Review Essay

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This is a terrific book. Goodwin has stepped with confidence into the well-mined, weary field of Lincoln historiography and emerged with a gem. Of interest to both specialists and generalists, this engaging trip through Civil War politics also offers pointed insight into the politics of today’s America.

Stepping back a century from her usual haunts, Goodwin daringly takes an approach to Lincoln unlike that of any previous biographer. Rather than looking at ever smaller aspects of his career, as historians anxious to carve out a new niche have been wont to do, Goodwin has opened up her lens wide. She shows us a Lincoln at the center of a vibrant political and social community. This is not unlike what David Herbert Donald did a few years ago in his *We Are Lincoln Men.* Goodwin, though, has included the women who made up part of Lincoln’s world. The product is the best rounded view of wartime Washington I have ever read. It is probably the most accurate as well.

Goodwin builds her book around the lives of Lincoln’s cabinet members and their female partners. Following the lives of the four rivals for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination, she introduces her readers to the world of nineteenth-century politics as the men and their companions experienced it. Here, Republican spokesman William Henry Seward climbs his way through the New York political machinery with the help of powerful newspaperman Thurlow Weed. Seward’s developing hunger for politics pulls him away from his beloved wife Frances, who stays mostly at home in New York with their children while he pursues national office, but who is present here through the letters she and her husband exchanged. Missouri’s Edward Bates illuminates the sectional tensions of the antebellum years as well as the domestic contentment with his wife Julia and their seventeen children that curbed his love for politics. Humorless Salmon P. Chase, whose moral stand against slavery dragged him into politics, is the pompous representative of abolitionism. Burying three wives before he was
forty-five, Chase concluded never to marry again, and instead molded his daughter Kate into his political helpmeet. Unionist Edwin M. Stanton, who illustrates class distinctions with his unspeakable rudeness to Lincoln in their lawyering days, enters the book as a main character when he replaces the cabinet’s corrupt Simon Cameron. Although late on the scene, Stanton is utterly committed to the Union and becomes one of Lincoln’s staunchest supporters.

Much as she did in her Pulitzer Prize winning *No Ordinary Time*—but here with a wider lens—Goodwin uses her characters’ perspectives to make her material come alive. The developing sectional crisis has personal meaning for Seward, Lincoln, Bates, and Chase; seeing it through their eyes brings home just how profoundly the events of the early nineteenth century affected the lives of Americans. Dry congressional events like the Kansas-Nebraska Act become mesmerizing as Lincoln sits up all night on the edge of his bed contemplating what the extension of slavery that it enables will mean. The war years, too, have personal meaning when interpreted through the eyes of those so closely involved in prosecuting it. The horrific loss of sons on the battlefield becomes real when the Lincolns’ son Willie dies from typhoid, devastating both parents. The inexorable pressure of the war is felt as Lincoln’s need for companionship drives him to Seward’s hearth where he can relax and talk of something other than strategy. Historians have long noted that Chase’s unquenchable thirst for the presidency directed his actions as secretary of the treasury, but that thirst takes on personal impact as a reader watches it consume and destroy his daughter Kate. Usually a cipher in wartime biographies, Stanton is gruff and curt, but here he personifies the tragedy of Lincoln’s death: despite Stanton’s habitually cool demeanor, his affection for the president is so deep that he cannot stop crying in the days after Lincoln is killed.

Goodwin’s investigation of the politics of the Civil War era does more than involve her readers deeply in a story that can be inaccessible when told in a more limited fashion. By bringing to life these prominent men and women of nineteenth-century politics, she offers a rounded view of Lincoln’s world. The president and his temperamental wife Mary lived among these Washington elites as the Civil War raged. The perspectives of these ten very different personalities on each other and on the events of the day illuminate the Lincolns far more fully than would a more limited view. Much of Goodwin’s material is published elsewhere, but biographies of Kate Chase, for example, are rarely integrated into examinations of treasury policy, or even into investigations of why Mary Lincoln was so hostile to
Salmon Chase. Strikingly, Goodwin’s quest to expand the world of Washington also took her into sources left by the Seward, Chase, Bates, and Stanton women that have rarely before, if ever, been used to examine Lincoln. Intelligent women all, their perspectives reveal that our previous understandings of wartime Washington were missing vital interactions.

Perhaps the character who wins most in this broader construction of the life of the Union capital is Lincoln’s much-maligned wife, Mary Todd Lincoln. Usually either ignored or condemned by Lincoln biographers, Mary Lincoln receives sympathetic treatment here. Goodwin recounts not only the warm letters between the Lincolns but also the numerous family deaths that unsettled Mrs. Lincoln and convinced her that misery was her lot. Not simply dismissed as a termagant, or even as a mother grieving for her dead children, Mary Lincoln is explained as jealous of her husband’s time and given credit for unheralded visits to wounded soldiers. Goodwin also emphasizes the poisonous rivalry between Mrs. Lincoln and the intriguing Kate Chase, the belle of Washington society, who calculatingly used her beauty and wit to advance her father’s political career. Mrs. Lincoln’s spending while in the White House is legendary but, Goodwin points out, part of Mrs. Lincoln’s obsession with clothing and fine appointments for the White House came from her determination to be Washington’s true first lady despite Kate Chase’s rival establishment. Newspapers vilified Mrs. Lincoln as a spendthrift while admiring the young Chase, who matched Mrs. Lincoln’s expenditures piece by piece. Goodwin notes that the Chases managed to avoid the same financial embarrassment as the Lincolns thanks only to the lavish gifts of banker Jay Cooke, whose friendliness with Chase won him a hugely valuable contract to sell Union bonds. Lincoln refused such questionable friendships, making Mrs. Lincoln’s overdrafts fodder for hostile newspapermen.

While Goodwin provides an engaging trip through the politics of the Civil War era, her book is not intended to be a general history. She is interested primarily in Abraham Lincoln. Goodwin uses the president’s rivals to illuminate some of the qualities that made Lincoln a great politician. Unlike any of them, he was willing to give the most powerful offices in the land to those who had fought against him and who, in Stanton’s case, treated him with utter disdain. Each rival also showed weaknesses that Lincoln did not have: Seward thrived on political intrigue while Lincoln refused to play games; Chase deluded himself into destructive self-righteousness while Lincoln accepted responsibility for the actions of his administration; Bates loved his contented home life while Lincoln’s marriage was turbulent if not downright miserable;
Heather Cox Richardson

Stanton irritated his men while Lincoln could get along with anyone. In the cutthroat world of nineteenth-century politics, Lincoln was the consummate politician. Showing his political savvy, Lincoln undercut his political rivals by gathering them together in his cabinet. He made Seward secretary of state, Chase secretary of the treasury, Bates attorney general, and, later, Stanton secretary of war. This brilliant strategy harnessed their formidable political ambitions to his own presidency (much to Chase’s chagrin). Working with these strong personalities demanded all of Lincoln’s exceptional personal skills; it also enabled him to stifle dissent within his fledgling party.

Goodwin’s argument that Lincoln was a political animal draws on excellent biographies by David Herbert Donald and William E. Gienapp. Donald’s *Lincoln* remains the definitive biography of the political Lincoln, while Gienapp’s *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America* is a highly readable short summary of Lincoln’s political genius. But the brilliance of *Team of Rivals* is that Goodwin does not end her story simply by reiterating that Lincoln was a consummate politician. Indeed, all of the cabinet members Goodwin describes were consumed by politics. Seward loved political intrigue so completely that he could not bear to leave Washington, even to be with his wife. Chase wanted power to enact his own superior standards on the lesser beings around him. Bates loved his wife and family so deeply that he centered his identity at home and managed to walk away from power. Less driven than the others, Stanton wanted power to defend the Union.

But none of these men were great politicians in the way that Lincoln was, and Goodwin set out to determine why. In the end, she concludes, Lincoln wanted political power not for his own aggrandizement, profit, or amusement, but because he wanted to serve humanity. This drive kept him going in his early years of obscurity and enabled him always to put the good of his country above his own ego. Lincoln was not simply a petty politician but a true statesman, and Goodwin honors him for it. His stature as a man who put his drive to benefit others before all else illuminates just why Lincoln has maintained such overwhelming popularity since his death while the stars of other assassinated presidents have risen and fallen with political tides. It is also a paean, one cannot help but suspect, to President William Jefferson Clinton’s idealism and a reprimand to the machinations of those who replaced him. In a time when scandals are popping up all over in Washington, such a commentary will not be lost on those of any political persuasion.

Noting the picayune problems with this book reinforces just how good the book generally is. New York congressman Elbridge Spaulding
is misnamed as Eldridge (16); nativist Know-Nothings are permitted to stand as Americans when they first show up without an explanation that Americans was the name of their specific party (25). More important is that, in part because Goodwin is off her twentieth-century turf, one sometimes feels as if she is a tour guide describing the nineteenth century for other neophytes. This shows in rather abrupt asides describing, for example, the common nineteenth-century practice of sharing beds. While explaining background information for readers is certainly necessary, I can’t help wishing the explanations had been integrated a little more gracefully into Goodwin’s generally elegant narrative. Similarly, Goodwin mingles together modern historical understandings, evidence of the past, poetry, and prose about Lincoln as she tells her story. These are interesting additions all, but they emphasize the reader’s distance from the era when Goodwin’s approach generally draws the reader into the world she describes.

The reader is left with the feeling that Goodwin is a gracious hostess standing in a doorway, interpreting events through her extensive knowledge of Lincolniana for those of us outside the room. This helps to lend a sense that Team of Rivals is Goodwin’s interpretation of life in Civil War Washington rather than a purely objective version of what happened. But so firmly has the author established her own historical skills, good sense, and authority in observing social interactions in the era of the Kennedys, the Johnsons, and the Roosevelts, that one can’t help but conclude that Goodwin’s version is the one to listen to. Indeed, a friend of mine confessed that his biggest argument with the book was that it ended; he found himself unwilling to let it go. I had a different reaction, putting this book down with a wish that, having found her way into the nineteenth century, Goodwin will stay. A first-rate book, Team of Rivals has proven Goodwin a first-rate historian of nineteenth-century America.