

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln

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✓ Verified Book of Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln

Summary:

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The life and times of Abraham Lincoln have been analyzed and dissected in countless books. Do we need another Lincoln biography? In Team of Rivals, esteemed historian Doris Kearns Goodwin proves that we do. Though she can't help but cover some familiar territory, her perspective is focused enough to offer fresh insights into Lincoln's leadership style and his deep understanding of human behavior and motivation. Goodwin makes the case for Lincoln's political genius by examining his relationships with three men he selected for his cabinet, all of whom were opponents for the Republican nomination in 1860: William H. Seward, Salmon P. Chase, and Edward Bates. These men, all accomplished, nationally known, and presidential, originally disdained Lincoln for his backwoods upbringing and lack of experience, and were shocked and humiliated at losing to this relatively obscure Illinois lawyer. Yet Lincoln not only convinced them to join his administration--Seward as secretary of state, Chase as secretary of the treasury, and Bates as attorney general--he ultimately gained their admiration and respect as well. How he soothed egos, turned rivals into allies, and dealt with many challenges to his leadership, all for the sake of the greater good, is largely what Goodwin's fine book is about. Had he not possessed the wisdom and confidence to select and work with the best people, she argues, he could not have led the nation through one of its darkest periods.

Ten years in the making, this engaging work reveals why "Lincoln's road to success was longer, more tortuous, and far less likely" than the other men, and why, when opportunity beckoned, Lincoln was "the best prepared to answer the call." This multiple biography further provides valuable background and insights into the contributions and talents of Seward, Chase, and Bates. Lincoln may have been "the indispensable ingredient of the Civil War," but these three men were invaluable to Lincoln and they played key roles in keeping the nation intact. --Shawn Carkonen

Team of Rivals doesn't just tell the story of Abraham Lincoln. It is a multiple biography of the entire team of personal and political competitors that he put together to lead the country through its greatest crisis. Here, Doris Kearns Goodwin profiles five of the key players in her book, four of whom contended for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination and all of whom later worked together in Lincoln's cabinet.

1. Edwin M. Stanton

Stanton treated Lincoln with utter contempt at their initial acquaintance when the two men were involved in a celebrated law case in the summer of 1855. Unimaginable as it might seem after Stanton's demeaning behavior, Lincoln offered him "the most powerful civilian post within his gift"--the post of secretary of war--at their next encounter six years later. On his first day in office as Simon Cameron's replacement, the energetic, hardworking Stanton instituted "an entirely new regime" in the War Department. After nearly a year of disappointment with Cameron, Lincoln had found in Stanton the leader the War Department desperately needed. Lincoln's choice of Stanton revealed his singular ability to transcend personal vendetta, humiliation, or bitterness. As for Stanton, despite his initial contempt for the man he once described as a "long armed Ape," he not only accepted the offer but came to respect and love Lincoln more than any person outside of his immediate family. He was beside himself with grief for weeks after the president's death.

2. Salmon P. Chase

Chase, an Ohioan, had been both senator and governor, had played a central role in the formation of the national Republican Party, and had shown an unflagging commitment to the cause of the black man. No individual felt he deserved the presidency as a natural result of his past contributions more than Chase himself, but he refused to engage in the practical methods by which nominations are won. He had virtually no campaign and he failed to conciliate his many enemies in Ohio itself. As a result, he alone among the candidates came to the convention without the united support of his own state. Chase never ceased to underestimate Lincoln, nor to resent the fact that he had lost the presidency to a man he considered his inferior. His frustration with his position as secretary of the treasury was alleviated only by his dogged hope that he, rather than Lincoln, would be the Republican nominee in 1864, and he steadfastly worked to that end. The president put up with Chase's machinations and haughty yet fundamentally insecure nature because he recognized his superlative accomplishments at treasury. Eventually, however, Chase threatened to split the Republican Party by continuing to fill key positions with partisans who supported his presidential hopes. When Lincoln stepped in, Chase tendered his resignation as he had three times before, but this time Lincoln stunned Chase by calling his bluff and accepting the offer.

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3. Abraham Lincoln

When Lincoln won the Republican presidential nomination in 1860 he seemed to have come from nowhere--a backwoods lawyer who had served one undistinguished term in the House of Representatives and lost two consecutive contests for the U.S. Senate. Contemporaries attributed his surprising nomination to chance, to his moderate position on slavery, and to the fact that he hailed from the battleground state of Illinois. But Lincoln's triumph, particularly when viewed against the efforts of his rivals, owed much to a remarkable, unsuspected political acuity and an emotional strength forged in the crucible of hardship and defeat. That Lincoln, after winning the presidency, made the unprecedented decision to incorporate his eminent rivals into his political family, the cabinet, was evidence of an uncanny self-confidence and an indication of what would prove to others a most unexpected greatness.

4. William H. Seward

A celebrated senator from New York for more than a decade and governor of his state for two terms before going to Washington, Seward was certain he was going to receive his party's nomination for president in 1860. The weekend before the convention in Chicago opened he had already composed a first draft of the valedictory speech he expected to make to the Senate, assuming that he would resign his position as soon as the decision in Chicago was made. His mortification at not having received the nomination never fully abated, and when he was offered his cabinet post as secretary of state he intended to have a major role in choosing the remaining cabinet members, conferring upon himself a position in the new government more commanding than that of Lincoln himself. He quickly realized the futility of his plan to relegate the president to a figurehead role. Though the feisty New Yorker would continue to debate numerous issues with Lincoln in the years ahead, exactly as Lincoln had hoped and needed him to do, Seward would become his closest friend, advisor, and ally in the administration. More than any other cabinet member Seward appreciated Lincoln's peerless skill in balancing factions both within his administration and in the country at large.

5. Edward Bates

A widely respected elder statesman, a delegate to the convention that framed the Missouri Constitution, and a former Missouri congressman whose opinions on national matters were still widely sought, Bates's ambitions for political success were gradually displaced by love for his wife and large family, and he withdrew from public life in the late 1840s. For the next 20 years he was asked repeatedly to run or once again accept high government posts but he consistently declined. However in early 1860, with letters and newspaper editorials advocating his candidacy crowding in upon him, he decided to try for the highest office in the land. After losing to Lincoln he vowed, in his diary, to decline a cabinet position if one were to be offered, but with the country "in trouble and danger" he felt it was his duty to accept when Lincoln asked him to be attorney general. Though Bates initially viewed Lincoln as a well-meaning but incompetent administrator, he eventually concluded that the president was an unmatched leader, "very near being a 'perfect man.'"

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