

Lifelifters Book Review Pulpit Series
Part I –

A Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln

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I realize, on looking back upon them, how many important and transforming things happened to me when I was only ten years of age. Not the least of these was occasioned by a spur-of-the-moment decision by my Aunt Judy to load a bunch of us cousins into her old Chevy for a road trip from southern Maryland to Washington D.C. one summer day. She took us to the recently opened National Wax Museum, where along with the depictions of other major events in American history, there was a full-sized representation of the box at Ford's Theatre in which Lincoln was assassinated.

It was so real and horrible – the president, about to be martyred, looked straight ahead at us kids, as the assassin, Derringer in hand, was just ready to kill this noblest and greatest of our nation's presidents. I was horrified by the very thought that so decent and great a man should die at the hand of one so inferior. I was at the same time repelled and fascinated.

“Do you want to see where it happened?” my Aunt asked me, and off we went to my first visit to Ford's Theatre, which was only a basement museum at that time. I have been both haunted and intrigued by the life and death of our sixteenth president ever since that day. Through the years, like many of you, I'm sure, I have read a number of biographies of Abe Lincoln. But, I tell you, none were better in fullness of detail or in compelling anecdotes than Doris Kearns Goodwin's engrossing new work, *A Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Could there be anything new to say about the Great Emancipator? That's a daunting question any would-be biographer has to address. And the answer, in the case of Ms. Goodwin is “absolutely, there is something new to be said.”

Three men, William H. Seward, Salmon P. Chase, and Edward Bates, improbably crossed paths with Lincoln in the late 1850s. And Lincoln, the one of this quartet who was surely least likely to succeed, wound up leading the nation through its greatest trial.

But, more than that, these other three gentlemen – New York Senator Seward, former Ohio Governor Chase, and Missouri's distinguished elder statesmen, Edward Bates – all of them rivals for the 1860 presidential nomination – actually served in President Lincoln's cabinet and became among his most intimate confidants.

And hence, as Doris Kearns Goodwin argues most convincingly through 916 pages, and I quote here:

This then is a story of Lincoln's political genius revealed through his extraordinary array of personal qualities that enabled him to form friendships with men whom had previously opposed him; to repair injured feelings that, left untended, might have escalated into permanent hostility; to assume responsibility for the failure of subordinates; to share credit with ease; and to learn from mistakes.

You see, all three of these rivals were clearly better educated and more experienced, as well as more successful politicians, than this hick country lawyer in his rumpled clothes. And yet, in the end, these other three came not only to respect, but to revere their brilliant president whose combined toughness and compassion elicited from them selflessness where once there had only been blind ambition and unbridled self-promotion.

Ms. Goodwin does not show us, as so many others have, a Lincoln who is blithely cast as a savior or a hypocrite – not at all. Instead, we follow Lincoln’s growth as an evolving, complex thinker who abhorred human cruelty and who was, after all, a political animal in a time and place where even the most liberal thinkers were nowhere near advocates of what we understand as racial equality.

This is to say that Abraham Lincoln was a statesmen and not a prophet. Remember how in 1862 Lincoln wrote to Horace Greeley, admitting:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing the slaves, I would do it. And if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it. And If I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

He went on to tell Greeley:

I believe that slavery is evil. I want it abolished. But I believe that the destruction of this nation is a worse evil and I must prevent it.

By the war’s conclusion, Ms. Goodwin shows us in an uncontestable manner, how far Lincoln’s mind had moved on this question. The abolishment of slavery had become an equal rationale for the necessity of pressing on for the Union’s ultimate victory. There was so much about Lincoln the man that ought to spur us today toward following his example. And this is where my book review becomes a pulpit review with a sermonic punch, I hope.

Doris Kearns Goodwin underscores how even as a child, Lincoln dreamed heroic dreams. He seemed to have been born with a sense of destiny about him. His school boy friend, Nathaniel Grigsby, once said of Lincoln, “His mind and ambition soared above us.”

In 1855, already a self-educated and successful lawyer, having served a term in the House of Representatives, but because of his lack of support for the Mexican War, was easily defeated in his efforts for reelection. Lincoln admonished a law student: “Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing.”

Just about this time, Ms. Kearns informs us, Lincoln devoted himself with renewed purpose to the anti-slavery movement and once so committed, demonstrated unwavering tenacity. Robert Frost, another biographer, writing of Lincoln put it this way:

Ambition and conviction united, as my two eyes make
one sight, to give Lincoln both a political future and a
cause worthy of his era.

And that, my dear friends, having a worthy purpose for being was Lincoln's fondest prayer from the very outset of his life. And I dare say you and I, and our children, and our children's children, ought to be no different. Among our chiefest joys whenever we leave this world ought to be the heartwarming fact that we have made a difference for the better.

As a political outsider – in today's parlance, “beyond the beltway” – Lincoln enlisted the services of precisely those three ambitious and wily advisors – Seward, Chase, and Bates – whom experts would have urged him to assign to political Siberia.

But Lincoln, contrary to the inclination of every other politician then or now, proceeded to offer Secretary of State to Seward, Secretary of the Treasury to Solomon Chase, and Attorney General to Edward Bates. He also chose Democrats like Edwin Stanton, his Secretary of War, to create a bipartisan cabinet.

All who were selected were brilliant, experienced, and egocentric men who had once foreseen themselves sitting in that very chair which that rail-splitter now occupied. Each personality is masterfully examined and juxtaposed against the others, and especially against Lincoln himself in Ms. Kearns's book. She provides us an illuminating narrative on an array of human personalities who, at the beginning, publicly belittle and doubt the man they actually serve. But by his murder at Ford's Theatre on that tragic night of April 14, 1865, each one would have gladly given up his own life for this president who already was widely predicted to eclipse the stature of George Washington and to truly belong to the ages.

All I can say to you is, if in this time of lackluster and uninspiring leadership, you want to renew your faith in the potential of one imperfect human being to bring honor and decency, sacred dedication, and an example of selfless and unceasing sacrifice for a cause bigger than anyone else's ability to either praise or critique, then you pick up this wonderful book and lose yourself in Lincoln's greatness.

My time is drawing to a close and I haven't even mentioned the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, or the surrender of Fort Sumter, or the battlefield of Antietam or Gettysburg, or Ulysses S. Grant, or Mary Lincoln, or even Lincoln's periods of depression, or his hard-to-define religious faith.

We haven't even parsed the majestic second inaugural address, which William Seward, having offered substantial input, immediately predicted would endure as “the

finest state paper in all history.” And we haven’t mentioned the brutal criticism to which he was subject and endured with unbelievable restraint and grace.

Even by the time the new century arrived, the one in which you and I were born, the Lincoln legacy had been made secure. In 1908, Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, told of traveling in the Caucasus, where he was the guest of a wild chieftain and his tribe. The chieftain asked about the great leaders of the world who lived beyond his borders, whereupon Tolstoy spoke of great Tsars and generals from Alexander to Napoleon. But the mountain man said:

You’ve not told us about the greatest general and greatest ruler of the world. We want to know something about him. He spoke like the voice of thunder. He laughed like the sunrise; and his deeds were as strong as the rock and as sweet as the fragrance of roses. He was so great that he even forgave the crimes of his greatest enemies, and shook brotherly hands with those who had plotted against his life. His name was Lincoln and the country in which he lived was called America. Tell us of that man.

Tolstoy, the cultured Russian, responded to the wild herdsman’s request by saying of Lincoln:

He was the only real giant in terms of depth of feeling and certain moral powers. He was one who wanted to be great through his smallness. He wanted to see himself in the world and not the world in himself.

Had you asked Lincoln, you would’ve learned that this man whose 200th birthday we will celebrate in three years, at 23 years of age had a direct and well-stated goal for himself. He told a group of farmers once,

Everyone is said to have his peculiar ambition. I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed by my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem.

Can you imagine that? He only wanted to be worthy of our esteem. They claim that a mother and her child were passing by the Lincoln home (which has been restored) in Springfield, Illinois. It was nighttime, and the lights shone brightly from within that national treasure. And the child said, “Look Mama, Mr. Lincoln has left his lights on!”

“Yes,” said the mother softly, “He has left them on for all the world to see.”

And so he did – he really did. Happy birthday, Mr. President.

Amen