“What Lincoln would say is that government should do for the people what they cannot do for themselves.”

Pulitzer Prize winner and presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin has written books about Lyndon Johnson, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln and the Kennedy family. Her book on Lincoln, “Team of Rivals,” was adapted in part into the feature film “Lincoln,” which was nominated for 12 Academy Awards. She wrote a memoir “Wait Till Next Year” about growing up a fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers and was the first female journalist to enter the Boston Red Sox locker room. Goodwin has addressed sessions at NCSL’s Legislative Summit.

**State Legislatures:** What could today’s legislators learn from Teddy Roosevelt, the subject of your next book, *Doris Kearns Goodwin:* There are universal traits our great leaders share that are applicable even when the context changes. What makes Teddy Roosevelt especially relevant is that he began his storied career in the New York State Assembly. He often said the state assembly was a great school for him. He learned the most important lesson in politics when he was just 23 years old—that he had to work with the other people, he had to compromise and figure out what would make the assembly work as a whole, and he brought that lesson to all the rest of his career.

**SL:** What would Teddy Roosevelt think of today’s political climate?

**DKG:** I think it would worry him a lot. He believed he could mobilize the public with his speeches, but in the end he knew he had to get a legislature—either Congress or the state assembly—to come together. I think the whole dysfunction of Washington today and the inability of the two sides to compromise would sadden him.

**SL:** What was the role of the media in Teddy Roosevelt’s day?

**DKG:** During his time, especially the magazine world, was considered the golden age of crusading journalism. McClure’s, for example, was headed by this wonderful character (Sam McClure) who was a genius, manic depressive and crazy, but incredibly brilliant. He would allow his writers—Ida Tarbell, Ray Baker, William Allen White, Lincoln Steffens—two years of research on their subjects, whether it was Standard Oil or railroad abuses or city corruption or food and drug problems, before they even had to write a word. So their pieces were really investigative, fact-based pieces. Today so much of the journalistic world has turned to entertainment. Because of the blogs and the need to be on the Internet, even our best journalistic attention is focused away from these longer pieces to shorter and shorter pieces, to Twitter at the end. The impact journalists used to have on public policy during the beginning of the 20th century, when they had such a close relationship with Teddy Roosevelt, were the happiest times of their lives. They said they felt they were part of the country’s progress at producing real regulatory legislation that lasted, not simply journalists.

**SL:** President Obama is an admirer of your book “Team of Rivals.” Given today’s contentious political climate, is it possible for anything resembling a “team of rivals” to be assembled today?

**DKG:** I think it’s much harder today. It’s even worse today than the contentiousness of the 1850s when you had people hitting each other over the head in Congress and almost killing each other on the Senate floor. Nonetheless, there was a sense in the old days that factions would come together and work out their difficulties. You also didn’t have the press in the 1860s telling everybody the feelings everybody had about one another. Even FDR brought two top Republicans, Frank Knox and Henry Stimson, into his cabinet on the eve of World War II. They didn’t agree with him at all about the New Deal, but he knew they agreed with him about the importance of the Allied cause against Hitler. Today you always get a token republican in a Democratic administration and vice versa, but you don’t get a lot because they would be seen as traitors in their own party if they joined the administration of the other.
SL: After the Supreme Court health care laws ruling, you tweeted quotes from Lincoln, including “With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed.” Why?

DKG: Even though the Supreme Court decided that the health care law would not be repealed, that it was constitutional, there still remained the battle to persuade the public that this law benefitted them. That’s what Lincoln meant. If you’ve got something big that’s going to affect people, the most important thing is for them to understand it. Public opinion polls show people aren’t sure about the provisions of the law and aren’t happy with it. If the law is going to remain on the books, that educational challenge is what faces the Obama administration.

SL: You’ve written that the country needs to decide how big government should be. How big should it be?

DKG: As big as it needs to be. What Lincoln would say—and he had the best argument—is that government should do for the people what they cannot do for themselves. I think you should say that the federal government should do for the country what state and local governments can’t do for themselves, states should do what local governments can’t. The lowest possible place where it can work is the best, that’s what the federal system is about. It’s been a continuing challenge from the beginning, from Jefferson and Hamilton. It’s a continuing strain in our nation’s life. To figure out how much government we really need without stifling private enterprise remains a huge problem for us—and a good one, one we should be fighting about.

SL: How does being a baseball fan inform your work as a historian?

DKG: It really is huge for me because I learned to love history through learning to love baseball. When I was 6 years old, my father taught me the mysterious art of keeping score at a baseball game. When he came home, I had recorded for him the history of that afternoon’s Brooklyn Dodger game. It makes you think there’s something magic about history, even if it’s just four hours old, to keep your father’s attention. I think I learned the narrative art from those nightly sessions. At first I would blurt out, ‘The Dodgers won’ or ‘The Dodgers lost’ which would take the drama out of this two-hour telling. I finally learned I had to tell a story from beginning to middle to end and that’s what history is: a storytelling. And you want to tell it without knowing ahead of time what happened.

To listen to the complete interview, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.

Editor’s note: This interview is part of a series of conversations with opinion leaders. It has been edited for length and clarity. The opinions are the interviewee’s and not necessarily NCSL’s.

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