

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln

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Review

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Goodwin, Doris Kearns *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Simon & Schuster, \$35.00 ISBN 9780684824901

Assimilating Opponents

Lincoln's Cabinet of Rivals

This new biography of Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet explores the President's political abilities. ABC News polls in 2000 and 2002 found that the American people believe Lincoln was the nation's greatest president. More words have been written about him than about any other American. In fact, there are more than 16,000 books, pamphlets, and articles written about him — more than any other figure in the history of the world with the exception of Jesus. He has been hailed as the Great Emancipator, the Savior of the Union, and the folksy embodiment of the Common Man.

This poses a major hurdle for a historian bent on writing a new biography of Lincoln: how to find a fresh approach to the great man, how to avoid simply regurgitating familiar facts and shop worn theories. First a disclosure; while I did not see this book until the time of publication, the author did use The Frank & Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana as part of her research and, for that, a gracious acknowledgement appears in the book.

The major appeal about this book is that, Goodwin examines Lincoln through his relationships with his former political rivals. The result gives us a portrait of Lincoln as a virtuosic politician and managerial genius — a visionary executive whose magnanimity, wisdom, humor, and shrewdness hold together both a small contentious cabinet and coalition of Republicans, moderate Democrats, and border-state Unionists.

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln, refers to the fact that after Lincoln was elected president in 1860, in selecting his cabinet he

chose former political opponents, including three who had run against him for the Republican Party nomination. By doing this, he demonstrated his self-confidence. Weighing the risk that they might run against him in the future, Lincoln recognized the even larger danger the nation faced with Southern states already seceding. He opted to have the strongest people near him. As it turned out, they, William H. Seward as Secretary of State, Edward Bates as Attorney General, and Salmon P. Chase as Secretary of the Treasury, along with other cabinet members did an extraordinary job. He had successfully co-opted his rivals.

While Lincoln always believed that slavery was morally wrong, he did not call for emancipation until September 1862 — with the issuance of the final Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Goodwin points out the two things that kept him from speaking out directly about emancipation earlier in the war. First, he knew that even as president he lacked the constitutional power to free slaves. However, as a clever lawyer, he understood that emancipating the slaves could be, as commander-in-chief, a military measure to seize enemy property. He recognized that the slaves were helping the Confederates by, for example, tending the fields so that white Southerners could serve in its army. So when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, it turned some of those slaves into free men and thus diminished the Confederate army's resources. In addition, Lincoln recognized free black men as the great available and yet unavailed of force that could help the Union win the war by enlisting them in the army and navy. Secondly, and more importantly, he was always conscious that in a democratic nation, leaders have to mold public opinion. It was obvious in 1861 and early 1862 that he would have lost the border states of Missouri, Delaware, Maryland, and Kentucky and much of his coalition in the North who opposed emancipation, if he had acted earlier.

The author's decade of work on this historical narrative clearly demonstrates Lincoln's political acumen. We all know him as the Great Emancipator and the preserver of the Union, but he really did understand how to juggle both political issues and people in general. He could see both sides of an issue, and had a winning sense of humor that grew out of his respect for people. He understood the requirements of politics and to give up personal grudges from the past. He knew how to make friends of former enemies, had empathy with people, acknowledged error and shared the credit for successes. This all represents great emotional intelligence possessed by a brilliant politician. As Doris Kearns Goodwin said in a recent interview, The qualities we normally associate with

goodness — decency, sensitivity, honesty, empathy — turn out to be great political resources.

One reviewer has complained that the book, belongs to the hagiographic tradition and that Goodwin skims lightly over her subject's more pragmatic political maneuverings and his troubling utterances about race. Such a judgment is facile. Goodwin honestly acknowledges Lincoln's initial support for black colonization to foreign lands and the explosive meeting Lincoln had with the black delegation at the president's mansion in 1862. When he urged them to accept colonization, his empathy . . . failed him. When it comes to covering political intrigue, Goodwin excels. The book is about ambition and the brilliance Lincoln exercised in assembling a tenuous coalition of rivals in his cabinet and using their talents to hold together the Republican party and the Union. According to the author, Lincoln offered his cabinet no choice, committing the administration to devote all its powers and energies to help bring the war to a successful conclusion

There is riveting political history when Goodwin describes Lincoln's own detailed management of his campaign, Seward's swallowing his pride when he lost the nomination and his Herculean effort to get Lincoln elected, as well as the ways in which the president eventually won over his Secretary of State who became his closest ally. Lincoln was a master with his peerless skill and balancing factions, especially in the face of unrelenting criticism and military failure.

Nor is Lincoln's mastery of language overlooked. Goodwin quotes *The New York Times* in 1863, The most consummate rhetorician never used language more pat to the purpose, . . . and still there is not a word in the letter not familiar to the plainest plowman.

His self-confidence in choosing political enemies for cabinet positions is an indication of what would prove to others a . . . most unexpected greatness. Not many would have agreed with Goodwin in Lincoln's time. Francis Blair, Jr., whose brother was in the cabinet, wrote, I have never since I was born imagine that a lot of poltroons & apes could be gathered together from the four quarters of the Globe.

By adding Seward, Chase, and Bates to her book, Goodwin has brought together four biographies into one. So here is Lincoln — lanky, melancholy,

homespun, inexperienced, and a much-derided rail splitter who had twice failed to reach the Senate and who had won the presidency with thirty-nine percent of the popular vote. But as Goodwin points out, amid the chaos of civil war, he struggled to hold the fragile country together.

For her original work and its brilliant execution, Doris Kearns Goodwin received the 2006 Lincoln Prize from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. **Team of Rivals** brings together the political genius of Abraham Lincoln with the biographical genius of Doris Kearns Goodwin. It is a reader's dream team.

Frank J. Williams is Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island and a member of the U.S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. His latest book, The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views (with Harold Holzer and Edna Greene Medford) has been published by Louisiana State University Press.