

Obama's *Presidency for Dummies*

Scott Hargreaves reviews

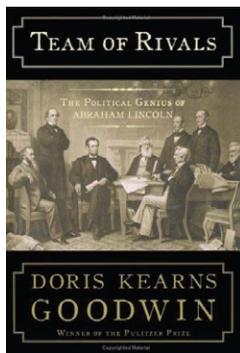
Team of Rivals

by Doris Kearns Goodwin
(Simon & Schuster, 2005,
944 pages)

In selecting Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State President Obama has made history repeat itself. His historical guide-book is *Team of Rivals*, a big fat gem of a book from Doris Kearns Goodwin which has proven irresistible to the US political class and also to many ordinary readers.

The key tale told in the book which drew the eye of Obama, Clinton, and the watching media, was that of a previous upstart President-elect from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln who chose as Secretary of State his defeated rival for party nomination—a previous Senator from New York named William Seward. Obama has famously read *Team of Rivals* and afterwards telephoned the author to discuss it. His appointment of Senator Clinton is therefore said to be part of a self-conscious effort to emulate the conciliatory measures of America's greatest President. 'I think it reflects a great inner strength on Obama's part that he is seriously considering creating a team of rivals as Lincoln did,' Goodwin has told the US media.

When Lincoln succumbed to the assassin's bullet it was one of his Cabinet members who said 'now he belongs to the ages', and from the vantage of the twenty-first century it is easy to fall for the trap of seeing not the real Lincoln, but some kind of secular saint. Not the real man, but the marble figure whose eternal gaze looks down past the Washington Monument towards the Capitol. Goodwin has done a great service by her subtle understanding and deft re-telling of the political machinations of Lincoln's time, breathing life back into the man and, if anything, increasing our appreci-



ation for what he achieved. Goodwin has previously written studies of FDR, the Kennedys and of Lyndon Johnson, and has a clear skill in interpreting politics.

The real Lincoln had his principles, but he was a politician in what then and now is the most thoroughly democratic nation on earth. Until the watershed year of 1860 his political career had seen thirty years of electoral striving, mostly resulting in failure. He practiced for his famous magnanimity in victory by repeatedly displaying graciousness in defeat. At the Republican National Convention his come from behind victory over Seward and also secondary rivals Salmon Chase and Edward Bates owed much to the skills honed in those years. As Kearns puts it: 'having risen to power with fewer privileges than any of his rivals, Lincoln was more accustomed to rely upon himself to shape events.' Not for nothing is the sub-title of the book 'the political genius of Abraham Lincoln.'

Even Lincoln had to bow to political realities. On the night before the vote was taken at the nominating Convention, Lincoln's representatives told him they could bring across the crucial votes of Pennsylvania if its leading light, Simon Cameron, was promised a place in Cabinet; 'Make no contracts that will bind me,' he cabled back, but the fixers went ahead anyway, saying 'Lincoln ain't here, and don't know what we have to meet.' Plausible deniability having been established, the votes were delivered and Cameron became Secretary for War.

Team of Rivals has been described

as a multi-biography, focussing on Lincoln and the three other men who stood for nomination as the candidate of the fledgling Republican party, each of whom was brought into the Cabinet. For Lincoln, the stakes were high because each of the other men represented distinct constituencies within the party. Seward was a Senator from New York and seen as the most abolitionist of the four and therefore most repugnant to the interest of the Southern and border states. Bates was from Missouri, one of the border states (which were slave states but which remained loyal to the Union) and was formally still a member of the moribund Whig party rather than a Republican. Chase was an Ohio politician with a national profile through his anti-slavery stance, but seen as more pragmatic than Seward, and was seen by abolitionists as too willing to appease the South. As the convention got under way, Lincoln emerged as the only candidate who could carry every Northern state.

Since the Democrats had split on the question of slavery and the Electoral College which decided the Presidency (based on votes in each state) was effectively 'first past the post', achieving the majority in each and every anti-slavery state was critical to the Republican's political strategy. Lincoln—who was opposed to slavery but who said that preserving the Union took precedence—was not only the compromise candidate between the factions but the one whom the machine-men believed would stand the best chance of claiming the White House whilst preserving the Union.

With the election won the push for secession in the Deep South became virtually unstoppable. With Lincoln's blessing Seward made a conciliatory speech to the Senate, but its real targets were the border states and the waverers within them. Obama is said to approach Lincoln in his ability as a speechmaker, so it is interesting that Goodwin shows how deeply the earlier President and Seward collaborated on Lincoln's first speech as President, carefully calibrating the mes-

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Civil War-era commemorative envelope of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet. New-York Historical Society, Library of Congress

sages to the South and their own constituencies. The closing call to the 'mystic chords of memory' was drawn from one of Seward's suggestions. That Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia, all slave states, all remained within the Union was a positive outcome of this diplomacy.

As well as tracking the high politics of the time, Goodwin is perceptive and occasionally touching on the personal lives of the protagonists. This is helpful in understanding the politics, but has its own interest. Salmon Chase, for instance, had faced the tragedy of the death of three wives, and his beautiful and effervescent daughter Kate took on—very successfully—the duties of Washington hostess. Seward had married an ardent abolitionist who for health reasons did not move to Washington, and their correspondence is full of loneliness and love, as well as political fervour and high idealism. The account of the tragic death of Lincoln's eleven year old son, Willie, from typhoid in 1862 and the impact this had on the President and his wife, Mary, is difficult for any parent to read.

Providing this context enables Goodwin to make the critical link between the various personal lives and the success of Lincoln's achievement in creating a (mostly) united and effective Cabinet. As Fox News has observed in this context, many Presidents claim to want a government of talent and independent thought, but few have the

wherewithal to achieve it. Nixon said that he abhorred yes-men, and then fired anyone who disagreed with him. Carter's early commitment to Cabinet process and weekly meetings trailed off into grudging acceptance and monthly sessions. Lincoln made it real by exercising restraint in public forums and his considerable charm and powers of persuasion in private meetings. He used to call on Seward in the evenings, and the two men swiftly became such firm friends that Seward publicly attested to Lincoln's fitness for command and put aside any thoughts of his own advancement.

The First Lady, Mary Lincoln, established new precedents in terms of entertaining the Washington social elite, and by her skills in staging events and judicious distribution of invitations helped overcome the initial scepticism of the manners of the President from the frontier. Goodwin provides a juicy digression on Mary's shopping sprees to furnish the White House and her personal wardrobe—enough to rival Jackie Kennedy or Sarah Palin—precisely because it is relevant to the wider objective of establishing Presidential legitimacy and social leverage for the First Family. At a time when Lincoln's senior General, the aristocratic (and ineffectual) George McClellan was snubbing his Commander-in-Chief and referring to him as the 'original gorilla', the battle for social standing was inseparable from the wider political project. Perhaps our

era's Presidential 'Chimp'—as George W Bush was sometimes called—would not have fared so badly in elite opinion if his determinedly private First Lady had taken more of a lead from Mary Lincoln's example.

If President Obama has displayed any reticence about accepting that Hillary Clinton can be a twenty-first William Seward, it perhaps reveals that he is thinking of another story from Goodwin's book. While Lincoln and Seward became firm friends and an effective team, the partnership with Secretary of Treasury, Salmon Chase was less smooth. Chase was a capable administrator but faced allegations of corruption. Somewhat of a drama queen he had a habit of offering his resignation to Lincoln over the merest perceived slight, convinced his abilities and political base made him indispensable. Described by Goodwin as having 'an insatiable desire for supreme office', Chase continued to serve in Lincoln's Cabinet while not-so-privately canvassing to replace him as the Republican candidate for the 1864 election. The ever-patient and restrained Lincoln never revealed his exasperation, and only when he felt secure did he strike, accepting with alacrity an offer of resignation that Chase had written purely as a pro forma. We can only wonder whether Obama questioned in respect of Hillary Clinton: is she a Seward, or a Chase?

