

Myron Taylor

Myron Taylor

The Man Nobody Knew

C. Evan Stewart



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The front cover photo is Mrs. and Mr. Taylor with Swiss Guards in the corridor of the Apostolic Palace after a papal audience on March 2, 1940, from the collection of C. Evan Stewart.

To

W. David Curtis Jr.

Legendary law professor and the
original biographer of Myron C. Taylor

and

Walter F. LaFeber & Joel H. Silbey
Legendary scholars who inspired my
love of history

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Preface

This biography of Myron C. Taylor has taken three decades. It was begun in the 1990s by my Cornell law professor, W. David Curtis Jr., after he went emeritus. Unfortunately, Dave became extremely ill and almost died. By 2002 he had substantially recovered, but he recognized that he could never finish what he had started.

On one of my many trips to Cornell in 2002, Dave asked me to stop by his law school office to chat. He did not flag in advance the reason for his request. And I did not need one, because David was the kindest and sweetest professor I had had at the Cornell Law School (two adjectives that usually do not go in the same sentence with an Ivy League law professor).

As was his custom, Dave got straight to the point. He explained the Taylor project and, given his health, that he could not bring it to fruition. Would I be interested in signing on to complete the biography of arguably Cornell's greatest philanthropist, the nation's greatest industrial leader of the first half of the twentieth century, and (in "retirement") a diplomat at the heart of some of the most important geopolitical issues of the World War II era? And not to worry, Dave assured me, the research was all done, all I would have to do is write it up.

Because of my high regard for my esteemed professor, I said "yes" without fully realizing what I was getting into. Unfortunately, Dave's representation about the research being fully done was not quite right. As an initial matter, Dave believed that all of Taylor's papers were stored at Cornell; but Taylor's papers are also housed at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, the



Myron Taylor portrait, painted by Frank O. Salisbury

Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.), the Annex to the Library of Congress (College Park, Maryland), and the Harry S. Truman Library (Independence, Missouri). In addition, the Oral History Project at Columbia University had also yet to be mined.

One benefit of the time it took me to go through all of the archives (including the Taylor Papers at Cornell) has been the enormous amount of relevant archival material and important scholarly work that has been released and published since 2002 (including works published in 2022). These materials have richly filled out the story of Taylor's life and works; put another way,

a Taylor biography published in 2002 would have been woefully incomplete.

The absence of a Taylor biography to date (and why he is little remembered today) is in large part because of his intense personal distaste for publicity; indeed, for much of his business career, the national media called him “the man nobody knows.” This lack of interest in self-promotion stemmed (I believe) from at least two sources: first, as the reader will see, Taylor was very much a nineteenth-century, Victorian gentleman; and second, Taylor was so successful in everything he had undertaken in his life, he felt no need to convince others of how great he in fact was.

Taylor’s lack of a need for public ego-gratification would prove to be of immense importance in fulfilling his diplomatic work, initially for President Roosevelt and later for President Truman. Based on my research, there was only one other presidential advisor who shared Taylor’s desire to do *only* what the president wanted. This is best illustrated by an incident in the Oval Office in January 1941, a meeting of FDR and his just vanquished Republican opponent, Wendell Willkie. President Roosevelt wanted Willkie’s help in building public support for aiding Great Britain in its war with Germany. Willkie, however, first wanted to vent about FDR’s closest political confidant, Harry Hopkins:

“Why,” asked Willkie, “do you keep Hopkins close to you? You must surely realize that people distrust him and resent his influence.”

Roosevelt replied: “[S]omeday you may well be sitting here where I am now as president of the United States. And when you are, you’ll be looking at that door over there and knowing that practically everyone who walks through it wants something out of you. You’ll learn what a lonely job this is and discover the need for somebody like Harry Hopkins who asks for nothing except to serve you.”¹

Taylor was made of similar stuff, and (as the reader will see) Roosevelt knew that and thus trusted him with many tough tasks (as later did Truman). It is no surprise that Taylor and Hopkins formed a strong personal friendship while serving the president and the country.

By the time he was representing FDR as the president's "Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary" to Pope Pius XII, Taylor was no longer "the man nobody knows"—he was, in fact, internationally famous and regularly received worldwide media coverage. But his approach to his task(s) remained the same. Ultimately, the pope would name Taylor a Knight of the Order of Pius IX, First Degree, in 1948, and President Truman awarded him the presidential Medal for Merit later that same year.

The process of writing Taylor's biography has not only given me a fascinating archival look into his brilliant, multi-faceted career, but it has also enriched my understanding of the political sagacity of Franklin Roosevelt. In addition, it has given me a far more nuanced understanding of Pope Pius XII's role vis-à-vis the Holocaust than was my prior (uneducated) understanding. With respect to this latter subject (as is true with many parts of the Taylor biography), the reader will need to consult some lengthy footnotes to get a complete picture of the historical record.

Note

- 1 R. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, pp. 2-3 (Harper & Brothers 1948).