

Title: "A Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln"

Author: Doris Kearns Goodwin

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Length: 754 pages

Reading time: 20 hours

Reading rating: 5 (1=very difficult; 10=very easy)

Overall rating: 4 (1=average; 4=outstanding)

While this book could be classified as biography or non-fiction, it was recommended to me as study in leadership. Most of us have been taught at least the bare-bones about Lincoln's 1.5 terms in the White House. Goodwin focuses on the amazing team that Lincoln assembled as his cabinet to assist him through the darkest days in American history.

Four candidates vied for the Republican nomination in Chicago in 1860. William Seward was the frontrunner going into the convention whose anti-slavery campaign, while based on moral grounds, was a calculated political stance. Salmon Chase had sworn to his Quaker father that he would oppose slavery on a religious basis. Edward Bates, from the "frontier" of St. Louis, was the candidate of a group of former Whigs and anti-slavery Democrats. Abraham Lincoln, a circuit-riding lawyer from Springfield, Illinois, had served shortly in Congress.

The brief version of how Lincoln won the nomination is that the other three had campaigned so widely that they had given critics fodder. Seward was confident in the nomination, but his enemies, including Horace Greeley, worked behind the scenes on the "night of the thousand knives" (p. 243) to defeat him. Lincoln's strategy of going into the convention as everyone's second choice worked.

The focus of the book is on the genius of what Lincoln did after that. "I began at once to feel that I needed support; others to share with me the burden," Lincoln said on the morning after his election. He surrounded himself with the strongest men in the Republican Party. He knew these were the strongest men in the nation. He thought he did not have the right to deprive the nation of their services, just because they were not elected President.

Every member of the cabinet was better educated, more well-known and more experienced than was Lincoln, but he had the self-confidence to listen to them.

What are the leadership characteristics that Lincoln possessed? Rather than gloat over his having won the Presidency, he repaired injured feelings. He dealt with strong egos through honesty and empathy. He refused to be provoked by petty grievances. His sense of timing was impeccable. He could diffuse tension with anecdotes

Lincoln demonstrated a willingness to share credit and to assume responsibility for failures. He never shifted blame. After Fort Sumter, he took the responsibility. "If this

must be done, *I must do it.*” (p. 343). When General McClelland blamed Secretary of War Stanton for the army’s failures, Lincoln deflected the blame to himself.

One of the many amazing quotations in this book is a newspaper editorial published in the staunchly pro-secession Charleston, SC, *Mercury* in 1865. “He has called around him ... the ablest and most earnest men of his country. Where he lacked an individual ability, learning, experience or statesmanship, he has sought it and found it. Force, energy, brains and earnestness he has collected around him in every department. We turn our eyes to Richmond, and the contrast is appalling, sickening to the heart.” (p. 701).

By widening the scope of her research to the cabinet members and their families, Goodwin increased the range of sources to include diaries and letters of not only the cabinet members, but also their wives and children. The book is a well written, very personal approach to these men and their relationships.

It has been said that Lincoln was a shrewd politician. Goodwin argues more convincingly that he was a great leader. There is much to be said for learning to work with those with whom we have competed in the past. Most organizations today do not have room (or time) for rivalries and bruised egos; rather they need cooperation among their best and brightest. There is much to be learned from Abraham Lincoln.

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