

Summary:

Goodwin tells the story of Lincoln's close and productive relationship with his three rivals for the Republican presidential nomination of 1860. At Lincoln's insistence, these men, William H. Seward of New York, Salmon Chase of Ohio and Edward Bates of Missouri, all became key members of his cabinet and went on to serve him well throughout the bloodiest years of the Civil War. Later, he appointed yet another former adversary, Edwin Stanton, as his secretary of war. In recognizing, recruiting and relying on talent, Lincoln held no grudges.

As Lincoln navigates through incompetent generals, battlefield setbacks and warring factions within his own administration, Goodwin portrays him as a master manipulator, although never for petty or destructive causes. He led his cabinet, the military and the country with a light and sensitive rein, even as he endured a succession of personal crises.

In Goodwin's estimation, Lincoln has had no political equal. He had a sense of timing and a feeling for the country as a whole, like when to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and when to bring black soldiers into the war. But, it was Lincoln's "decency and morality", and his ability to turn these virtues into political instruments that ultimately set him above other leaders.

The Constitution makes no provision for a president's cabinet. After all, no one in the Constitutional Convention in 1787 ever thought the office of the president would require much more than secretarial help. Not even the size of the cabinet has remained stable. Washington had a cabinet of four; John Adams added a fifth in 1798. George W. Bush has 15 cabinet posts, along with four other cabinet-rank executive positions.

By the time Lincoln became President, cabinet-making had reached the point where cabinet members overshadowed the President who had nominated them. Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan were routinely upstaged or subverted by their secretaries of war and state. And Lincoln did not look like any improvement. He had earned a leading place in Republican Party politics in Illinois, and snatched some brief national attention by challenging Stephen Douglas for the Senate in 1858, almost winning the Democrat's seat. But Lincoln enjoyed nothing like the stature of New York's William Seward or Ohio's Salmon Chase (the John McCain of his time).

Yet obscurity cut both ways; Seward, Chase and the others had spent so long in the political limelight that each had acquired many enemies. Lincoln, at least, had offended no one, and so the nomination swung to him. But once elected, he had to come to terms with the damaged egos of the party's jilted, and there was no guarantee that they would defer to this little known log-splitting circuit lawyer from the prairies. Losing the nomination humiliated Seward, and Chase still longed to be president. These were exactly the sort of advisers Lincoln would have been well advised to keep far away.

Instead, he offered the State Department to Seward, the War Department to Cameron and the Treasury to Chase, knowing that he was also handing them the opportunity to build rival political empires of their own. Lincoln did this partly because he had no real choice. He was painfully aware of his outsider status in Washington, and with no close political allies of national stature, he had no one else to whom he could turn.

But Lincoln's selection of a cabinet of rivals was also an expression of a shrewdness few could appreciate in 1861. Keeping Seward and Chase within his administration gave him more opportunities to control them and fewer opportunities for them to create problems. It also guaranteed

that, in any controversy, he could count on Seward and Chase to back-stab each other, allowing him to emerge as the all-powerful settler of disputes. To improve his chances for command, Lincoln added two of his loyalists, Montgomery Blair as postmaster general and Gideon Welles as secretary of the Navy. Seward, Chase or Bates might have derailed this plan by refusing Lincoln's initial offer of a cabinet post, but the president had correctly guessed that none could bring himself to refuse even secondhand prestige. From that moment, Lincoln had them in his power, and he never let them go.

Goodwin comes to the close of Team of Rivals amazed and delighted to find "that Abraham Lincoln would emerge the undisputed captain of this most unusual cabinet" and thereby "prove to others a most unexpected greatness."

Opinion:

Good news- The book is extremely well-written with interesting and detailed plots and sub plots. It is like several biographies rolled into one, and is quite compelling. Goodwin took hundreds of letters, records and personal diaries and weaved them into a wonderful story of our nation's turbulent history in the 1850's and 60's. And the author, through Abraham Lincoln, provides us with some valuable life and leadership lessons for today.

Bad news- It took Doris Kearns Goodwin nearly ten years to write this book, and it felt like it took me nearly that long to read it! Including her notes and index it is 916 pages long!

Good news- I have done you another big favor by reading (most of) the book, gleaming the best and most practical ideas from it, and offering you some meaningful applications.

Applications:

Lessons from Abraham Lincoln (and a few applications for each):

1. Tell the truth, using tact and diplomacy.

- Remember when young Lincoln's father asked him who chopped down the cherry tree and Abe confessed saying, "I can not tell a lie." Hey wait, that was George Washington! But Lincoln was known as "Honest Abe".
- Telling the truth is the right thing to do. Sometimes we need to tell it with tact and diplomacy, but it is still the right thing to do; in relationships, in team settings, at work, at home, leading, following, etc., etc.

2. Demonstrate your passion, humility, decency and morality.

- We have heard this before, but Lincoln reminds us that these are some of the values and characteristics of great leaders. Would any of us like to be known as boring, pampas, indecent or immoral?

3. Keep your friends close and your enemies (rivals) even closer.

- But not just for the reasons we know about. Sure, it makes sense to know who and where your enemies are, but if you can utilize their strengths (by appealing to their egos) and help make a bigger difference, do it. This is where Lincoln's genius really made a difference for him, and for the nation. Perhaps this thinking can help us at work too.

4. Recognize talent (using your rivals for their strengths and expertise and don't hold grudges).

- Politics is politics and business is business (although a lot of it can feel very personal). I have a great friend, client and entrepreneur, who, like Lincoln in his day, can win, lose, get beat up, beat someone else up and go out for a drink or play golf with that adversary, forgetting all that "business stuff" after the fray is over. He separates business from non-business, doesn't hold grudges and has even hired some of those tough adversaries to make a difference in his organizations.

5. Pay attention to timing.

- Do you remember that phrase: "ready, willing and able"? Situational Leadership reminds us that people need to be motivated (willing) and competent (able) to perform a task well and that as leaders, we need to help people along the motivational and competence curves through the appropriate mix of direction and support. But what about readiness? Sometimes people are motivated and competent enough to perform well, but the timing just isn't right. Maybe that relates to motivation, but we need to be very aware of timing too. It can sometimes be the most critical factor.

6. See the big picture and put things in context.

- Lincoln had the big picture in mind at all times. His objective was to preserve the union. And that's why he chose the best people he could find to help him in that mission. Even if they were his previous rivals.

And a p.s to my local friends: Maybe Philadelphia Eagle Coach Andy Reid and Quarterback and Team Leader Donovan McNabb should read this book (or my review) after that devastating loss to the NY Giants. And I am sure Lincoln would agree with these ideas: Always attack. Never coast. Never assume. Pay attention to the big picture AND the small details. Have the right weapons. Have contingencies and adjust the plan when you need to.

And Finally:

I continue to work with many clients on team building issues, and I intend to use some of Lincoln's wisdom with those clients in the future... If you want more thoughts about this book, or want to add your own, check out my blog. You can visit it at <http://richsteel.blogspot.com>

Or to talk more about this and other topics, e-mail me (Rich Steel) at rsbvc@aol.com or call me at my office on 610 388 3680 or on my cell at 610 324 8466.