Review: 'Leadership in Turbulent Times,' by Doris Kearns Goodwin

NONFICTION: Doris Kearns Goodwin looks at transactional and transformational leaders.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune | SEPTEMBER 14, 2018 — 12:14PM

“When the American people feel they are doing all right for themselves they do not give much thought to the character of the man in the White House,” Robert Sherwood once observed. However, “when adversity sets in,” as it did in the 1930s, when Sherwood served as a White House aide, they look to the president to “assert himself as a vital, human need.”

In “Leadership in Turbulent Times,” Doris Kearns Goodwin, the author of “Team of Rivals” and “The Bully Pulpit,” among many other books, celebrates Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson as transactional and transformational leaders, who operated pragmatically, appealing to the self-interest of Americans, and who inspired followers to make sacrifices in pursuit of moral principles and higher goals.

As Goodwin reminds us of their paths to positions of power and the challenges they faced as presidents, she identifies the traits of personality and character that made them great leaders. Published at a turbulent time, her book is a rich source of information and inspiration.

Goodwin emphasizes the resilience of her subjects, each of whom experienced a personal crisis at a relatively young age. The trial-and-error approach Franklin Roosevelt employed to improve his mobility after he contracted polio, she writes, left “an indelible fingerprint on his leadership style.” The country needs — and demands — “persistent experimentation,” he repeated throughout the Great Depression. If a policy fails, “admit it and try another. But above all, try something.”

With the possible exception of Lyndon Johnson, Goodwin indicates, all of her presidents were great communicators. Lincoln, for example, persuaded through “sincerity, clarity, conviction, passion” and a profound knowledge of the subjects he addressed, including slavery.

Perhaps most important, Goodwin’s presidents understood that they should not act until an issue was ripe. Theodore Roosevelt did not intervene to settle a coal strike until public opinion had turned against the mine owners. Lyndon Johnson used the carnage committed by state police and Sheriff Jim Clark’s mounted posse against peaceful protesters walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., and “the ensuing national humiliation” to expedite passage of a historic voting rights bill.

Goodwin downplays or ignores many of the faults and failures of her heroes. But we should forgive her. During “times of fracture and fear,” Lincoln, the two Roosevelts and Johnson did, indeed, set a “high standard and bar” for the presidents who followed them. Most important, Goodwin reminds us that a democracy leadership is a two-way street, a mirror in which people, for better and worse, see their collective reflection. As he so often did, President Lincoln expressed it well: “With public sentiment,” Father Abraham declared, “nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed.”

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Leadership in Turbulent Times

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