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## Lessons From Lincoln

By [Jill Berkowicz](#) and [Ann Myers](#) on February 17, 2013 6:26 PM | [No comments](#)

Lincoln is one of the most researched leaders of all time. Most of us know something about him whether from our time in school, popular literature, research, journals, or the media. He was the leader whose principled stand ended slavery and prevented our nation from dividing in two. We may also recognize his silhouette. He was the tall slender man with the angular portrait and the tall hat. Of course, we all know he was assassinated. For some, their knowledge of Lincoln is limited to these few historical facts.

That is until Steven Spielberg decided to bring Lincoln, artistically, to life on the screen. Who of us, whether we know a lot about Lincoln or not, did not sit spellbound as we watched Daniel Day-Lewis make Lincoln come alive in front of our very eyes? The film is based in part on the book *"Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln"* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. With the seal of approval from the extraordinary historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, Steven Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy and their team brought us all into a critical moment in our history. We watched the interplay of conscience and political strategy, deepened by the inner life struggles of the leaders and, even then, governmental drama and tension. May none of us ever be called to bear a moral dilemma of the magnitude portrayed in the film: ending the horror of the war or ending slavery first.

Donald T. Phillips, in *"Lincoln on Leadership"*, refers to Lincoln's mastery of paradox. This certainly speaks to what leaders are facing today. "Lincoln provided a rock-solid, stable government as a foundation for the nation's security, while at the same time personally instituting massive amounts of change" (p.79). Phillips listed other paradoxes of Lincoln's leadership style "He was charismatic yet unassuming. He was consistent yet flexible. He was the victim of vast amounts of slander and malice, yet he was also immensely popular with the troops. He was trusting and compassionate, yet could also be demanding and tough. He was a risk-taker and innovative, yet patient and calculating" (p.79). These attributes are exactly what today's leaders need right now.

These are personal qualities. Where do we get them and how do we develop them? For some of us they are simply natural, but for most of us, they are developed through the life experiences that challenge us the most. No school, no online class, no book, can teach us how to be compassionate, or courageous, or selfless, unless we understand the value of personal growth as it relates to our leadership. These are personal qualities that we grow if we have the awareness. They are required in our job description as leaders and as human beings. The advantages of suffering through difficult times are that they break us open, cause us to fall down, to learn what humility is. Those are the moments when we have made a mistake or have failed in some way, or have been attacked or hurt by a foe. They are not secrets. It is during these times we can learn the most about ourselves. It is when others learn about us, too. Some come back stronger and hold firm to a cause while others cannot recover.

Lincoln's personal challenges were many: battles with depression, the loss of a child and the aftermath as it affected his family, his wife's depression and withdrawal. His professional challenges were great: the country's division and possible split, his values about the worth of human beings and where slavery fit in that belief system, a long war. All served to define Lincoln and make him whom he was.

Lincoln, Kearns Goodwin, and Spielberg have given us a magnificent opportunity to watch leadership in action and learn. On this Presidents' Day weekend, we gratefully acknowledge the examples we have been given. Last week, **Participant Media** announced that the film will be made available to all middle and high schools across the nation. We are being given the phenomenal opportunity to bring these lessons, through this powerful film, to our classrooms. Let's not let that opportunity pass us by.

**Resource:**

Phillips, D. T. (1992). *Lincoln on leadership*. New York: Hachette Book Group.

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