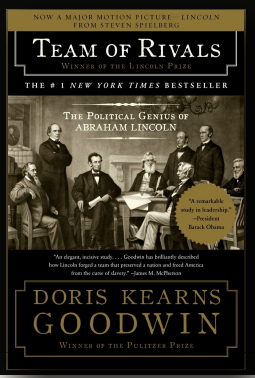
SIMON & SCHUSTER · 2005 · WINNER OF THE LINCOLN PRIZE

Team of Rivals

THE POLITICAL GENIUS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN Pulitzer Prize–winning historian

"Every member of this administration was better known, better educated, and more experienced in public life than Lincoln." He made them his cabinet anyway — and led them.



Bring the people who ran against you inside — then out-lead them with character.

Goodwin's thesis: Lincoln won in 1860 not by luck but because *"he was shrewdest and canniest of them all."* Then he did what no president had done: put his three rivals in his cabinet. His tools were personal — he could *"assume responsibility for the failures of subordinates; to share credit with ease; and to learn from mistakes."* Decency, she argues, *"can also be impressive political resources."*

THE TEAM *his three 1860 rivals, plus his harshest critic*

SEWARD — STATE
The favorite: 173½ votes on the first ballot. Tried to run the government himself.
then: his closest friend and adviser

CHASE — TREASURY
Never stopped thinking Lincoln his inferior; plotted against him.
then: made Chief Justice anyway

BATES — ATTORNEY GENERAL
Thought him well-meaning but weak.
then: *"very near being a perfect man."*

STANTON — WAR · 1862
Had humiliated Lincoln at a Cincinnati trial six years before.
then: wept for weeks after his death

WELLES · BLAIR — NAVY · POST OFFICE
Ex-Democrats chosen for balance — and the border states.
then: Welles: *"a towering figure"*

1860–61 · WINNING AND BUILDING

1 Be everyone's second choice

He had no first-choice support outside Illinois and maybe Indiana, so he attacked no one: *"give no offence to others— leave them in a mood to come to us, if they shall be compelled to give up their first love."* Chicago, May 1860, 233 to win:

Ballot	Seward	Lincoln	Chase	Bates
1st	173½	102	49	48
2nd	184½	181	fading	
3rd	**Lincoln 231½ + 4 from Ohio = nominated**			

While his rivals sat out the year, he toured five states, gave Cooper Union, and got the convention held in Chicago.

2 Hire the strongest from every faction

The day after the election he wrote seven names on a card — Seward, Chase, Bates among them: *"and before the sun went down, I had made up my Cabinet."* When Weed counted too many ex-Democrats, Lincoln said that counting himself, the cabinet was *"balanced and ballasted."*

3 Consult everyone, decide alone

Weed's verdict: he *"talks freely with everybody, reads whatever is written to him; but thinks and acts by himself and for himself."*

4 Stop a power grab without humiliating

April 1, 1861: Seward wrote that the administration had no policy and offered to run it. Lincoln's reply, short and private: *"I remark that if this must be done, I must do it."* No scene, no leak. Within weeks Seward wrote that Lincoln's *"magnanimity is almost superhuman"*.

1861–63 · RUNNING THE TEAM

5 Hire for the job, even your critic

January 1862, the War Department mired in fraud: he chose Stanton, who had snubbed him. Stanton took a pay cut from over $50,000 a year to $8,000 and turned the department around in days. Seward, Chase and Cameron each believed he had picked Stanton.

6 Take the blame, give the credit

When the press made Stanton the scapegoat, Lincoln told a crowd at the Capitol: *"I stand here, as justice requires me to do, to take upon myself what has been charged on the Secretary of War."* The attacks stopped.

7 Write the hot letter — don't send it

After Lee escaped Gettysburg he wrote Meade a scathing letter and filed it: *"To Gen. Meade, never sent, or signed."* Days later: *"I am now profoundly grateful for what was done, without criticism for what was not done."*

8 Forgive fast; let the rival be right

When Blair's private letter calling his policy "feeble" was published, Lincoln told him to forget it. *"If I do get up a little temper I have no sufficient time to keep it up."* In the Trent crisis he tried to argue against Seward's position, then: *"that proved to me your ground was the right one."*

9 Be patient — then set a test

He bore McClellan's delays and insults (*"better at this time not to be making points of etiquette & personal dignity."*), then set a private test after Antietam: *"If he let them get away I would remove him. He did so & I relieved him."*

10 Admit mistakes; give away credit

To Grant, after Vicksburg: *"I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong."* To Sherman, after Savannah: *"The honor is all yours"*.

1862–65 · TIMING AND MAGNANIMITY

11 Decide yourself; take advice on timing

July 22, 1862: he told the cabinet emancipation was decided. Only Seward's point was new — wait for a victory: *"I put the draft of the proclamation aside, as you do your sketch for a picture, waiting for a victory."* Antietam came; he issued it Sept 22. His rule: *"with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed."*

12 Hold both resignations

Dec 1862: senators, fed by Chase, moved to force Seward out. Lincoln put the senators and his cabinet in one room for five hours; Chase had to contradict himself. Next day Chase offered to resign. With both letters in hand Lincoln kept both men: *"I can ride on now, I've got a pumpkin in each end of my bag!"*

13 Promote the rival who plotted against you

1864: Chase's backers mailed 100 Republicans a circular calling Lincoln's re-election "practically impossible." Lincoln did not strike back; he waited until the states lined up behind him. When Chase offered his fourth resignation, Lincoln took it: *"I put my pen into my mouth, and grit my teeth upon it."* Months later he made Chase Chief Justice: *"I should despise myself if I allowed personal differences to affect my judgment of his fitness for the office"*.

14 Plan for losing — keep the principle

August 1864, sure he would lose, he had each cabinet member sign a sealed memo unread: *"it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected."* He still refused to drop emancipation. Atlanta fell; he won 212 electoral votes to 21.

USE IT MONDAY

- Name the person who disagrees with you most. Could they do a job better than anyone else?
- Next time a manager is blamed for your decision, say so in front of the team.
- Write the angry email. Save it in drafts. Re-read in 48 hours.
- Before letting someone go, set the test in writing — then apply it.

WHERE HE FELL SHORT

- Deferred to McClellan for months; chose Burnside, then Fredericksburg.
- Cameron at War was *"a serious mistake"*; contracts were corrupt.
- The 1862 colonization meeting: *"empathy had singularly failed him"*.
- Irregular cabinet meetings; some members felt shut out.

HOW THIS PAGE WAS MADE. From the full ebook. As planned for this long book, the key leadership chapters were read in full (introduction, chapters 8, 10, 12–26, epilogue), not the early-life chapters. Every quote checked word for word against the book.

"Now he belongs to the ages." EDWIN STANTON · APRIL 15, 1865