

Historians are giving us a bonanza of books about great leaders in history. This is a great time to read them so that we can understand how lacking in this quality our leadership is today.

An older book about leadership is Doris Kearns Goodman's Team of Rivals, in which Abraham Lincoln, whose election in 1860, triggered the Civil War (the South knew that their primary industry, slavery, was under attack), selected all of his political rivals to serve on his cabinet. His rivals, most of whom initially thought him a backwoodsman, found out gradually how great this man was. Lincoln had enough confidence in his own intelligence to surround himself with other very capable and bright men, and together, they saved the country from a permanent division into two nations.

A second quality of Lincoln's leadership was his ability to explain complex issues in clear language. He knew how to speak to everyone, and was able to do it with brevity, not a 19th century quality. Orators could speak for hours, and audiences in those days had long attention spans. But Lincoln's gift was how to create clarity and how to encourage "our better angels," which addresses moral values: doing the right thing. He never used his gifts to incite mobs or encourage bigotry.

The presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt has inspired many other biographies that covered his remarkable four terms in office. Roosevelt was never a great scholar or intellectual, but he had an extraordinary gift for politics. He was also a great judge of people, and when he took office in 1933, at a time of potential collapse of this country under the Great Depression, he immediately took action. He surrounded himself with the best minds available, including for the first time, a woman as labor secretary, Frances Perkins. He and his "brain trust" set about addressing all the emergencies facing the country: financial, social, and intellectual. They were willing to innovate programs that they were then willing to discard if they did not work. The American public gave him their trust, and together, many great changes were made to our society. Social Security was just one of them, a system that we would never abandon.

Roosevelt's next challenge was how to govern this country as World War II was brewing in Europe and Asia. The vast majority of Americans were isolationist, hoping to avoid the pains they suffered in World War I. Roosevelt knew that we would inevitably be drawn into war and he trod carefully to give enough military support to Winston Churchill in Britain who stood alone against Hitler's gobbling up much of Europe. Roosevelt's actions helped Churchill protect England and then later enabled us to enter the war with a staging ground for retaking Europe from the Nazis.

The latest book to read about Winston Churchill's amazing leadership is The Splendid and the Vile, by Erik Larson. The book covers Churchill's first year in power, and his adept leadership that we now know helped save the world from Fascism.

The latest wonderful book about Roosevelt's leadership ability is Jonathan Alter's The Defining Moment (FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope). This book, like the Churchill book, reconstructs the first months of leadership that saved their countries. Lesser men might not have succeeded.

Harry Truman, an "accidental president" (following the death of Roosevelt) was confronted with the secret weapon, the Atom Bomb, the decision to use it, and recognition that the USSR was the world's next threat. He was self-educated, upright, and ready to take responsibility (the buck stops here).

The leadership of John Kennedy (and brother Robert) saved us from a world destroying World War III, during the missile crisis with the Soviet Union.

We are in the midst of another enormous crisis: a pandemic and catastrophic economic meltdown. We are just months away from hopefully electing a leader who will surround himself with the best minds possible, will be of upright character, and will inspire us to listen to "our better angels." Those qualities are much missed right now. Leadership matters.

679 words.

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