TEAM OF RIVALS

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He “was a humanitarian as broad as the world. He was bigger than his country”. Is this a speech at the funeral of Nelson Mandela? No, it is Leo Tolstoy describing Abraham Lincoln. Tolstoy goes on to say: “He was not a great general like Napoleon or Washington; he was not such a skilful statesman as Gladstone or Frederick the Great, but his supremacy expresses itself altogether in his peculiar moral power and in the greatness of his character… His genius is still too strong and too powerful for the common understanding, just as the sun is too hot when its light beams directly on us.”

Another literary figure, Walt Whitman, wrote that “Abraham Lincoln seems to me the grandest figure yet, on the crowded canvas of the Nineteenth Century”. And Ulysses S Grant, the future President of the United States stated that “He was incontestably the greatest man I ever knew”.

All these folks are quoted in Pulitzer Prize Winning Author Doris Kearns Goodwin’s very readable and scholarly book “Team of Rivals – The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln”. This book in part inspired the recent film called “Lincoln”. Of course, if the South had won the Civil War then Lincoln probably would have been hanged as a war criminal – if Hitler had prevailed in WW11 we would all be admirers probably of small moustaches.

Reading Goodwin’s book has left me with two overwhelming conclusions – Abraham Lincoln was a very decent human being who was rarely at the mercy of his own ego and that you could learn a lot from him about effective leadership.

Lincoln was a “prairie lawyer” and a surprise candidate for the Presidency. He was surrounded by a field of far greater luminaries than himself, but somehow he managed to out-manoeuvre them and achieve his nomination and election. Having won, he then invited all his jealous and acrimonious rivals to join him in his Cabinet and to contribute their talents to the preservation of the Union. Their sniping and undermining of Lincoln didn’t cease but he tolerated it and navigated it for the greater good.

Lincoln’s leadership contributed to preserving the Union through the bloodiest of Civil Wars and to the abolition of slavery. He combined great Principle and Idealism with breathtaking Pragmatism. He strongly believed in the dignity of human beings but largely from a secular motivation, and he was committed to the democratic experiment which America represented.

There are many interesting paradoxes in his methods. He was definitely conservative by nature and always testing the waters, and yet he strongly believed in the power of argument and advocacy to change people’s minds.

Here is an excerpt from page 596 of Goodwin’s book (did I mention that it is a large book?) where she is referring to commentary at the time from a distinguished Harvard professor whom Lincoln admired:

“For many months, Lowell observed, the untried president seemed too hesitant – on military engagements, on emancipation, on recruiting black troops. Increasingly, it was becoming evident that this Abraham Lincoln was ‘a character of marked individuality and capacity for affairs’. In a democratic nation, Lowell added, ‘where the rough and ready understanding of people is sure at last to be the controlling power, a profound common sense is the best genius for statesmanship’. Lincoln had demonstrated a perfectly calibrated touch for public sentiment and impeccable timing in his introduction of new measures. While some thought he had delayed his decision on emancipation too long, he undoubtedly had a ‘sure footed understanding’ of the American people. ‘Mr Lincoln’s perilous task has been to carry a rather shackly raft through the rapids, making fast the unrulier logs as he could snatch opportunity,’ concluded Lowell, ‘and the country is to be congratulated that he did not think it his duty to run straight at all hazards, but cautiously to assure himself with his setting-pole where the main current was, and keep steadily to that’.”

At the same time, Lincoln did not believe that leadership was simply about following public sentiment – he believed that leaders must actively shape public sentiment. There are some terrific passages in the book about Lincoln’s views on how to influence others and to influence change. In the past I myself have argued that it is not enough for leaders to be right or cogent if they want to be influential, but they need to communicate in ways that their target audience can actually “hear” what it is that they are saying. On pages 167 and 168 of Goodwin’s book she quotes Abraham Lincoln making this point very passionately:

“Unlike the majority of the antislavery orators, who denounced the South and castigated slaveowners as corrupt and un-Christian, Lincoln pointedly denied fundamental differences between Northerners and Southerners. He argued that ‘they are what we would be in there situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up … When it is said that the institution exists and that it is very difficult to get rid of it in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself’.

Rather than upbraid slaveowners, Lincoln sought to comprehend their position through empathy. More than a decade earlier, he had employed a similar approach when he advised temperance advocates to refrain from denouncing drinkers in ‘thundering tones of anathema and denunciation’ for denunciation would inevitably be met with denunciation, ‘crimination with crimination, and anathema with anathema’. In a passage directed at abolitionists as well as temperance reformers, he had observed that it was the nature of man, when told that he should be ‘shunned and despised’, and condemned as the author ‘of all the vice and misery and crime in the land’ to ‘retreat within himself, close all avenues to his head and his heart.’

Though the cause be ‘naked truth itself’ …. the sanctimonious reformer could no more pierce the heart of the drinker or slaveowner than ‘penetrate the hard shell of a tortoise with a rye straw. Such is man, and so must he be understood by those who would lead him’. In order to ‘win a man to your cause’, Lincoln explained, you must first reach his heart, ‘the great high road to reason’. This, he concluded, was the only road to victory – to that glorious day ‘when there shall be neither a slave nor a drunkard on the earth’.”

OK, maybe he went too far with that drunkard reference, but I recommend “Team of Rivals” to you. It certainly convinced me that Abraham Lincoln was a great leader, but even more, I was blown away by his humanity.