

Look at Lincoln: Leadership: In Turbulent Times

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Review

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In an age that assumes individuals are endowed with leadership rather than viewing it as an evolving concept, frustration and disappointment sets in when these leaders are not easily found. Both the author and the writer David Foster Wallace, recognize that "...the word *leader* has become a cliché that is so boring our eyes glaze over when we see it... "When you come across somebody who actually *is* a real leader, that person isn't boring at all; in fact he is the opposite of boring."

Doris Kearns Goodwin discusses the four courageous and effective leaders she knows best: Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon B. Johnson. She examines their genuine leadership including their successes and failures. The four were ambitious and had a deep-rooted resilience that permitted them to overcome adversity. Despite confronting political necessities, they had the moral virtue to think primarily of "the whole" rather than just their own individual interest.

Her book is refreshing in describing how the four handled crises effectively. For example, in a recent speech to chief executives, the author described how Lincoln, who suffered from depression, would read Shakespeare's comedies; the over energized Theodore Roosevelt would write letters to friends asking them not to worry about him if he lost reelection; FDR, at the height of Nazi Germany's conquest in Europe, would picture himself as a child at Hyde Park.

What comes through in this 368-page text is the empathy that each of the four leaders possessed. She does this by using one specific crisis that each faced – the Emancipation Proclamation for Abraham Lincoln, the mediation of the 1902 coal strike by TR, the first 100 days of FDR's during the great depression, and the Civil Rights Act drafted and pushed through a truculent Congress by LBJ after the assassination of JFK. Bullet points are used to detail leadership tips.

Kearns Goodwin indicates that she started this volume before the current occupant of the White House won election. Without entering the fray of today's politics, she focuses on the ability of her subjects to control their tempers during a crisis. Lincoln did have a temper and was known for writing intemperate letters when angry. But he had the good sense to not send them after taking time to reflect on them. FDR severely edited his "Fireside Chats" until criticisms of his political opponents were finally excised. TR remained calm despite tense meetings with coal bosses, miners, and J.P. Morgan so that he could mediate the coal strike.

Her leadership quartet took office in crisis; LBJ and TR, after the assassination of a president, Lincoln at the collapse of the country, and FDR during severest economic depression. Having spent over 40 years writing and lecturing about the four, she breaks her essays on leadership traits in three parts. Part I discusses their dreams and the making of ambition in each: the autodidactic Lincoln and his becoming a well-respected lawyer and Whig political leader; the sense of family and privilege experienced by TR and FDR and their participation in New York politics; LBJ's accompanying his father and grandfather in the Texas Hill Country becomes fascinated with people politics ultimately resulting in his ambitiousness as a New Dealer.

Part II discusses the losses and failures experienced by each and how they were able to learn from them. Each had to get up every day "...to make the donuts" - Abraham Lincoln's tedious terms in the Illinois legislature and single term in Congress, as well as his failure to obtain commissioner of the land records from General Zachary Taylor who he had helped win the presidency in 1848; the death of Teddy Roosevelt's young wife and his beloved mother on the same day; the diagnosis of polio for FDR in 1921, and LBJ losing the race for the U.S. Senate in 1941.

The final section of the book explains the great accomplishment in each president's term and draws upon their successes in negotiating them. Lincoln's bold decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation; TR's mediation of the massive nationwide coal strike; FDR's decisiveness in the first 100 days of his presidency restoring hope after the immense financial collapse of the country; and LBJ's dramatic executive and legislative actions to insure civil rights after a century of delay.

The volume concludes with an epilogue on how we view these leaders. Most were self-made leaders and not born as such.

This book demonstrates what American greatness means. The four had great ambition, yet except for Lincoln, had little appreciation for humility. They were passionate to do good for the many and understood that American greatness was beyond individual capacity to exceed simple self-interest. They were heroes but, sadly, their measurement for their place in history is different than today's which appears to be based on selfishness.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular Civil War Book Review columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.