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LINCOLN

BASED IN PART ON

TEAM OF RIVALS

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN

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TEAM OF RIVALS



THE POLITICAL GENIUS

of

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

DORIS KEARNS

GOODWIN

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Endpapers: (*Front*) View from Pennsylvania Avenue of the unfinished U.S.
Capitol in the 1850s; (*back*) view from Pennsylvania Avenue of the finished Capitol
building, taken after Lincoln's death.

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*For Richard N. Goodwin,
my husband of thirty years*

“The conduct of the republican party in this nomination is a remarkable indication of small intellect, growing smaller. They pass over ... statesmen and able men, and they take up a fourth rate lecturer, who cannot speak good grammar.”

—The *New York Herald* (May 19, 1860), commenting on Abraham Lincoln’s nomination for president at the Republican National Convention

“Why, if the old Greeks had had this man, what trilogies of plays—what epics—would have been made out of him! How the rhapsodes would have recited him! How quickly that quaint tall form would have enter’d into the region where men vitalize gods, and gods divinify men! But Lincoln, his times, his death—great as any, any age— belong altogether to our own.”

—Walt Whitman, “Death of Abraham Lincoln,” 1879

“The greatness of Napoleon, Caesar or Washington is only moonlight by the sun of Lincoln. His example is universal and will last thousands of years... . He was bigger than his country— bigger than all the Presidents together ... and as a great character he will live as long as the world lives.”

—Leo Tolstoy, *The World*, New York, 1909

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INTRODUCTION

In 1876, the celebrated orator Frederick Douglass dedicated a monument in Washington, D.C., erected by black Americans to honor Abraham Lincoln. The former slave told his audience that “there is little necessity on this occasion to speak at length and critically of this great and good man, and of his high mission in the world. That ground has been fully occupied. ...The whole field of fact and fancy has been gleaned and garnered. Any man can say things that are true of Abraham Lincoln, but no man can say anything that is new of Abraham Lincoln.”

Speaking only eleven years after Lincoln’s death, Douglass was too close to assess the fascination that this plain and complex, shrewd and transparent, tender and iron-willed leader would hold for generations of Americans. In the nearly two hundred years since his birth, countless historians and writers have uncovered new documents, provided fresh insights, and developed an ever-deepening understanding of our sixteenth president.

In my own effort to illuminate the character and career of Abraham Lincoln, I have coupled the account of his life with the stories of the remarkable men who were his rivals for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination— New York senator William H. Seward, Ohio governor Salmon P. Chase, and Missouri’s distinguished elder statesman Edward Bates.

Taken together, the lives of these four men give us a picture of the path taken by ambitious young men in the North who came of age in the early decades of the nineteenth century. All four studied law, became distinguished orators, entered politics, and opposed the spread of slavery. Their upward climb was one followed by many thousands who left the small towns of their birth to seek opportunity and adventure in the rapidly growing cities of a dynamic, expanding America.

Just as a hologram is created through the interference of light from separate sources, so the lives and impressions of those who companioned Lincoln give us a clearer and more dimensional picture of the president himself. Lincoln’s barren childhood, his lack of schooling, his relationships with many friends, his complicated marriage, the nature of his ambition, and his ruminations about death can be analyzed more clearly when he is placed side by side with his three contemporaries.

When Lincoln won the nomination, each of his celebrated rivals believed the wrong man had been chosen. Ralph Waldo Emerson recalled his first reception of the news that the “comparative unknown name of Lincoln” had been selected: “we heard the result coldly and sadly. It seemed to us rash, on a purely local reputation, to build so grave a trust in such anxious times.”

Lincoln seemed to have come from nowhere—a backwoods lawyer who had served one undistinguished term in the House of Representatives and had lost two consecutive contests for the U.S. Senate. Contemporaries and historians alike have attributed his surprising nomination to chance—the fact that he came from the battleground state of Illinois and stood in the center of his party. The comparative perspective suggests a different interpretation. When viewed against the failed efforts of his rivals, it is clear that Lincoln won the nomination because he was shrewdest and canniest of them all. More accustomed to relying upon himself to shape events, he took the greatest control of the process leading up to the nomination, displaying a fierce ambition, an exceptional political acumen, and a wide range of emotional strengths, forged in the crucible of personal hardship, that took his unsuspecting rivals by surprise.

That Lincoln, after winning the presidency, made the unprecedented decision to incorporate his eminent rivals into his political family, the cabinet, was evidence of a profound self-confidence and the first indication of what would prove to others a most unexpected greatness. Seward became secretary of state, Chase secretary of the treasury, and Bates attorney general. The remaining top posts Lincoln

offered to three former Democrats whose stories also inhabit these pages—Gideon Welles, Lincoln’s “Neptune,” was made secretary of the navy, Montgomery Blair became postmaster general, and Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln’s “Mars,” eventually became secretary of war. Every member of the administration was better known, better educated, and more experienced in public life than Lincoln. Their presence in the cabinet might have threatened to eclipse the obscure prairie lawyer from Springfield.

It soon became clear, however, that Abraham Lincoln would emerge the undisputed captain of the most unusual cabinet, truly a team of rivals. The powerful competitors who had originally disdained Lincoln became colleagues who helped him steer the country through its darkest days. Seward was the first to appreciate Lincoln’s remarkable talents, quickly realizing the futility of his plan to relegate the president to a figurehead role. In the months that followed, Seward would become Lincoln’s close friend and advisor in the administration. 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.” Edwin Stanton, who had treated Lincoln with contempt at their initial acquaintance, developed a great respect for the commander in chief and was unable to control his tears for weeks after the president’s death. Even Chase, whose restless ambition for the presidency was never realized, at last acknowledged that Lincoln had outmaneuvered him.

This, then, is a story of Lincoln’s political genius revealed through his extraordinary array of personal qualities that enabled him to form friendships with men who had previously opposed him; to repair injured feelings that, left untended, might have escalated into permanent hostility; to assume responsibility for the failures of subordinates; to share credit with ease; and to learn from mistakes. He possessed an acute understanding of the sources of power inherent in the presidency, an unparalleled ability to keep his governing coalition intact, a tough-minded appreciation of the need to protect his presidential prerogatives, and a masterful sense of timing. His success in dealing with the strong egos of the men in his cabinet suggests that in the hands of a truly great politician the qualities we generally associate with decency and morality—kindness, sensitivity, compassion, honesty, and empathy—can also be impressive political resources.

Before I began this book, aware of the sorrowful aspect of his features and the sadness attributed to him by his contemporaries, I had assumed that Lincoln suffered from chronic depression. Yet, with the exception of two despondent episodes in his early life that are described in this story, there is no evidence that he was immobilized by depression. On the contrary, even during the worst days of the war, he retained his ability to function at a very high level.

To be sure, he had a melancholy temperament, most likely imprinted on him from birth. But melancholy differs from depression. It is not an illness; it does not proceed from a specific cause; it is an aspect of one’s nature. It has been recognized by artists and writers for centuries as a potential source of creativity and achievement.

Moreover, Lincoln possessed an uncanny understanding of his shifting moods, a profound self-awareness that enabled him to find constructive ways to alleviate sadness and stress. Indeed, when he is compared with his colleagues, it is clear that he possessed the most even-tempered disposition of them all. Time and again, he was the one who dispelled his colleagues’ anxiety and sustained their spirits with his gift for storytelling and his lifeaffirming sense of humor. When resentment and contention threatened to destroy his administration, he refused to be provoked by petty grievances, to submit to jealousy, or to brood over perceived slights. Through the appalling pressures he faced day after day, he retained an unflagging faith in his country’s cause.

The comparative approach has also yielded an interesting cast of female characters to provide perspective on the Lincolns’ marriage. The fiercely idealistic Frances Seward served as her husband’s

social conscience. The beautiful Kate Chase made her father's quest for the presidency the ruling passion of her life, while the devoted Julia Bates created a blissful home that gradually enticed her husband away from public ambitions. Like Frances Seward, Mary Lincoln displayed a striking intelligence; like Kate Chase, she possessed what was then considered an unladylike interest in politics. Mary's detractors have suggested that if she had created a more tranquil domestic life for her family, Lincoln might have been satisfied to remain in Springfield. Yet the idea that he could have been a contented homebody, like Edward Bates, contradicts everything we know of the powerful ambition that drove him from his earliest days.

By widening the lens to include Lincoln's colleagues and their families, my story benefited from a treasure trove of primary sources that have not generally been used in Lincoln biographies. The correspondence of the Seward family contains nearly five thousand letters, including an eighthundred-page diary that 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 Salmon Chase recorded the events of four decades, he wrote thousands 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 that Bates began in 1846 provides 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 memoir reveal the devotion and idealism that connected the passionate, hard-driving woman to his secretary to his president. The correspondence of Montgomery Blair's sister, Elizabeth Blair Lee, and her husband, Captain Samuel Phillips Lee, leaves a memorable picture of daily life in wartime Washington. The diary of Gideon Welles, of course, has long been recognized for its penetrating insights into the workings of the Lincoln administration.

Through these fresh sources, we see Lincoln liberated from his familiar frock coat and stovepipe hat. We see him late at night relaxing at Seward's house, his long legs stretched before a blazing fire, talking of many things besides the war. 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. We feel the enervating tension in the telegraph office as Lincoln clasps Stanton's hand, awaiting bulletins from the battlefield. We follow him to the front on a dozen occasions and observe the invigorating impact of his sympathetic, kindly presence on the morale of the troops. In all these varied encounters, Lincoln's vibrant personality shines through. In the mirrors of his colleagues he comes to life.

As a young man, Lincoln worried that the "field of glory" had been harvested by the founding fathers, that nothing had been left for his generation but modest ambitions. In the 1850s, however, the wheel of history turned. The rising intensity of the slavery issue and the threatening dissolution of the nation itself provided Lincoln and his colleagues with an opportunity to save and improve the democracy established by Washington, Jefferson, and Adams, creating what Lincoln later called "a new birth of freedom." Without the march of events that led to the Civil War, Lincoln still would have been a good man, but most likely would never have been publicly recognized as a great man. It was history that gave him the opportunity to manifest his greatness, providing the stage that allowed him to shape and transform our national life.

For better than thirty years, as a working historian, I have written on leaders I knew, such as Lyndon Johnson, and interviewed intimates of the Kennedy family and many who knew Franklin Roosevelt, a leader perhaps as indispensable in his way as was Lincoln to the social and political direction of the country. After living with the subject of Abraham Lincoln for a decade, however, reading what he himself wrote and what hundreds of others have written about him, following the a

of his ambition, and assessing the inevitable mixture of human foibles and strengths that made up his temperament, after watching him deal with the terrible deprivations of his childhood, the deaths of his children, and the horror that engulfed the entire nation, I find that after nearly two centuries, the uniquely American story of Abraham Lincoln has unequalled power to captivate the imagination and to inspire emotion.

WASHINGTON, D.C., DURING THE CIVIL WAR





CHAPTER 1

FOUR MEN WAITING

On May 18, 1860, the day when the Republican Party would nominate its candidate for president Abraham Lincoln was up early. As he climbed the stairs to his plainly furnished law office on the west side of the public square in Springfield, Illinois, breakfast was being served at the 130-room Chene House on Fourth Street. Fresh butter, flour, lard, and eggs were being put out for sale at the City Grocery Store on North Sixth Street. And in the morning newspaper, the proprietors at Smit Wickersham & Company had announced the arrival of a large spring stock of silks, calicos, gingham and linens, along with a new supply of the latest styles of hosiery and gloves.

The Republicans had chosen to meet in Chicago. A new convention hall called the "Wigwam" had been constructed for the occasion. The first ballot was not due to be called until 10 a.m. and Lincoln, although patient by nature, was visibly "nervous, fidgety, and intensely excited." With an outside chance to secure the Republican nomination for the highest office of the land, he was unable to focus on his work. Even under ordinary circumstances many would have found concentration difficult in the untidy office Lincoln shared with his younger partner, William Herndon. Two worktables, piled high with papers and correspondence, formed a T in the center of the room. Additional documents and letters spilled out from the drawers and pigeonholes of an outmoded secretary in the corner. When he needed a particular piece of correspondence, Lincoln had to rifle through disorderly stacks of papers, rummaging, as a last resort, in the lining of his old plug hat, where he often put stray letters or notes.

Restlessly descending to the street, he passed the state capitol building, set back from the road, and the open lot where he played handball with his friends, and climbed a short set of stairs to the office of the *Illinois State Journal*, the local Republican newspaper. The editorial room on the second floor, with a central large wood-burning stove, was a gathering place for the exchange of news and gossip.

He wandered over to the telegraph office on the north side of the square to see if any new dispatches had come in. There were few outward signs that this was a day of special moment and expectation in the history of Springfield, scant record of any celebration or festivity planned should Lincoln, long their fellow townsman, actually secure the nomination. That he had garnered the support of the Illinois delegation at the state convention at Decatur earlier that month was widely understood to be a "complimentary" gesture. Yet if there were no firm plans to celebrate his dark horse bid, Lincoln knew well the ardor of his staunch circle of friends already at work on his behalf on the floor of the Wigwam.

The hands of the town clock on the steeple of the Baptist church on Adams Street must have seemed not to move. When Lincoln learned that his longtime friend James Conkling had returned unexpectedly from the convention the previous evening, he walked over to Conkling's office above Chatterton's jewelry store. Told that his friend was expected within the hour, he returned to his own quarters, intending to come back as soon as Conkling arrived.

Lincoln's shock of black hair, brown furrowed face, and deep-set eyes made him look older than his fifty-one years. He was a familiar figure to almost everyone in Springfield, as was his singular way of walking, which gave the impression that his long, gaunt frame needed oiling. He plodded forward in an awkward manner, hands hanging at his sides or folded behind his back. His step had no spring, his partner William Herndon recalled. He lifted his whole foot at once rather than lifting from the toe and then thrust the whole foot down on the ground rather than landing on his heel. "His legs," another observer noted, "seemed to drag from the knees down, like those of a laborer going home after a hard day's work."

His features, even supporters conceded, were not such “as belong to a handsome man.” In repose his face was “so overspread with sadness,” the reporter Horace White noted, that it seemed as if “Shakespeare’s melancholy Jacques had been translated from the forest of Arden to the capital of Illinois.” Yet, when Lincoln began to speak, White observed, “this expression of sorrow dropped from him instantly. His face lighted up with a winning smile, and where I had a moment before seen only leaden sorrow I now beheld keen intelligence, genuine kindness of heart, and the promise of true friendship.” If his appearance seemed somewhat odd, what captivated admirers, another contemporary observed, was “his winning manner, his ready good humor, and his unaffected kindness and gentleness.” Five minutes in his presence, and “you cease to think that he is either homely or awkward.”

Springfield had been Lincoln’s home for nearly a quarter of a century. He had arrived in the young city to practice law at twenty-eight years old, riding into town, his great friend Joshua Speed recalled “on a borrowed horse, with no earthly property save a pair of saddle-bags containing a few clothes.” The city had grown rapidly, particularly after 1839, when it became the capital of Illinois. By 1860 Springfield boasted nearly ten thousand residents, though its business district, designed to accommodate the expanding population that arrived in town when the legislature was in session, housed thousands more. Ten hotels radiated from the public square where the capitol building stood. In addition, there were multiple saloons and restaurants, seven newspapers, three billiard halls, dozens of retail stores, three military armories, and two railroad depots.

Here in Springfield, in the Edwards mansion on the hill, Lincoln had courted and married “the belle of the town,” young Mary Todd, who had come to live with her married sister, Elizabeth, wife of Ninian Edwards, the well-to-do son of the former governor of Illinois. Raised in a prominent Lexington, Kentucky, family, Mary had received an education far superior to most girls her age. For four years she had studied languages and literature in an exclusive boarding school and then spent two additional years in what was considered graduate study. The story is told of Lincoln’s first meeting with Mary at a festive party. Captivated by her lively manner, intelligent face, clear blue eyes, and dimpled smile, Lincoln reportedly said, “I want to dance with you in the worst way.” And, Mary laughingly told her cousin later that night, “he certainly did.” In Springfield, all their children were born, and one was buried. In that spring of 1860, Mary was forty-two, Robert sixteen, William nine, and Thomas seven. Edward, the second son, had died at the age of three.

Their home, described at the time as a modest “two-story frame house, having a wide hall running through the centre, with parlors on both sides,” stood close to the street and boasted few trees and no garden. “The adornments were few, but chastely appropriate,” one contemporary observer noted. In the center hall stood “the customary little table with a white marble top,” on which were arranged flowers, a silver-plated ice-water pitcher, and family photographs. Along the walls were positioned some chairs and a sofa. “Everything,” a journalist observed, “tended to represent the home of a man who has battled hard with the fortunes of life, and whose hard experience had taught him to enjoy whatever of success belongs to him, rather in solid substance than in showy display.”

During his years in Springfield, Lincoln had forged an unusually loyal circle of friends. They had worked with him in the state legislature, helped him in his campaigns for Congress and the Senate, and now, at this very moment, were guiding his efforts at the Chicago convention, “moving heaven and Earth,” they assured him, in an attempt to secure him the nomination. These steadfast companions included David Davis, the Circuit Court judge for the Eighth District, whose three-hundred-pound body was matched by “a big brain and a big heart”; Norman Judd, an attorney for the railroads and chairman of the Illinois Republican state central committee; Leonard Swett, a lawyer from Bloomington who believed he knew Lincoln “as intimately as I have ever known any man in my life.”

and Stephen Logan, Lincoln's law partner for three years in the early forties.

Many of these friendships had been forged during the shared experience of the "circuit," the eight weeks each spring and fall when Lincoln and his fellow lawyers journeyed together throughout the state. They shared rooms and sometimes beds in dusty village inns and taverns, spending long evenings gathered together around a blazing fire. The economics of the legal profession in sparsely populated Illinois were such that lawyers had to move about the state in the company of the circuit judge, trying thousands of small cases in order to make a living. The arrival of the traveling bar brought life and vitality to the county seats, fellow rider Henry Whitney recalled. Villagers congregated on the courthouse steps. When the court sessions were complete, everyone would gather in the local tavern from dusk to dawn, sharing drinks, stories, and good cheer.

In these convivial settings, Lincoln was invariably the center of attention. No one could equal his never-ending stream of stories nor his ability to reproduce them with such contagious mirth. As his winding tales became more famous, crowds of villagers awaited his arrival at every stop for the chance to hear a master storyteller. Everywhere he went, he won devoted followers, friendships that later emboldened his quest for office. Political life in these years, the historian Robert Wiebe has observed, "broke down into clusters of men who were bound together by mutual trust." And no political circle was more loyally bound than the band of compatriots working for Lincoln in Chicago.

The prospects for his candidacy had taken wing in 1858 after his brilliant campaign against the formidable Democratic leader, Stephen Douglas, in a dramatic senate race in Illinois that had attracted national attention. Though Douglas had won a narrow victory, Lincoln managed to unite the disparate elements of his state's fledgling Republican Party—that curious amalgamation of former Whig antislavery Democrats, nativists, foreigners, radicals, and conservatives. In the mid-1850s, the Republican Party had come together in state after state in the North with the common goal of preventing the spread of slavery to the territories. "Of *strange, discordant*, and even, *hostile* elements," Lincoln proudly claimed, "we gathered from the four winds, and *formed* and fought the battle through." The story of Lincoln's rise to power was inextricably linked to the increasing intensity of the antislavery cause. Public feeling on the slavery issue had become so flammable that Lincoln's seven debates with Douglas were carried in newspapers across the land, proving the prairie lawyer from Springfield more than a match for the most likely Democratic nominee for the presidency.

Furthermore, in an age when speech-making prowess was central to political success, when the spoken word filled the air "from sun-up til sundown," Lincoln's stirring oratory had earned the admiration of a far-flung audience who had either heard him speak or read his speeches in the paper. As his reputation grew, the invitations to speak multiplied. In the year before the convention, he had appeared before tens of thousands of people in Ohio, Iowa, Indiana, Wisconsin, Kentucky, New York, and New England. The pinnacle of his success was reached at Cooper Union in New York, where, on the evening of February 27, 1860, before a zealous crowd of more than fifteen hundred people, Lincoln delivered what the *New York Tribune* called "one of the happiest and most convincing political arguments ever made in this City" in defense of Republican principles and the need to confine slavery to the places where it already existed. "The vast assemblage frequently rang with cheers and shouts of applause, which were prolonged and intensified at the close. No man ever before made such an impression on his first appeal to a New-York audience."

Lincoln's success in the East bolstered his supporters at home. On May 10, the fired-up Republican state convention at Decatur nominated him for president, labeling him "the Rail Candidate for President" after two fence rails he had supposedly split in his youth were ceremoniously carried into the hall. The following week, the powerful *Chicago Press and Tribune* formally endorsed Lincoln

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