



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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### **Doris Kearns Goodwin | OAS Episode 17 | Sept. 14, 2017**

Welcome to Our American States, a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

On Our American States today we’re honored to have with us Doris Kearns Goodwin, who is the author of six books. Five of them have been about presidents: Lincoln, Kennedy, Johnson, Franklin Roosevelt, and then your latest one, *The Bully Pulpit*, on William Taft and Teddy Roosevelt.

So what’s next for you Doris? What’s next in your pipeline?

Doris: Well, what I realized is that underneath all these fat books that I’ve written over time was really a study of leadership, and that’s what I was most interested in. When I was in graduate school, those were the kinds of questions you used to ask: Are leaders born or are they made? How do they get through adversity? Is it a matter of the man versus the times or the times versus the man?

So I figured I’d just take four of my guys, as I like to call them, starting with Lincoln, and then Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin and LBJ domestically, and figure out: How did they become leaders? How much of their leadership traits were inborn? How did they develop into leaders? How did they get through adversity? And then: How did they meet the moment that they were called upon to lead?

So it’s really fun and it turns out that I had to learn a lot more than I thought I knew. I thought oh, I know these guys, but when you’re thinking about it in a different way, you have to learn a lot more.

Gene: And did you come up with the idea of this book before the last presidential election?

Doris: I did. Of course I've been working on it for, you know, for the last... I'm always taking so long, about three years, but it does have a feeling right now that leadership is more important than ever before and I'm hoping that it can reach not just people who like history, but people who want to be leaders in any field, because there are lessons to be learned from the people who have been our great leaders.

Gene: For me leadership is a word that kind of gets tossed around carelessly, that there really isn't a good definition of it. Do you have a definition?

Doris: No. You know, it's really interesting... I think there are about 25 of them you can read in even some of the best books. I mean clearly it has to do with a person's ability to influence other people to move in a common direction that hopefully is for the common good, and that ability to mobilize the energy and spirit of other people and have other people look to you for direction and guidance.

And it can be in any number of fields. It could be a leading doctor in a hospital; it can be a leading teacher. That's the important thing – it's obviously not just political, not just presidential leaders.

So I'm trying to write this thing about something called "the making of leaders," so that it would be applicable to young people in lots of other fields as well to learn from these people.

Gene: One thing I've always been curious about... your book about Lincoln, which is considered the definitive book about his administration and how he created it and how he worked with it – because he was president during the Civil War and his leadership skills were definitely greatly noted as you kind of mentioned earlier, there are other qualities to a leader. Does it take a crisis for leadership to come out?

Doris: It's a really good question. I mean, I think it's true that a crisis creates more opportunities for great leadership, especially in a system like America where there are so many checks and balances that it's hard sometimes to get your ideas or agenda through.

But in a crisis, there's a momentum, that you know you have to deal with the issue at hand, and so you've got a chance for greater leadership. Abigail Adams said during the American Revolution to John Adams that "great necessities create great virtues and that these are the times in which a genius would want to live." So the crisis, whether it's war or depression, creates an opportunity for an historic leader, but you have to have the right temperament and the right leadership skills to make use of that opportunity.

So you can see that in the 1850s you had two leaders in there before Lincoln who were not able to stem the secession tide that was already beginning to build in the South and the North, and you had Lincoln come along at a moment when he had the right temperament and the right skills to deal with it.

You had President Hoover in the Depression era, and the country was in almost as bad a shape as when FDR took over, and yet he didn't have the right capacity... he was a good leader in a lot

of other ways, but not to deal with that kind of crisis. So it is a matter of the man meeting the moment, but having the temperament and the skills to make use of it.

Gene: For now it seems like compromise is a hard word and something that's difficult for leaders to do today. I think the perception of the public is that this is a very polarized country right now. Do you think your research is going to uncover some ways to convince leaders that compromise is a good thing?

Doris: They have to understand that compromise is a good thing. Our whole system, the democratic system that was created by the Founding Fathers, was built on compromise. That's why they have a House and a Senate. That's why they have three branches of government. And that's why they assumed that compromise would be sort of the glue that holds it all together. If you've got people that are on one side or the other, left or right, it's going to be harder to compromise.

But even more than that, I think in the old days, people stayed in Washington on the weekends, they knew each other across party lines, their spouses knew each other, their kids knew each other. Now they go home on the weekends to raise money. They hardly know the other people and they haven't got a human relationship with them.

And I think one of the things we're missing today too is that when we had leaders in the 50s and 60s and probably even into the 70s, many of them had been in war together; they'd had a common mission, whether it was World War II or the Korean War. So they knew what it was like to forge compromise and to work as a team, and not allow the fact that you're one or the other party, or you're black or you're white, to make a difference.

And so it's encouraging to see that there are some veterans coming into public life now, but there are many fewer veterans now than we had in those earlier days. I sometimes think we need a national service program, that if we had such a thing and people really were able to do something in a year between high school and college or college, etc., and they worked with people from diverse backgrounds on some common good missions, that maybe they'd learn to get away from the polarization that they're all being brought up in now.

Gene: So there's some data out there that suggests that people's faith in institutions even is kind of crumbling right now. You're speaking at the National Conference of State Legislatures today. What advice do you have for elected officials on ways that they can kind of restore faith in institutions and government in particular?

Doris: I think it's important for political leaders to talk about why they want to be in politics, to remind people that they've chosen this as a profession, or for a period of time, because they believe that politicians can do good things, and they believe in their state legislatures or they wouldn't be there.

I mean, you sometimes wonder, especially in Congress, which has been so broken, more than some of the state legislatures, how much fun is it to be a congressman anymore if you know that you can't even get a bill passed on a minor issue because of the polarization.

So I think state legislators, they have a chance right now because they seem to work better in many ways. They have to pass budgets. You know, they can't go over the debt limit. There's a lot

of experimentation going on in states. And I think it's important for them... they may not always do it... to just talk about the pleasures of it and the joys of it, and remind themselves even as they're doing that of why they became a public figure, and letting young people know that, so that they see something other than the kind of vitriol that's coming out of Washington.

Gene: And speaking of that, what lessons from history might our elected officials use from the past history to navigate the current political climate in Washington D.C.?

Doris: Well I think it's important for them to remember that there were times, great times, when Democrats and Republicans worked together and could produce legislation that they knew their children would be proud that they had been involved with.

When I think about the Civil Rights Law which LBJ was able to get through in 1964 and there was no way he could do it with Democrats alone because the Southern Democrats would filibuster it, so he had to reach across the aisle to Republicans, and he goes to Everett Dirksen and he says to him: Dirksen, you come with me on this bill and schoolchildren will know only two names 200 years from now, Abraham Lincoln and Everett Dirksen. And Dirksen does bring 22 Republicans to join the 44 northern Democrats. And that sense of bipartisanship is remembered on both sides now as having done something really critically important.

So it's happened before. It happened even during Reagan's time when Reagan and Tip O'Neill were able to be friends. So we're just forgetting. The trouble is when you haven't seen something for a while, then you lose the desire even for it and you think it's impossible. But we've had rough times in history when things were even worse in the 1850s.

There was a woman on a plane who asked me: There have been worse times, right? She was an older woman. And I said: Oh yeah, the 1850s, it was terrible. They carried guns to the Senate floor. The southern congressman hit the northern senator over the head with a cane. He was out of commission for two years. And she said: Yeah, but that didn't end up too well. There was the Civil War. And I said: Oh yeah, you're right. I'd better think of something better than that.

Gene: So of all the people that you've studied, if you could take a microphone and recorder right now and interview anyone, living or dead, is there one particular person that you'd really like to sit down and have a conversation with?

Doris: Well I think of the people I've studied, it would probably be Lincoln. And I know that if I was supposed to interview him now, I should ask him a question that everybody wants to know: What would you have done differently about Reconstruction had you lived? But instead I think I'd just ask him to tell me a story because then I know he'd come alive and his whole face would "wrinkle" up and he would laugh louder than even the storied people would imagine, and I'd see him alive.

If there's somebody else in the world, I think it would be Winston Churchill. I would love to have studied him. I would love to have met him. When I was doing the FDR book, he just was such a huge figure, and we just saw Dunkirk the other night, so that made me think of him again. It's an incredible movie. What a character – living till 90, drinking a lot, smoking, being a public figure, and having that extraordinary verve I guess is the answer. So I'll take Lincoln and Churchill; then I'll bring FDR along too.

Gene: Good choices. Being a baseball fan, I would be remiss in not mentioning your sixth book which is about baseball. You and I share an affinity for Theo Epstein because I was born in Chicago and am a Cubs fan.

Doris: You're a happy man. (chuckles)

Gene: I'm living well right now. Is there a correlation between baseball and sports or do you try to keep the two separate?

Doris: No. I think what happens to make a team win is often a team spirit, that somehow there's a leader, whether it's a player that's a leader or the manager that's a leader, and sometimes it's not the teams with the greatest talent individually, but somehow they work together, and that's true in leadership in any level of life I think. And there's going through adversity.

As we know from the Boston Red Sox and you know from the Chicago Cubs, there's something about that adversity that welds the people in the town together so that when you finally win it's just glorious. I mean I used to think it must not be as much fun being a New York Yankees fan because you win all the time, and maybe you don't care about it after you've won. You still do care about it, but nothing will be like that first time, nothing. And there was something about Chicago as a town and Boston I think that... I remember one of the times we lost one of the playoffs to the Yankees again, of course, before 2004, and as we were all filing out of the park, some old guy stood up and he said: Year after year after year after year! And everybody just laughed in this common misery. So it was pretty thrilling to watch the Cubs win last year.

Gene: So let me get you out on this. You're talking to state legislators today. What's your message to them?

Doris: I think the most important message to them is that they have to provide for America right now examples of parties getting together and passing legislation and dealing with the administration and the enactment of the laws that are coming down, and making people in their own states feel that government is working. If it doesn't seem to be working too well in Washington, we've got states in which it is working well, and I think they have to project that image.

I think it's important for them to not only do it and make it happen, and obviously in some states it's not working as well as others, but where it is I think that's what's great about a networking situation like this conference, is that they can talk to each other and there are ideas that can be shared I'm sure: What made it work here? What did you do there? And they can see each other as human beings here, and there are lots of Republicans and Democrats, and they're out of their polarized settings.

So I think more of these kinds of things that can happen, the more times they can just talk about successes when they have them, and advertise that they're having fun being politicians – I think that's so important for young people to see that it is an extremely, it seems to me, fulfilling profession if you can change people's lives and make people's lives better through it.

And in the meantime you're dealing with people. There's gregariousness, there's excitement, there's legislation. I still love the political life and I think we have to just project that feeling

more, because it's been denigrated for so long now and you worry that the best people may not want to enter public life as a result. And if we don't have that, then the democracy is in trouble.

Gene: Doris Kearns Goodwin, thank you very much for being on Our American States.

Doris: You are more than welcome. Thank you.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of Our American States. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.