I visited you in your grist mill, I broke out in a rash.

LEO. It's a cider mill, not a grist mill.

SYLVIA. Whatever. It's beautiful what you've done with it, but I'm allergic to something in the place.

LEO. I don't even know what grist is. It's a cider mill!

SYLVIA. Relax, Leo. You're all tense from that doctor. We've got business to discuss. I hate how we always get together right after you've just seen your doctor or been visiting your father in the old folks home or—

LEO. Nursing home.

SYLVIA. Call it what you want. But you're always a mess when you come from there. How is he, by the way?

LEO. Dad? Being nursed. That's what they do in a nursing home. He's no better, no worse.

SYLVIA. So is everybody I know. Can you relax for five minutes, stop counting your cholesterol and listen to me? If I was a lawyer this would be costing you a bundle. Unfortunately agents don't get paid by the hour. Otherwise you couldn't afford me.

LEO. He still recognizes me. But he calls me Sonny rather than Leo.

SYLVIA. Sonny. How sweet.

LEO. Sonny was our dog. The family mongrel who died thirty years ago.

SYLVIA. How old people can remember! And how is your daughter? Molly?

LEO. She's seeing some high-school dropout who takes her out in his snowmobile.

SYLVIA. Well, it'll be spring soon. Can I ask about Rita?

LEO. If you like.

SYLVIA. How is Rita?

LEO. None of your business.

SYLVIA. You ought to marry that woman. She's good for you.

LEO. Thank you, doctor. I think we've covered all civilities—dad, Molly, Rita—so we can get down to business. Unless you want to ask about my parrot Pierre.

SYLVIA. I think it was Pierre I was allergic to. Can we talk now?

LEO. Yes. Tell me how well we're doing.

SYLVIA. We're doing very well.

LEO. So you said on the phone.

SYLVIA. Your novelization of the Julia Roberts movie is selling briskly. Not like hot cakes, but briskly. If she gets nominated, we expect to see big numbers in the spring. I was in L.A. and Chicago around Christmas, and copies were on sale in every airport.

LEO. Best place for that sort of thing.

SYLVIA. Don't get snide, Leo. Especially about your own work. And Bantam Dell is going to get Bernie to design the cover for the novelization you did of Clint's movie.

LEO. Bernie Martin? Bernie "the bodice-ripper" Martin?

SYLVIA. His covers are the best. Don't carp. And Paramount wants to do a sequel to *Married Treasure* if they can get Bruce to do it for less than twenty million. But you know how he hates to do sequels, so I wouldn't hold my breath.

LEO. Better to breathe a sign of relief. *Married Treasure* was garbage.

SYLVIA. Hold your tongue, Leo, and just cash the checks like a good boy.

LEO. Actually, I've had an idea for a book—

SYLVIA. I'm not finished. There's more. (*Excited.*) I was saving it for last. Another novelization of a film. But what a film! You're going to love it, Leo. It's literary. It's big. It's perfect for you!

LEO. Let me guess. Kim Kardashian is going to play Joan of Arc.

SYLVIA. Are you going to make snide jokes or are you going to listen to me?

LEO. You'll tell me anyway.

SYLVIA. You bet I will. Are you ready for this? Three words. All I need to say is three words. *War ... and ... Peace!*

(*Pause.*)

LEO. *War and Peace.*

SYLVIA. A new movie version of *War and Peace!* I heard about it from my masseur, who got the word from a Universal exec who's in town for the Tribeca Film thingy. I called Jerry, and I think we might get in! Just think of it!

LEO. *War and Peace.*

SYLVIA. It'll be big. It's *Gone With the Wind* with snow! It's *Doctor Zhivago* without that annoying revolution! It's *Lord of the Rings* with Russian accents!

LEO. Haven't there been plenty of movie versions of *War and Peace* already?

SYLVIA. Hollywood hasn't done one since forever. And they're talking big stars, Leo. Brad with a mustache! Jennifer with her hair up!

LEO. How about Eddie Murphy as Napoleon?

SYLVIA. Laugh if you must, but this can turn into the biggest deal I've ever made for you! A giant spectacle like this ... box office bonanza ... see the movie then read the book! Can you grasp it, Leo?

LEO. Sylvia, I don't know how to tell you this but ... there's already a book version of *War and Peace.*

SYLVIA. I know. And have you picked it up lately? It's a million pages at least! No one is going to read that. Besides, the film will be different. More sex, for one thing. Computerized battles. French can-can girls. You name it, they'll put it in there. It'll sell and people will want to read it.

- LEO. You want me to write a novelization of a movie based on a novel?
- SYLVIA. It happens all the time. And you would be perfect for it,
Leo. You could write it. I can make this deal, you will do a terrific job, and we'll both make enough money to buy five grist mills!
- LEO. I've got to think about this, Sylvia. I'm used to hack work but this ... this is a whole new level of stupidity.
- SYLVIA. Think your head off if you must. But if I can snag this deal with Universal, I expect you to jump on it with me. You know how I've always looked out for you, Leo. Didn't I get you that novelization of Robin's movie just when your divorce bills came in? And the James Bond series when you needed to pay for Molly's college tuition?
- LEO. Yes, Sylvia. You saved my life. You made me what I am today. Whatever that is.
- SYLVIA. But keep this *War and Peace* thing under your hat. It's all in negotiation still. I hear they're trying to get Stephen King to do the screenplay.
- LEO. Perfect.
- SYLVIA. Before I run for my two o'clock, tell me about this idea you have for a book.
- LEO. I don't want to make you late—
- SYLVIA. Talk! I got three minutes. (*Looks toward window.*) Oh, it stopped raining. I'll give you five.
- LEO. It probably won't interest you very much. It's nonfiction.
- SYLVIA. They make movies of nonfiction. I saw *Beautiful Mind*. Pitch.
- LEO. There was this man ... a lunatic, really. He lived in the middle of the 19th century—
- SYLVIA. A period piece. OK ...
- LEO. His name was Joshua Norton. He was a Jew, born in England, and he became a successful shipping merchant for a time. He settled in San Francisco, where he was a big name in the rice market. But poor old Norton was wiped out in the depression of 1854. Lost everything. Ended up living in a cheap boarding house where, it seems, he lost his reason.
- SYLVIA. Sounds depressing. Unless Anthony plays the old guy—
- LEO. Sylvia ... please.
- SYLVIA. I'm listening.

LEO. One day, out of the blue, he decided to proclaim himself the Emperor of the United States. Wrote up a proclamation and sent it to all the papers. A San Francisco editor was desperate for something to amuse his readers, so he printed it, as well as all of Norton's other proclamations. It was all a joke, yet it seems that the whole city went along with the old guy. Bowed to him when he walked down the street, let him dine in restaurants without paying, that sort of thing. He even got himself a fancy uniform with a big hat and paraded around like he was ... well ... emperor.

SYLVIA. Definitely Anthony. Maybe Patrick or Sean.

LEO. Sylvia, it's a book. Just a nonfiction book. I've only begun to get into the research but I can tell you already there is no sex or violence or car chases. Just a book.

SYLVIA. Well, it sounds like interesting stuff. Let me know where it goes. It might lead to something big.

LEO. I doubt it. But it feels good to work on something that's for ... something that's my own idea. Just like a real writer.

SYLVIA. You're a real writer, Leo. You just need guidance. (*Looks off.*) Is it starting to rain again? (*Rises.*) I'll never get a cab if it does. (*Kisses LEO on the cheek.*) Must run, Leo. Keep thinking *War and Peace*. But not a word to anyone.

LEO. My lips are sealed. (*Rises.*)

SYLVIA. Love you, dear. I'll call you next week. (*Exits.*)

LEO (*sits again, heaves a sigh*). *Gone With the Wind* with snow ...

(Lights down on the restaurant, and LEO exits as lights rise on NORTON. He is now in fancy uniform.)

NORTON. October 12, 1859. In our continued effort for domestic and international stability and well being, and after sustained and vigorous self contemplation, I, Norton the First, Emperor of these United States, do hereby abolish Congress. This ineffectual body of personages has long proven to be more a detriment than a boon to the people of the nation, and it is in the best interests of all that I announce their demise. Future generations will look back on this date as a new and embracing Independence Day in which the Union was freed from the shackles of oppression. It will be written that from this day on, justice and peace prevailed during the reign of Norton the First.

(NORTON exits, and lights rise on LEO's home. The furniture is quaint without being cliché. There is a desk littered with computer equipment and papers, some solid wooden beams to remind one of the old mill's original use, and a cage with a parrot in it. LEO sits, and RITA enters with two filled wine glasses. She is in her 40s, attractive, a good listener and calming influence.)

RITA. Everyone has high cholesterol, Leo. It's the American way of life.

LEO. It's not just high cholesterol. It's all those numbers!

RITA. Good and bad. I know.

LEO. And according to the numbers, I am doomed!

RITA. But how do you feel?

LEO. Feel?

RITA. Do you feel sick?

LEO. Of course not! What does that have to do with it?

RITA. Leo, if you are going to turn into a hypochondriac, I don't know what I'll do. With all your other faults, you'll be impossible to live with.

LEO. I always warned you that I was a difficult person.

RITA. You didn't have to warn me. I knew it after ten seconds. *(Kisses him.)* Drink your pinot grigio.

LEO. Isn't this stuff poison for cholesterol?

RITA. A little wine helps you live forever. What did your doctor say about the pills?

LEO. They aren't working. In fact, they've affected my liver. I've now got the constitution of an eighty-year-old alcoholic. We're going to try new pills.

RITA. The new pills will work, they'll get your cholesterol under control, then you can get back to writing. How's Norton coming?

LEO. He's fascinating. I love the research. I just hope I can capture him on paper.

RITA. Did you tell Sylvia?

LEO. She wants either Sean Connery or Anthony Hopkins to play Noton.

RITA. I thought this was a book.

LEO. To Sylvia, a book only exists in order to be made into a movie. I'm just relieved she didn't suggest Jim Carrey.

RITA. Drink your wine. Leo, I'm afraid it's you and the microwave for dinner tonight. I've got a client who wants to see the Tudor on McCavity Drive at six o'clock.

LEO. I thought we could have dinner together.

RITA. You mean you thought I would cook dinner for you. Not tonight, love.

LEO (*testy*). If that house on McCavity is Tudor, I'm Winston Churchill.

RITA. Don't be difficult. There's plenty of choices in the freezer you can nuke.

LEO. Four half-timbered beams and two stained glass windows do not a Tudor mansion make!

RITA. I might not be back until late. The last time I showed this couple a house, we ended up counting the number of slots in the wine cellar.

LEO. I suppose these people think actual Tudors lived in upstate New York.

RITA. The man is a college professor. Cornell, I think.

LEO. For your sake, I hope he's not history. Or architecture.

RITA. Computers. What else?

LEO. Then by all means tell them it's real Tudor. Let it slip out that Anne of Cleves spent the Fourth of July weekend there once.

RITA. You are truly in a foul mood today, Leo. Is it because of dinner?

LEO. Who can think of eating when one is dying of cholesterol overdose?

RITA. Try to keep breathing until I come back later tonight.

LEO. Are you coming back later tonight?

RITA. Do you want me to come back later tonight?

LEO. Yes, actually.

RITA. And stay the night?

LEO. Yes, to be truthful.

RITA. How sweet. I didn't think you were in a romantic mood.

LEO. I'm not. I'm scared.

RITA. Honestly?

LEO. Cross my heart. My cholesterol-saturated heart.

(The sound of the front door opening and slamming, and MOLLY enters. She is twenty-two years old, looks younger, acts older. She is pleasantly surprised to see RITA.)

MOLLY. Oh, Rita! I didn't recognize the car outside.

RITA. The company car. I hope you didn't block me. I've got to run in a second.

MOLLY. No, I'm parked behind Dad. (*Goes to the birdcage.*) Hello, Pierre. What have you got to say for yourself? (*Silence.*) Nothing.

LEO. I thought you weren't coming home after work, Molly. (*MOLLY kisses him on the cheek.*) I hope you didn't come back for dinner. Rita has to go and sell a Tudor house, and I'm microwaving some low cholesterol ice cubes.

MOLLY. I'm meeting Randy for sushi. I just stopped by to change.

RITA. And how is Randy?

MOLLY. The same.

RITA. I'm sorry to hear that.

MOLLY. Can't be helped. A year ago, while I was going through some kind of inner rebellion, I thought Randy was interesting. It didn't take long to outgrow him. What Tudor house?

RITA. The one on McCavity.

MOLLY. They're selling that as Tudor?

LEO (*triumphantly to RITA*). You see!

RITA. Well what would you call it?

MOLLY. Well ... to me it looks more like Pinocchio's house.

LEO. Bravo!

MOLLY. Hello, Pierre. Say something to Molly. (*Silence.*) Nothing.

RITA. I don't think a Cornell computer professor would want to live in Pinocchio's house. I'll stick to Tudor.

MOLLY. Must you go right away, Rita?

RITA. I should have left five minutes ago.

MOLLY. Oh ...

RITA. Why? Is something the matter?

MOLLY. No.

LEO. Rita will be coming back later.

MOLLY. I'm afraid it's going to be a long night of dealing with Randy. Some other time.

RITA. Of course. (*Kisses LEO.*) Until later then. Eat something. Please?

LEO. Yes, nurse. The wine has given me something of an appetite. How much cholesterol is there in Pop Tarts?

MOLLY. What's all this about cholesterol?

RITA. Your father saw his doctor today.

MOLLY. That explains a lot.

LEO. No, it doesn't! I don't need any doctor to tell me I'm a walking time bomb!

RITA. Don't explode until I get back. Goodbye, Molly! Give my best to— *(Looks at her watch.)* Oh, I'm going to be late! *(Grabs her briefcase.)* And this couple is so damn punctual! Bye! *(Exits.)*

LEO *(calling out after her)*. Tell them Cardinal Wolsey once took a crap in the privy! *(Awkward pause.)* I didn't know you liked sushi.

MOLLY. I don't. But Randy does. So your cholesterol is still high?

LEO. High as a kite. Depending on how you do the math, I may crash at any moment.

MOLLY. Something tells me you're exaggerating, Dad.

LEO. Rita says I'm turning into a hypochondriac.

MOLLY. No comment. Did you see Grandpa when you were down there?

LEO. I did.

MOLLY. How's he doing?

LEO. No comment. What did you mean you had to "deal with" Randy? Is something going on?

MOLLY. You might say so. Oh, damn! I wish Rita was here. It's easier to talk to her.

LEO. Thank you.

MOLLY. You know what I mean.

LEO. Actually, I don't. What's the trouble, Molly?

MOLLY. No trouble. It's ... *(A bit too casually.)* it's just that I'm pregnant.

(Pause.)

LEO. Some people might call that trouble.

MOLLY. I don't. But there's Randy to deal with and ...

LEO. Is Randy the ... lucky dad?

MOLLY. Of course he is! What do you think I am?

LEO. Sorry. And you have to tell him tonight?

MOLLY. Hell, no. I'm never going to tell him. I just have to get rid of him once and for all. So I'm going to watch him eat sushi.

LEO. I don't know what to say.

MOLLY. You'll think of something. You're never at a loss for words.

LEO. I ... I ... *(Pause.)* I wish Rita was here.

MOLLY. I know how you feel.

LEO. How do *you* feel, Molly? I mean, about the whole ... thing?

MOLLY. At first I was confused. It was a surprise. I didn't plan on this at all. Then I found I liked the idea. Having a child ...

LEO. But without Randy?

MOLLY. I wouldn't trust Randy to babysit Pierre no less help raise a kid!

LEO. How long have you known?

MOLLY. About Randy? Since forever.

LEO. No. About the ... baby.

MOLLY. Long enough. I've had plenty of time to think it over. I know what I'm doing.

LEO. Have you told your mother?

MOLLY. I'm not looking forward to that.

LEO. My only suggestion is: Don't do it over sushi. She likes her steaks well done and her fish in the form of sticks.

MOLLY. Dad, are you ... OK with this?

LEO. Molly, when you decided to move back here after college, I told you I was a distracted father at best. But I do love you and will stand by you ... whatever that means.

MOLLY. It means a lot. *(Embraces him.)* Thanks. Now I better go change.

LEO. You've got to change clothes for sushi?

MOLLY. Randy loves this dress. He says it makes me look like Kate Winslet in *Titanic*.

LEO. Before or after the iceberg?

MOLLY. So I thought I better not wear it. *(Exits to the bedrooms.)*

LEO. Good idea. Better put on something dowdy. Look in the Halloween hamper. *(Finishes his wine; pause; then speaks in a motherly voice.)* "Better be extra nice to Grandpa. He has hiiiiiiigh cholesterol."

(Lights fade out on the house and rise on NORTON in a spotlight.)

NORTON. To Abraham Lincoln, White House, Washington, D.C. November 3, 1861. Dear Mr. President: As your Emperor who has your best wishes at heart, I must communicate my concerns to you regarding the current level of hostilities between different regions