

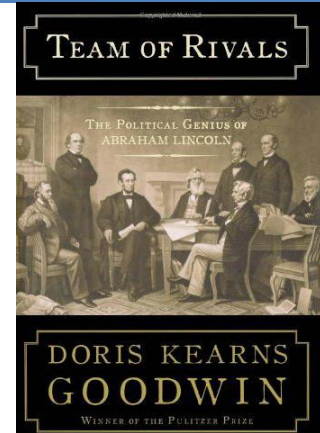


The Myth of 'Rivals'

by Matthew Pinsker

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/journal/2010/06/07/team-of-rivals-op-ed/>

People love Doris Kearns Goodwin's book on the Lincoln presidency, "Team of Rivals." More important, for this moment in American history, Barack Obama loves it. The book is certainly fun to read, but its claim that Abraham Lincoln revealed his "political genius" through the management of his wartime Cabinet deserves a harder look, especially now that it seems to be offering a template for the new administration. "Lincoln basically pulled in all the people who had been running against him into his Cabinet," is the way Obama has summarized Goodwin's thesis, adding, "Whatever personal feelings there were, the issue was how can we get this country through this time of crisis." That's true enough, but the problem is, it didn't work that well for Lincoln. There were painful trade-offs with the "team of rivals" approach that are never fully addressed in the book, or by others that offer happy-sounding descriptions of the Lincoln presidency.

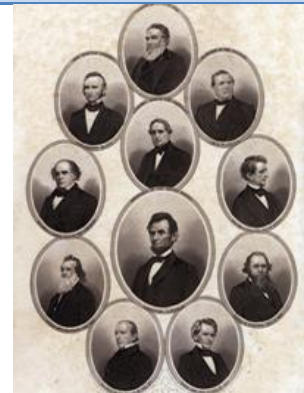


Team of Rivals (2005)

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Lincoln's decision to embrace former rivals, for instance, inevitably meant ignoring old friends -- a development they took badly. "We made Abe and, by God, we can unmake him," complained Chicago Tribune Managing Editor Joseph Medill in 1861. Especially during 1861 and 1862, the first two years of Lincoln's initially troubled administration, friends growled over his ingratitude as former rivals continued to play out their old political feuds. In fairness, Goodwin describes several of these more difficult moments, such as when Secretary of State William Seward tried to seize political command from Lincoln during the Ft. Sumter crisis. But she passes over their consequences too easily. Though Seward, the former New York senator who had been the Republican front-runner, eventually proved helpful to the president, the impact of repeated disloyalty and unnecessary backroom drama from him and several other Cabinet officers was a significant factor in the early failures of the Union war effort.



Lincoln Cabinet, 1861-1864



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By December 1862, there was a full-blown Cabinet crisis. "We are now on the brink of destruction," Lincoln confided to a close friend after being deluged with congressional criticism and confronted by resignations from both Seward and Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase. Goodwin suggests that Lincoln's quiet confidence and impressive emotional intelligence enabled him to survive and ultimately forge an effective team out of his former rivals, but that's more wishful thinking than serious analysis. Consider this inconvenient truth: Out of the four leading vote-getters for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination whom Lincoln placed on his original team, three left during his first term -- one in disgrace, one in defiance and one in disgust.



Political cartoon, detail (1863)

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Simon Cameron was the disgraced rival, Lincoln's failed first secretary of War. Goodwin essentially erased him from her group biography, not mentioning him in the book's first 200 pages, even though he placed third, after Seward and Lincoln, on the first Republican presidential ballot. Cameron proved so corrupt and inept that the Republican-controlled House of Representatives censured him after he was removed from office in 1862. Chase was the defiant rival. As Goodwin acknowledges, the Treasury chief never reconciled himself to Lincoln's victory, continuously angling to replace him. Lincoln put up with this aggravation until he secured renomination and then dumped his brilliant but arrogant subordinate because, in his words, their "mutual embarrassment" was no longer sustainable.

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A. Lincoln

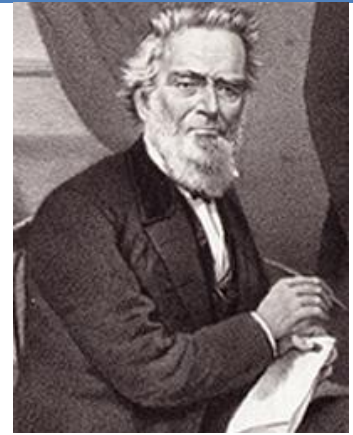
Lincoln to Chase, June 30, 1864



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Atty. Gen. Edward Bates was the disgusted rival. The elder statesman -- 67 when he was appointed -- never felt at home in the Lincoln Cabinet and played only a marginal role in shaping policy. He resigned late in the first term. His diary reflects deep discontent with what he considered the relentless political maneuvering of his Cabinet peers and even the president. "Alas!" Bates wrote in August 1864, "that I should live to see such abject fear -- such small stolid indifference to duty -- such open contempt of Constitution and law -- and such profound ignorance of policy and prudence!" Only Seward endured throughout the Civil War. He and Lincoln did become friends, and he provided some valuable political advice, but the significance of his contributions as Lincoln's secretary of State have been challenged by many historians, and his repeated fights with other party leaders were always distracting.



Edward Bates, 1861

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John Hay, one of Lincoln's closest aides, noted in his diary that by the summer of 1863, the president had essentially learned to rule his Cabinet with "tyrannous authority," observing that the "most important things he decides & there is no cavil." Over the years, it has become easy to forget that hard edge and the once bad times that nearly destroyed a president. Lincoln's Cabinet was no team. His rivals proved to be uneven as subordinates. Some were capable despite their personal disloyalty, yet others were simply disastrous. Lincoln was a political genius, but his model for Cabinet-building should stand more as a cautionary tale than as a leadership manual.



Adapted from Christopher Weyant cartoon, *The Hill* (2009)



House Divided



Further Reading

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Document 1– Diary Entry by Orville Browning, December 18, 1862

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/32714>

Source Citation –

Orville Browning, *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning Volume I, 1850-1864*, ed. Theodore Calvin Pease (2 vols., Springfield, IL: The Blakely Printing Company, 1927), 1: 599-601.

Overview –

In December 1862, President Lincoln faced a crisis within his administration as cabinet members turned on one another, especially targeting Secretary of State William Seward. In this diary entry, Illinois senator Orville Browning captured Lincoln's moment of doubt shortly after the president had confided in his close friend that the recent military defeats and political feuding had put the nation on "the brink of destruction." (By Rebecca Solnit)

Transcribed Text –

Thursday Decr 18, 1862 With Boone & Head at the Treasury Department in the morning. In the evening went with Mr D W Wise of Boston to the Presidents *The Servant at the door reported that he was not in his office—was in the house but had directed them to say that he could not be seen to night.

I told the boy to tell him I wished to see him a moment and went up in to his room. He soon came in. I saw in a moment that he was in distress—that more than usual trouble was pressing upon him. I introduced Mr Wise who wished to get some items for the preparation of a biography, but soon discovered that the President was in no mood to talk upon the subject. We took our leave. When we got to the door the President called to me saying he wished to speak to me a moment. Mr Wise passed into the hall and I returned. He asked me if I was at the caucus yesterday. I told him I was and the day before also. Said he "What do these men want?" I answered "I hardly know Mr President, but they are exceedingly violent towards the administration, and what we did yesterday was the gentlest thing that could be done. We had to do that or worse." Said he "They wish to get rid of me, and I am sometimes half disposed to gratify them." I replied Some of them do wish to get rid of you, but the fortunes of the Country are bound up with your fortunes, and you stand firmly at your post and hold the helm with a steady hand—To relinquish it now would bring upon us certain and inevitable ruin." Said he "We are now on the brink of destruction. It appears to me the Almighty is against us, and I can hardly see a ray of hope." I answered "Be firm and we will yet save the Country. Do not be driven from your post. You ought to have crushed the ultra, impracticable men last summer. You could then have done it, and escaped these troubles. But we will not talk of the past. Let us be hopeful and take care of the future Mr Seward appears now to be the especial object of their hostility. Still I believe he has managed our foreign affairs as well as any one could have done. Yet they are very bitter upon him, and some of them very bitter upon you." He then said Why will men believe a lie, an absurd lie, that could not impose upon a child, and cling to it and repeat it in defiance of all evidence to the contrary." I understood this to refer to the charges against Mr Seward.

He then added "the Committee is to be up to see me at 7 O'clock. Since I heard last night of the proceedings of the caucus I have been more distressed than by any event of my life." I bade him good night, and left him



Document 2– John Hay to John Nicolay, August 7, 1863

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/32707>

Source Citation –

John Hay to John Nicolay, August 7, 1863, Washington, DC, in Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1939), 75-76.

Overview –

During August 1863, Abraham Lincoln was essentially left alone in the White House. Congress was out of session, senior aide John Nicolay was on a trip out west, and even the First Family was traveling. Lincoln's other top assistant John Hay updated Nicolay with a chatty letter on August 7, 1863 that described the less distracted president as "in fine whack." Hay also noted Lincoln's "tyrannous authority" over his Cabinet and claimed that "the hand of God" had placed him in the presidency. (By Brenna McKelvey)

Transcribed Text –

To J.G. Nicolay
Executive Mansion, Washington,
August 7, 1863.

The draft fell pretty heavily in our end of town. William Johnson (cullud) was taken while polishing the Executive boots and rasping the Imperial Abolition whisker. Henry Stoddard is a conscript bold. You remember that good-natured shiny-faced darkey who used to be my special favorite a year ago at Willard's. He is gone, *en haut de la spout*. And the gorgeous headwaiter, G. Washington. A clerk in the War Department named Ramsey committed suicide on hearing he was drafted. Our friend Henry A. Blood was snatched from his jealous desk. And Bob Lamon is on the [torn off]. Bob [Lincoln] and his mother have gone through to the white mountains. (I don't take any special stock in the matter & write the locality in small letters.) Bob was so shattered by the wedding of the idol of all of us, the bright particular *Teutonne*, that he rushed madly off to sympathize with nature in her sternest aspects. They will be gone some time. The newspapers say the Tycoon will join them after a while. If so, he does not know it. He may possibly go for a few days to Cape May where Hill Lamon is now staying, though that is not certain.

This town is as dismal now as a defaced tombstone. Everybody has gone. I am getting apathetic & write blackguardly articles for the *Chronicle* from which West extracts the dirt & fun & publishes the dreary remains. The Tycoon is in fine whack. I have rarely seen him more serene & busy. He is managing this war, the draft, foreign relations, and planning a reconstruction of the Union, all at once. I never knew with what tyrannous authority he rules the Cabinet, till now. The most important things he decides & there is no cavil. I am growing more and more firmly convinced that the good of the country absolutely demands that he should be kept where he is till this thing is over. There is no man in the country, so wise, so gentle, and so firm. I believe the hand of God placed him where he is.

They are working against him like beavers though; Hale & that crowd, but don't seem to make anything by it. I believe the people know what they want and unless politics have gained in power & lost in principle they will have it.....



Document 3— Diary Entry by Edward Bates, August 4, 1864

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/32716>

Source Citation –

Howard K. Beale, ed., *The Diary of Edward Bates 1859-1866* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1933), 393-394.

Overview –

In this angry diary entry, Attorney General Edward Bates voiced his disgust with President Lincoln's refusal to overturn the introduction of martial law in Norfolk, Virginia by Union general Benjamin Butler, blasting the "abject fear" and "stolid indifference to duty" at stake in the case. Bates believed the decision represented "open contempt of constitution and law." The unhappy attorney general resigned from office after the presidential election in November 1864. (By Rebecca Solnit)

Transcribed Text –

Aug 4 Thursday. This is, under the Prest's procla[ma]tion, a day of humiliation, fasting and prayer; and surely no people ever stood more in need of self-abasement, for our persistent wickedness and perverse obstinacy in wrong. The whole scheme of individual and social morality seems to be reversed. Our men who seemed to be the best among us, seem to have lost the *moral sense*—argument and logic are wasted upon them, for, yielding a stupid assent to your propositions, they no longer do any thing *because it is right*, nor leave any thing undone *because it is wrong*.

The President knows as well as I do, that Genl. Butler's proceedings to overthrow the Civil Law at Norfolk, and establish his own despotism in its stead, is unlawful and wrong, and without ever a pretence of military necessity, and yet, he will not revoke the usurping orders, for fear Gel Butler will "raise a hubbub *about it*." Alas! That I should live to see such abject fear—such small stolid indifference to duty—such open contempt of constitution and law—and such profound ignorance of policy and prudence!

My hear is sick, when I see the President shrink from the correction of gross and heinous wrong because he is afraid "Genl Butler will raise a hubbub about it."

Attended Dr. Smith's church, in the forenoon, and heard a passible good sermon, but not as st[r]ong as the occasion called for, with such right material at hand.

At night fall, Matilda returned from Wheeling, bringing with he, Ada Bates.