

2006 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN FOR *TEAM OF RIVALS: THE POLITICAL GENIUS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN*



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

As I've never been good at masking my emotions, let me start by saying I am absolutely thrilled to be standing here – so grateful for this wonderful award and so happy to share it with all of you.

For as long as I can remember I have loved history – a love shaped, I believe, by two childhood experiences: first, my mother's chronic illness. She had had rheumatic fever as a child which left her with a damaged heart, so damaged that the doctors said she had the arteries of a 70 year old when she was only 30. Though it made her an invalid, she read books in every spare moment she could find, despite having only an eighth grade education. And every night she would read to me as long as I could stay awake – that childhood dream of never having to go to sleep. The only thing I loved more than listening to a book was listening to stories about her childhood. I somehow became obsessed with the idea that if I could keep her talking about the days when she was young and healthy before her illness set in, that her mind would control her body and the premature aging process we were witnessing would be stopped in its tracks. So I would constantly say to her: Mom, tell me a story about the days when you were my age, not realizing how peculiar that was until I had my own three boys, not one of whom has ever begged me to tell them a story of the days when I was young!

The second root of my love of history can be traced to my father's love of baseball. When I was only six, he taught me how to keep score so that I could record for him that afternoon's Brooklyn Dodger game while he was at work in New York. And then when he returned he would listen with rapt attention as I recounted every single play of every inning of the game, making me feel that history was magic, even if just the history of a game taking place only hours before. In fact, I'm convinced I learned the narrative art from those nightly sessions with my father for at first I would be so excited I would blurt out: "The Dodgers won or the Dodgers lost", which took much of the drama of this telling away. So I learned I had

to tell a story from beginning to middle to end. Much later, I read an essay by my heroine, Barbara Tuchman who advised even when writing about a war you must imagine to yourself you do not know how that war ended so you can carry your reader with you every step along the way from beginning to middle to end – the very lesson I learned instinctively as a child keeping my father’s attention.

If my love of history was rooted in those childhood experiences, my fascination with the presidency came from the privilege of working with one president - LBJ. My relationship with him began on a curious note. When I was 24 I was chosen as a White House Fellow. There was a big dance at the White House to celebrate; President Johnson danced with me, which was not that peculiar since there were only three female Fellows that year. In the course of our dancing, he whispered that he wanted me to be assigned directly to him in the White House. But it was not to be that simple. For in the months prior to the dance, like many young people, I had been active in the antiwar movement, and had written an article against LBJ which came out in the New Republic not long after the dance at the White House, Its theme: how to remove LBJ from power. I was certain he would kick me out of the program but surprisingly he said bring her down here for a year and if I can’t win her over, no one can.

So I eventually ended up working for him and then accompanying him to his ranch to help on his memoirs during last years of his life - never fully understanding why he had chosen me to spend so much time with. I liked to believe it was because I was a good listener. He was a great storyteller. Though I later discovered that many of his stories were not true, they were great nonetheless. So I think part of his attraction to me was that I loved listening to his tall tales.

The older I’ve gotten, the more I realize what a privilege it was to have spent so many hours with this aging lion of a man – a victor in a thousand contests – three great civil rights laws, Medicare, head start, the war on poverty, and yet roundly defeated in the end by the war in Vietnam. In his vulnerable state, he opened up to me in ways he never would have had I known him at the height of his power – sharing his fears, sorrows and worries. I’d like to believe that this privilege fired within me the drive to understand the inner person behind the public figures - which I’ve tried to bring to each of my subjects since then.

In searching for my next topic after completing my first work on LBJ, I embarked upon a three-generation history of the Kennedy family. Here again, luck played a role. Because my husband had worked in the Kennedy White House and knew the family well, I was given access to 150 cartons of documents belonging to Joe and Rose Kennedy that had recently been shipped to the Kennedy library but were not yet catalogued. Crammed in boxes that had stood for years in storage were thousands of letters, newspaper clippings, and photographs – a biographer’s dream equivalent to my extensive conversations with LBJ.

The special advantages I had been accorded in both books proved both a blessing and a curse. I can still remember the anxiety I felt the first time I went to the Roosevelt Library to begin research on my next work on Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and the home front during World War II. This time there would be no cache of papers, no long talks with the principals, and I wondered whether I was up to the task. Yet with fear came the hope that, by then, I had learned the historian's craft and could do what historians have always been able to do- dig through primary materials, search through manuscript collections, old newspapers and diaries.

My favorite source turned out to be the White House Usher Diaries – handwritten entries kept at the end of each day recording when Eleanor and Franklin awakened, who accompanied them at breakfast, lunch or dinner, where they went during the day. Previous historians had used them for dramatic days – Pearl Harbor, Election Day, and Inaugural Day – but I took notes on every entry for every day from 1940 to 1945. For once I knew who had come that day; I could track down their diaries and letters describing the meetings or the lunches. This process led to massive notebooks arranged chronologically with all supplementary material attached. Not that the story would be told in strict chronological order but it allowed me to think day by day, to know only what my subjects knew at that moment, moving step by step through the war just as Barbara Tuchman had recommended.

It took six years to write – longer than the war took to be fought – but I felt enlarged in the presence of these two extraordinary individuals and at the same time humbled by the remarkable generation that fought and died to save Western civilization against the threat of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany.

When I took the giant leap after FDR and World War II to go backward in time to the 19th century and Abraham Lincoln, the first task was to begin accumulating a Lincoln library. As the shelves began to fill, I had to move my Roosevelt books into another room and I confess to a curious sadness as if I were leaving familiar friends behind.

To be sure, the first several years of the ten-year project were filled with worry as to whether I could find my own road into this oft told tale. But at the same time, I had the intense pleasure of immersing myself in the Lincoln literature, containing some of the finest books in American history. And I found what all of you know – a community of research scholars willing to share their ideas, their sources and their vastly greater knowledge with a rookie entering the field.

I thought at first I would focus on the relationship between Mary and Lincoln as I had done with Eleanor and Franklin, but I soon realized Mary couldn't carry the public side of the story as Eleanor could. Moreover, as I plunged into the invaluable three volume Day by Day series, I began to see that Lincoln was spending far more time with the members of his cabinet than with Mary- one could almost say he was married to them more in terms of emotions shared and hours spent as they sat together in

meetings, in the telegraph office, took carriage rides in the afternoons and relaxed together at night. So, still shy about tackling Lincoln, I decided to study the cabinet members in depth first, focusing particularly on his three rivals for the nomination, Seward, Chase and Bates, as well as Stanton, hoping that if I could at least master some understanding of them, I could bring that understanding to bear on Lincoln.

By widening the lens to include Lincoln's colleagues and their families, I was able to make use of a treasure trove of primary sources that have not been generally used in Lincoln biographies. The correspondence of the Seward family contains nearly five thousand letters, including an 800 page diary which Seward's daughter Fanny kept from her fifteenth year until two weeks before her death at the age of twenty-one. In addition to the voluminous journals in which he recorded the events of four decades, Salmon Chase wrote hundreds of personal letters. A revealing section of his daughter Kate's diary also survives, along with dozens of letters from her husband, William Sprague. The unpublished section of the diary Bates began in 1846 reveals a more intimate glimpse of the man than the published diary that starts in 1859. Letters to his wife Julia during his years in Congress expose the warmth beneath his stolid exterior. Stanton's emotional letters to his family and his sister's unpublished sketch reveal the devotion and idealism that connected the passionate, hard-driving war Secretary to his president.

Slowly, I gained confidence that I knew "my guys," though I was still unsure how to structure the story. Then one weekend I took a copy of *Plutarch's Lives* off the shelf. I had not read it since graduate school. I was entranced once more with the insights Plutarch gained by his comparative technique and began to think, what if I couple Lincoln's early life with that of his rivals? Maybe then the familiar story of his barren childhood, lack of schooling, political oratory, complicated marriage and male friendships would be seen in a different light.

So I decided to follow Seward, Chase, Bates and Stanton – as they, along with Lincoln, came of age, studied law, entered politics and opposed the spread of slavery, hoping by the time that Lincoln put them into his cabinet, the reader would know them all as if each had been given a small biography in his own right.

What struck me most forcibly when I measured Lincoln against his rivals was the profound nature of his ambition – a fierce ambition, desiring nothing less than to accomplish something so worthy that his story could be told after he died, yet as Don Fehrenbacher observes, an ambition free from pettiness, malice and overindulgence, an ambition that shared little ground with Chase's blatant obsession with office, Seward's tendency toward opportunism, or the ambivalent ambition that led Bates to withdraw from public life in favor of his family.

Even as a child Lincoln dreamed heroic dreams. From the outset he was aware of a destiny beyond that of his unlettered father and hardscrabble childhood. While his formal schooling did not

amount to one full year, books became his academy, his college. It was said that when he got a copy of the King James Bible or Shakespeare's plays, he was so excited he couldn't sleep, he couldn't eat. "There is no frigate like a Book," wrote Emily Dickinson, "to take us Lands away." Though Lincoln would never leave America, he traveled with Byron's poetry to Spain and Portugal and followed the English Kings into battle with Shakespeare. It was through literature that he was able to transcend his surroundings.

But there were so many losses in his early life that he was haunted by death. His mother died when he was only nine, his only sister in childbirth a few years later and his first love, Ann Rutledge, at 22. Moreover, as his mother lay dying, she did not hold out to him the promise that they would be reunited in the hereafter. She simply said, "Abraham, I am going away from you and I shall never return." As a result, he became obsessed with the thought that when we die, that is the last of us, that our life on earth is simply swept away, dust to dust. As he grew older, however, he seemed to find consolation in the ancient Greek notion that when we die our image lives on in the memory of others; he derived comfort from the thought that if he could accomplish something that would stand the test of time, his reputation would outlive his earthly life.

That admirable ambition became his lodestar. It carried him through his one significant depression when he was in his early thirties, when three things combined to lay him low. His engagement to Mary Todd had been broken; Joshua Speed, the only friend to whom he had opened his heart, was leaving Springfield, and his political career was on a downward slide. "I am now the most miserable man living," he told a friend. "To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better." Worried that he was suicidal, his friends removed all razors and knives from his room.

Speed warned Lincoln, in a conversation both men would remember as long as they lived, that if he did not rally he would most certainly die. Lincoln said he was more than willing to die, but had done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived and that to leave the world a little better place for his having lived in it was what he desired to live for. Fueled by this ambition, he gradually recovered from his depression. He returned to the state legislature, eventually won a seat in Congress, and then, after losing twice for the Senate, surprised the nation with an upset victory to win the Republican nomination for the presidency over three far better known, far more experienced rivals.

Then when he won the election, he stunned the nation even more by appointing all three of these rivals to his cabinet, an unprecedented act, especially since each one of them thought he should have been president instead of Lincoln. Their presence threatened to eclipse the prairie lawyer from Illinois. When asked why he had done this, he said it was simple. They were the strongest men in the country, the country was in peril. He could not deprive the country of their services.

But it soon became clear that Abraham Lincoln would emerge as the undisputed captain of this most unusual team of rivals as each of them came to realize that he possessed an unparalleled array of

emotional strengths that proved far more important than the relative thinness of his external resume. He possessed an uncanny ability to empathize with and understand other people's points of view. He repaired injured feelings that might have escalated into permanent hostility. He shared credit with ease, assumed responsibility for the failures of his subordinates, and learned from his mistakes. He refused to be provoked by petty grievances, to submit to jealousy, or to brood over perceived slights. Time and again, he was the one who dispelled his colleague's anxiety and sustained their spirits with his gift for storytelling and his life-affirming sense of humor. And he expressed his unshakeable convictions in a language of enduring beauty, almost as if the rhythms of the Bible and his beloved Shakespeare had worked their way into his very soul.

In 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, Lincoln invited his old friend Joshua Speed to the White House. He reminded Speed of their conversation of two decades earlier. Then, speaking of the Proclamation, he declared: "I believe that in this measure . . . my fondest hopes will be realized." As he was about to put his signature on the historic proclamation, however, he found that his arm was numb from shaking a thousand hands at a New Years reception earlier that day. "If my hand trembles when I sign this," Lincoln said, putting down the pen, "all who examine the document hereafter will say, 'He hesitated.' Yet I never in my life felt more certain that I was doing right. If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it." So he waited a moment until he was ready to sign with a bold, clear and firm hand.

It saddened me to realize that Lincoln had only a few days before his death to relish the thought that the war was winding to a close, only a few days to realize that the pledge he had made at Gettysburg had been fulfilled, that all those who had given their lives had in fact not died in vain, for with the Union victory, the idea of America - the idea that ordinary people could govern themselves - had been preserved, a beacon of hope to the world at large.

I confess that after living with this remarkable man day after day for the ten years, I had trouble bringing his story to an end until I discovered a stunning interview with Leo Tolstoy in the New York World in 1908 in which Tolstoy told of a trip he had taken to a remote area of the Caucasus where he met with a group of local warriors. Gathering family and neighbors around, the chief asked Tolstoy to tell stories about the famous men of history. When Tolstoy was winding to a close - after entertaining the crowd for hours with tales of Alexander, Frederick the Great and Napoleon - the chief stood and said, "But you have not told us about the greatest ruler of the world - the man who spoke with a voice of thunder, who laughed like the sunrise, who lived in a land called America, which is so far away that if a youth should journey to reach it he would be an old man when he arrived. Tell us of that man. Tell us of Lincoln."

After telling them everything he knew about Lincoln's life, Tolstoy pondered why it was that Lincoln overshadowed all the others – not a great general like Napoleon, not a skillful statesman like Frederick the Great. But, Tolstoy concluded, and historians the world over would readily agree, his supremacy expressed itself altogether in his peculiar moral power and in the greatness of his character.

So in the end, the fierce ambition that had carried Lincoln through his bleak childhood, his laborious efforts to educate himself, his string of political failures and the darkest months of the war when he was called upon again and again to rally his disheartened countrymen, soothe the animosity of his generals, and mediate among members of his often contentious administration had been realized in ways he never could have imagined. His story would be told and retold for generations.

For honoring me as one of those storytellers tonight, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Just as a hologram is created through the interference of light from separate sources, so the lives and impressions of those who companioned Lincoln provided a clearer and more dimensional picture of the president himself. The growth of Lincoln's political genius was revealed in the amazing wealth of papers left by these competitors-turned-collaborators. Their diaries, statements to others, and letters exchanged with families, friends, and contemporaries offer countless episodes and memories from which a more human and nuanced picture coalesces. We see Lincoln late at night relaxing at Seward's house, his long legs stretched before a blazing fire. We hear his curious and infectious humor in the punch lines of his favorite stories and sit in on clamorous cabinet discussions regarding emancipation and reconstruction. There are moving accounts of Lincoln's numerous visits to the front, where his kind presence lifts the soldiers' spirits, as well as his own. We can feel the enervating tension in the telegraph office as he clasps Stanton's hand awaiting bulletins from the battlefield. Taken together, these perceptions and perspectives allow us an intimate glimpse of a monumental figure.