Leadership Lessons from Abraham Lincoln

IN JANUARY 2008, CBS anchor Katie Couric asked Barack Obama which one book he would take with him to the White House, apart from the Bible. The eventual winner of the presidential election singled out Team of Rivals, Doris Kearns Goodwin’s 2005 best-selling account of President Abraham Lincoln’s leadership during the Civil War.

In the months following his election victory, President Obama has made it clear that he is modeling his leadership on the style of his presidential predecessor from Illinois. By bringing heavyweight politicians who are themselves past and future presidential contenders into his cabinet, Obama has reprised Lincoln’s strategy of creating a team composed of his most able rivals, people who are unafraid to take issue with him and are confident of their own leadership abilities.
If the new U.S. president can learn from Abraham Lincoln so too can business leaders who are grappling now with similar questions of how to lead in turbulent times. To find out what the lessons from Lincoln are, HBR senior editor Diane Coutu interviewed Team of Rivals author Goodwin, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian whose other books include No Ordinary Time (about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and their era), The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys, and Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream.

In the course of a wide-ranging, two-hour conversation, Goodwin described the qualities that made it possible for Lincoln to “bring disgruntled opponents together to create the most unusual cabinet in history,” offered some advice to the new president as he confronts the current economic crisis, and expressed her belief that the United States will weather this storm as it has weathered worse before. What follows is an abridged and edited version of the interview.

What lessons can President Barack Obama and other leaders take away from studying Abraham Lincoln’s presidency?

There are several, but the first one President Obama focused on in discussions during the election campaign concerns the way Lincoln surrounded himself with people, including his rivals, who had strong egos and high ambitions; who felt free to question his authority; and who were unafraid to argue with him.

For example, Lincoln brought Salmon Chase into his cabinet as treasury secretary and kept him there for three years, knowing full well that Chase craved the presidency with every fiber of his being and knowing that Chase was undermining him all the time with cabinet members, Congress, and the rest of the country. So long as he was doing a good job at his post, that was more important than personal feelings. Obama is obviously trying to do the same thing by choosing his chief rival, Hillary Clinton, to be secretary of state; by picking rival Joe Biden as his vice president; and by including powerful Republicans in his cabinet like Robert Gates and Ray LaHood.

But you have to remember, the idea is not just to put your rivals in power – the point is that you must choose the best and most able people in the country, for the good of the country. Lincoln came to power when the nation was in peril, and he had the intelligence, and the self-confidence, to know that he needed the best people by his side, people who were leaders in their own right and who were very aware of their own strengths. That’s an important insight whether you’re the leader of a country or the CEO of a company.

What’s the downside of creating a team of rivals?

If you are as inclusive a leader as Lincoln was, or as President Obama seems to be, then the danger is that you’re constantly talking and arguing about things late into the night without reaching a consensus. It can be paralyzing. So you have to be prepared to vote on decisions, and if a vote results in a stalemate, then you have to make the decision yourself and be ready to tell the team, “Like it or not, here’s what we’re doing.”

For example, for months Lincoln let his cabinet debate about if and when slavery should be abolished. Finally, though, he made up his mind to issue his historic Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves. He brought the cabinet together and told them he no longer needed their thoughts on the main issue – but that he would listen to their suggestions about how best to implement his decision and its timing. So even though some members still did not support Lincoln’s decision, they felt they’d been heard. And they had been. When one cabinet member suggested that Lincoln wait for a victory on the field to issue the proclamation, Lincoln took his advice.

You’ve written biographies of three other American presidents. What, in your opinion, are the essential qualities of a successful leader?

I can’t emphasize strongly enough the fact that you’ve got to surround yourself with people who can argue with you and question your assumptions. It particularly helps if you can bring in people whose temperaments differ from your own.

When Lincoln brought Edwin Stanton into the cabinet in 1862 as secretary of war, for example, Stanton was much tougher, much more secretive, than Lincoln, who was often too kind to subordinates and at times too open. Their opposite temperaments balanced each other out. Where Lincoln was too lenient, issuing pardons for soldiers who had run away from battle to the point of hurting military discipline, Stanton was relentless in his desire to punish cowardice. By working together, pardons were issued, but not in the numbers they had been under Lincoln alone.

You also have to be able to figure out how to share credit for your success with your inner team so that they feel a part of a mission. Basically, you want to create a reservoir of good feeling, and that involves not only acknowledging your errors but even shouldering the blame for the failures of some of your subordinates. Again and again, Lincoln took...
responsibility for what he did, and he
shared responsibility for the mistakes of
others, and so people became very loyal
to him.

History also shows that it's essential
to know how to connect to the larger
public, whether that's through radio,
in the case of Franklin Roosevelt, or in
the cabinet came to think so, too. One af-
fter another, they came to power thinking
Lincoln was rather unexceptional and
ended up believing that he was as near a
perfect man as anyone they'd ever met.

What Lincoln had, it seems to me, was
an extraordinary amount of emotional
intelligence. He was able to acknowl-
edge his errors and learn from his mis-
takes to a remarkable degree. He was
careful to put past hurts behind him
and never allowed wounds to fester. The
rare example I could find of Lincoln's
being unable to forgive someone was
his father. Lincoln never visited his fa-
ther when he was dying, which suggests
that he could not let go of the anger he
felt toward the man who considered the
future president's fierce desire to learn
a sign of laziness.

He had flaws, of course; every leader
has flaws. Lincoln's greatest flaw came
out of his strength, which was generally
liking people and not wanting to hurt
them. He always wanted to give some-
body a second or even a third chance.
This weakness proved disastrous with
George McClellan, who was head of the
Union Army for some months near the
beginning of the war. Lincoln should
have fired McClellan within weeks of see-
ning how narcissistic and insubordinate
he was. In part, Lincoln didn't because

Lincoln's case, through speeches that
were filled with such poetry and clar-
ity that people felt they were watching
him think and that he was telling them
the truth.

I would add here that one more suc-
cess factor is key for great leadership,
be it in business or politics, and it's one
that's usually overlooked. As a leader
you need to know how to relax so that
you can replenish your energies for the
struggles facing you tomorrow.

Lincoln went to the theater about a
hundred times while he was in Wash-
ington. And although he suffered from
a certain melancholy, he had a tremen-
dous sense of humor and would enter-
tain people long into the night with his
stories. Franklin Roosevelt was the same
way. He had this cocktail hour every eve-
ning during World War II when you just
couldn't talk about the war. He needed
to remain free from thinking about the
bad things for a few hours. Or he would
play with his stamps. This ability to re-
charge your batteries in the midst of
great stress and crisis is crucial for suc-
cessful leadership.

More books have been written on
Lincoln than on any other American
president. What does Lincoln's magic
as a leader really come down to?
Well, it wasn't anything so immediately
felt as charisma. In fact, it took the coun-
try some time to warm to Lincoln; his

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at that time he didn’t have enough confidence in his own understanding of military affairs. He was still learning about how to wage war by going to the Library of Congress and reading books on military strategy. But in the end it was his inability to hurt people that made Lincoln keep McClellan on far too long. As a result, battles were lost, and thousands of soldiers died who might have lived had Lincoln fired McClellan earlier. So it wasn’t just a small flaw.

In your biography of Lincoln, you rely heavily on the intimate letters between wives and husbands. What will historians do without such letters in the future?

It’s a big issue for historians – and for leaders who are trying to learn from history – because traditionally it’s in people’s private correspondence that you get the emotional understanding of what leaders are really feeling and doing as history is being made.

Unfortunately, Lincoln left few personal letters, but Seward would write to his wife daily to tell her what Lincoln did that day or about some of the arguments that went on in the cabinet, and those letters provide a unique insight into what Lincoln thought and felt as great decisions were being made.

Looking back, the thing that’s really impressive is that here were these leaders running the Civil War, and people like Seward still had time to meditate on the day’s events and to write these long letters to his wife at night. These were the days of no television. Leaders weren’t worried about cable news or their BlackBerrys. They weren’t multitasking; they had time to reflect. It’s a luxury many leaders just don’t have today, and that’s a real loss.

For historians, the biggest loss is going to be the time between the rise of the telephone in the 1940s and the advent of e-mail in the 1990s. There’s a 50-year period that is almost completely gone from history, unless, like Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, you taped conversations. Today, at least we have e-mails, which are in some way reviving the art of letter writing. I don’t know whether or not, 200 years from now, we’ll be able to retrieve e-mails found on old computers. But I think – or at least I hope – that if people send a long e-mail to somebody now, and they know it’s something important, they will have the foresight to print it out.

Obama took your book with him to the Oval Office. What else would you recommend he read?

Obama does seem to have a sense of history, and were I to speak with him again, I would suggest that he read about other presidents going through difficult times. I would certainly recommend Roosevelt’s fireside chats, where he explains in such simple language terribly complicated problems like the banking crisis, the economic crisis, and the war. And since Obama is interested in the moments in history when people come together to produce change from the bottom up, he also might want to look at the Progressive movement at the turn of the twentieth century – which led to curbs on the giant trusts, pure-food-and-drug legislation, railroad
regulation, and conservation measures—or the civil rights movement, to learn how it created the pressure that allowed the voting rights and desegregation acts to pass.

I find it interesting, though, that Lincoln didn’t read biographies—at least you don’t hear about him reading of Washington or Jefferson, the people you would imagine he’d be very interested in. He was more impressed by their words. It’s the documents of American history—the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence—that became his inspiration. He said himself that he never had a thought that didn’t come from the Declaration of Independence. If Lincoln is Obama’s role model, then he might want to go back to those documents and study them in great detail. I think that appreciating them and their great promise is what makes you understand what hope is all about.

Do you really have such hope when everything seems to be crashing down around us?

Yes, I really do. In times of crisis, things become possible that wouldn’t be possible in ordinary times. The way the U.S. government is set up, with so many checks and balances, means that it almost takes a deep crisis to move forward. So there are only certain moments in history when great change can take place. FDR had this opportunity in the Depression; Lincoln did during the Civil War. Obama has that same great opportunity now. The challenges Americans are now facing give him a chance to pull the country together in new ways, working across party lines.

Also, history is a great reminder that, however bad things look today, they’ve been worse before, and Americans still pulled through. Today’s crisis is not as bad as the Great Depression, let alone the Civil War that Lincoln confronted. One of my favorite FDR speeches is one he made in 1942 that was very similar to Obama’s victory speech in Chicago. FDR warned his listeners that there would be many failures before the country won World War II. But he reminded them that America had faced disasters before and had come out the other side. Despite the cruel winter at Valley Forge, for example, Americans still won independence. FDR’s speech was so successful that thousands of affirming telegrams flooded into the White House.

Obviously there’s a fine line between optimism that’s simply not credible and a sense of real confidence that there’s something about the United States and its people and its system that’s going to make the country pull together and get out of this hole. Roosevelt once said something like, “The most efficient dictatorship could never compete with the free energies of a free people in a democratic system.” I think that’s right—and not just for the United States but for democracies around the world.

Of all the politicians you’ve written about—the Kennedys and the Fitzgeralds, FDR, LBJ, Lincoln, and now Theodore Roosevelt—who would you choose to spend an evening with?

Lincoln, without question. It took me 10 years to write his biography, and he was a very amiable companion all those years.

If I did get to meet him, though, I wouldn’t ask him what I, as a historian, know I’m supposed to ask him—about what he would have done to bring the country together after the Civil War, had he lived. I’d ask him to tell me stories. Everyone remarked upon his extraordinary sense of humor, and he was widely admired as a storyteller. He said himself that a good story is better than a drop of whiskey. I’d just sit at the kitchen table with him and have him tell me one story after another, for then he would truly come to life again.