

# Book Review

## Team of Rivals

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In Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, the author sets out to tell the story surrounding Abraham Lincoln's cabinet and his presidency. The book provides thorough portraits of the political figures in it while narrating one of the most tumultuous periods in American history.

The beginning of the book paints a picture of each of the politicians who became members of Lincoln's cabinet. Three of them, Salmon P. Chase, William Henry Seward, and Edwin Bates, were Lincoln's chief rivals for the presidential nomination of the Republican party of 1860. All three were better known than Lincoln as were their ambitions for the presidency.

Goodwin aptly explains the motivations and pathways that each of these men took in an attempt to gain the presidency while also highlighting the circumstances that prevented them from obtaining it. Fierce ambitions for political success were a trait that Chase and Seward possessed. A Seward comment included in the book notes, "What a demon is this ambition." (Goodwin, p 75) Seward's ambition often kept him from his family and a normal social life. Seward also made the grave mistake of traveling to Europe before the Republican Convention showing over- confidence in his securing the nomination. Chase was stymied not only by his audaciousness but also by his radical views of slavery. Bates on the other hand was too conservative for liberal Republicans.

Lincoln was different from these three men in many ways. The first distinctive difference was background. Unlike the other three contenders Lincoln was not born to wealth, nor did he receive a prestigious education. In rural Kentucky and Indiana where Lincoln was raised, most rural families could not afford the tuition for subscription schools and public education did not exist. Lincoln had to be his own teacher through books and interactions with people. Stories told by adults that came to visit his family had a profound effect on his life. He enjoyed finding meaning and moral lessons behind the stories and often used these stories as president to explain his decisions. Lincoln's modest surrounding help him develop a level of empathy for his fellow human beings that none of his contenders could

parallel. His ability to convey complex political issues in laymen's terms served him well in speeches and thus in his ability to reach the people. ( Goodwin, pgs 1-50)

In regards to the issues of the day, Kearns explains how Lincoln's views and his political prowess of distributing those views combined to make him a viable contender for the presidency. Trained in law Lincoln did extensive research on the issue of slavery. He believed the founder's viewed slavery, "as an evil not to be extended, but to be tolerated and protected only because of and so far as its actual presence among us makes that toleration and protection a necessity." (Goodwin, p 231) Lincoln, more than any of his rivals for the presidency, took a middle ground on slavery. His views on that subject as well as other issues of the day placed him in the middle of a divided Republican party. Lincoln made sure not make waves prior to the convention and therefore had fewer enemies than his rivals. Lincoln wrote a friend expressing, "I am certainly not the first choice there; and yet I have not heard that any one makes any positive objection to me." (Goodwin, p 244) Lincoln did not speak out poorly against any of his fellow candidates nor did he allow his team at the convention to make any contracts that would bind him in exchange for nominative votes. Lincoln's political skills, sound character, and circumstances at the convention won Lincoln the nomination.

Goodwin soundly covers Lincoln's character and demeanor throughout the book especially when covering the main point of the book which is how and why Lincoln created the cabinet that he did. The first thing that Lincoln did was to contact his rivals from the convention to serve him in his cabinet. He did this stealthily, exhibiting his sound understanding of human nature. His invitations and responses to Bates, Seward, and Chase, offering them positions in his cabinet were thoughtful, humble, and strategic all at the same time. Instances in the book explain that humility was another unique characteristic that Lincoln possessed. Throughout Goodwin's book instances of his humility abound. In one instance Lincoln replies to criticism in the following way. "...But I want to add one thing: When you

see me doing anything that for the good of the country ought not to be done, come and tell me so, and why you think so" ( Goodwin, p 369)

Lincoln believed in coalition and cooperation which is what he was trying to create in his cabinet. Lincoln was not afraid of criticism and realized that he would need guidance to steer the country during such a tension filled time.

As the book continues through the Civil War the interactions of the various personalities in Lincoln's cabinet play out. In the situations that arise Lincoln exhibits the same patience, political prowess, and character that were apparent leading up to the convention of 1860. Although the strong personalities in his cabinet grapple for power Lincoln ultimately proves that he is the master at the helm of the ship.

Despite being in charge Lincoln would often consult his cabinet throughout *Team of Rivals* to strengthen his ideas and speeches and gain criticism. He understood that a man's ideas should be scrutinized. The cabinet meetings also showed that he would not bend to political pressure simply to get re-elected however he understood and was very concerned with public sentiment.

In Goodwin's book the reader gains a firm understanding of the personalities in Lincoln's cabinet and how they helped to guide the course of history. The personality and character of Lincoln is also comprehensively covered however at times an analytical reader will still question the role that fate and circumstance had in his success. Regardless, Goodwin shows a Lincoln whose solid character was the impetus to his greatness. He was both objective and passionate. In other words he knew when to employ reason in situations, he knew when to utilize passion, and he also knew how to seek out advice when his own mind could not distinguish the two.

Goodwin also addresses the issues of slavery in relation to Lincoln. She describes events leading up to the emancipation proclamation and Lincoln's opinion surrounding it. Lincoln had distinctive ideas about the timing of the release of the proclamation. Goodwin also expounds on how Lincoln's ideas for the colonization for blacks and their role in the United States would drastically change throughout his presidency. Initially he favored colonization and by the end of the war he was considering every possible means by which the Negro could be secured in his freedom. (Goodwin, p 647) Above all Goodwin points out that Lincoln supported the preservation of the union above all else.

"My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because it helps to save the Union." (Goodwin, p 471)

Ultimately Lincoln held a liberal view of human nature and would have pardoned all political offenses if he could have. He desired a lenient reconstruction policy for the south showing a foresight that vengeful punishment would not make this country stronger but would prolong the healing process. Political folly or not, it was these Christian ideals which defined his presidency. As Goodwin points out the south lost an ally when Booth shot him in Ford's Theatre.

The book Team of Rivals holds a few pedagogical uses for a classroom teacher. I teach U.S History II at a high school academic level. Academic is a grade level tract. The curriculum begins at Reconstruction and concludes at the present. Primarily, the content knowledge gained from reading this book is priceless as it is detailed and informative. It helped to fill in gaps and truly give a complete picture of Lincoln's opinions. I feel as though I can present Lincoln in his entirety to my students. It often

baffles students coming into my classroom when they learn that Lincoln was not the fiery abolitionist that he is so often painted as. The students become investigative historians trying to reveal the truth.

Students can investigate by analyzing various quotes from Lincoln in *Team of Rivals*. They can come to their own conclusions regarding his feelings towards slavery, emancipation, the Civil War, and the union. Excerpts could also be used to analyze Lincoln's character as a person. In addition the pictures chosen to accompany the book tell a lot about the political figures that surrounded Lincoln during his tenures. They could serve as useful guides for the teacher during a presentation on the book.

Finally a lesson about Lincoln's assassination could utilize the last few pages of Goodwin's book. Students usually enter the classroom with the knowledge that Lincoln was shot but with little knowledge of the detail regarding the assassination. They do not know that the violent plot was against other people as well as Lincoln. Reading parts of Goodwin could open their eyes to the fact that the plot was much wider than Lincoln himself. I would recommend *Team of Rivals* to any Lincoln aficionado.

Works Cited

Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *Team of Rivals*. Simon & Schuster. New York 2005