



Book Review

Storied Leadership A Case for the Power of Narrative

By Major Cadence L. Coffin

*Are leaders born or made? Doris Kearns Goodwin responds: Let me tell you a story.*¹

A perennial discussion for leaders is whether leaders are born or made.² *Leadership in Turbulent Times*³ (*Leadership*) by Doris Kearns Goodwin is one of more than 12,000 books in the Library of Congress on leadership.⁴ One could argue that from the sheer number of leadership publications available (Army Doctrine Publication 6-22⁵ included), we have the answer: leaders are made, or at least we believe they can be.⁶ Naturally, then—and rightly!—readers are on the lookout for formulas for successful leadership.

Leadership, like other books of its kind, offers practical guidance for outstanding leadership from the lives of four exceptional presidents: Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), and Lyndon B. Johnson. But Goodwin’s aim is much higher. She does not limit the question to what qualities (innate or learned) make a good leader; she focuses on the cause-and-effect relationship between the four men and the times in which they lived. She does so by employing the narrative method of instruction because the most effective way to develop young leaders is through story. Manuals or books that atomize leadership into discrete traits and strip them of context are helpful but insufficient to inspire future leaders. Goodwin takes the classic leadership traits, such as those offered in the Army’s leadership requirements model,⁷ and explores their application through the lives of these men. As a result, *Leadership* stands as a necessary supplement to the Army’s leadership doctrine.

The Story: “No Single Path”⁸

Goodwin is a Pulitzer Prize winner⁹ and author of individual biographies on each of these presidents. She is more than equipped to tease out the leadership lessons from their lives. As Theodore Roosevelt said of his literary heroes, Goodwin “has gone to bed at night and risen in the morning with these men,” and she knows “their strengths and weaknesses.”¹⁰ Although *Leadership* is supported by fifty-eight pages of citations,¹¹ Goodwin shares her subjects’ stories in a way that is accessible to lay readers. She presents these men as characters in their story, focusing on the human side of leadership. She follows the lead of Abraham Lincoln by taking a complex idea and giving concrete

examples in story format.¹² It is not just instructional; it is enjoyable.

Great leadership is best understood in the nuance of story. Goodwin expertly aligns the subjects’ stories parallel to each other to make visible what we might not see by viewing these men in isolation: context matters. Goodwin’s approach prevents future leaders from concluding that there is a single path to leadership.¹³ For example, if you thought that leaders are born after reading about Abraham Lincoln’s natural empathy,¹⁴ Goodwin presents you with the counterpoint of FDR conquering polio¹⁵ to show that a man who had assumed such an outstanding level of responsibility¹⁶ for his life was uniquely capable of leading us through the Great Depression and World War II.

We read of Theodore Roosevelt’s inborn and unmatched willpower and energy¹⁷ to find more support for leaders being born. But then Goodwin juxtaposes those ideas against the strongest example of a man being shaped by the times: Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson was a legislative master,¹⁸ but it was only when President John F. Kennedy’s assassination forced him to carry out President Kennedy’s vision that he became a great leader.¹⁹

That’s what makes Goodwin’s approach so effective: by presenting the information as a story, the reader has to actively participate and wrestle with the concept of cause-and-effect. At every turn, Goodwin offers future leaders the necessary context that brings leadership traits to life.

Goodwin had many options to choose from when writing about leadership, so why these four presidents? It is easy to understand why leaders like Lincoln and FDR made the list.²⁰ However, her less obvious choice of Johnson makes the reader wonder whether these four men were chosen out of convenience—she already had a wealth of source material after writing the biographies of each.²¹ Is *Leadership* just a derivative of her earlier research?²² Even Goodwin expresses concern that the reader has grounds to question her choices.²³ However, one of *Leadership*’s themes is that there is “no single path.”²⁴ Future leaders have a trove of varied examples to explore. By selecting four presidents with different qualities, from different times, and with varying levels of success, Goodwin makes her point.

The Leaders: A Building of Four Stories

The subtext between the lines of almost every chapter²⁵ of *Leadership* is that storytelling is a vital skill for leaders. Not only is it her method of instruction as the author, but she also highlights the influence of storytelling in each of the presidents' lives. Vignettes describing each president's obsession with hearing and telling stories appear in over one

opposite the set pieces surrounding these characters can be. Although Lincoln had "no wealthy or popular relations to recommend [him],"³³ he had physical strength and health.³⁴ Roosevelt had access to all the tools and resources a child could want except for a healthy body. He had bronchial asthma, which made him a sickly and timid child.³⁵ Like Lincoln, he also wanted to rise above his circumstances and found himself

storytelling that made his fireside chats so effective.

"Storytelling played a central role in young Lyndon's life," too.⁴⁵ He used it as an escape from his parents' fractured relationship and the tension in his childhood home.⁴⁶ The stories he read and heard became the scaffolding for his "heroic conception of leadership."⁴⁷ As a young adult, he would channel that heroic conception of leadership as the principal of a Mexican American elementary school in Cotulla, Texas.⁴⁸ He would devote all of his energy and his own personal funds to the betterment of his students.⁴⁹ Later, he would say, "I can still see the faces of the children who sat in my class."⁵⁰ His students were "poor . . . and they knew, even in their youth, the pain of prejudice."⁵¹ These visions became his wellspring of motivation during the civil rights era. After the tragic death of President Kennedy, Johnson "harked back to his childhood . . . to the stories his grandfather told"⁵² and "knew what had to be done."⁵³

The virtue of a list of leadership traits is limited by the imagination of the reader. By placing those traits in context, future leaders can see them in action and explore their limitations.

hundred places throughout the book.²⁶ Not only were all four presidents influenced by stories, but they also used storytelling as a tool of influence as leaders.

Lincoln was known from his youth as "the best storyteller in the house."²⁷ Despite extreme poverty, the loss of his mother, and discouragement from his father,²⁸ Lincoln quested after literature and learning. This was, in part, born out of the frustration he felt when others "talked to [him] in a way [he] could not understand," the only thing that made him truly angry.²⁹ He also avoided engendering that frustration in others. "With kindness, playfulness, wit, and wisdom," he would instruct those in his sphere of influence.³⁰ He would take complex concepts and present them in stories and maxims so that others "might instantly see the force and bearing of what he said."³¹

But it is not the hardship of childhood poverty that creates the ambition required for leadership. Theodore Roosevelt was born into privilege.³² He had loving parents who gave him individualized care and education. In terms of worldly privilege, he was at the other end of the spectrum from Lincoln. The effect of placing Lincoln and Roosevelt's childhoods side-by-side shows just how

transported into the lives of the adventurous heroes he admired through books.³⁶ From his heroes, he learned the "gospel of will,"³⁷ and he transformed his body to keep up with his mind. "The story of Theodore Roosevelt is the story of a small boy who read about great men and decided he wanted to be like them."³⁸

Like Theodore Roosevelt, FDR was born into worldly privilege. However, unlike Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, FDR had an idyllic upbringing with both privilege and health.³⁹ What separates FDR from Lincoln and Roosevelt is that his love of story did not come from reading literature but from listening to it. His mother would read to him regularly,⁴⁰ and "he would absorb great quantities of information by hearing people talk."⁴¹ He would later tell his cabinet secretary that he much preferred to read aloud to someone than to read by himself.⁴² He was warm and charming and would speak with everyone he encountered: in general stores, in village squares, and standing outside manufacturing plants.⁴³ He loved to talk and listened intently as others spoke about their work, their lives, and their family.⁴⁴ These experiences were the infrastructure for the

The Adversity: A Harbinger of Success

The next section of the book weaves another common thread through their development: a life-altering trauma that challenged their will, upended their ambition, and would have justified the end of their rise. Suppose a future leader was tempted to believe these men were destined for greatness based on their innate characteristics or upbringing alone. In that case, that leader is confronted with section II of *Leadership*, "Adversity and Growth,"⁵⁴ and is disabused of that notion.

Here, Goodwin tells the story of each man conquering his challenges, making a strong argument that leaders are developed because of their circumstances, not in spite of them. Goodwin leaves no room for fatalism here. There was nothing inevitable about Lincoln unburdening himself from the shackles of depression, which caused his friends to remove all the sharp objects from his room,⁵⁵ or Roosevelt channeling his grief from the loss of his wife and mother into something productive, just as he did with his childhood asthma.⁵⁶ Everyone would have understood if FDR had surrendered to his polio diagnosis and lived a quiet life of meaning at home,⁵⁷ and it was not a guarantee that Johnson would

rediscover his motivation after his heart attack.⁵⁸

Their experiences would have understandably interfered with—or even halted—the rise of any person. One wonders what stories these men told themselves as they experienced their respective challenges. Each conquered the vicissitudes of life before taking on the mantle of the presidency. The resilience they displayed in their personal crises was a harbinger of the leadership they would display during national crises.⁵⁹ Their stories encourage future leaders facing their own turbulence that their experiences can play an essential role in their success.⁶⁰

The Times: “For Leadership Does Not Exist in a Void”⁶¹

If future leaders are not already convinced that leadership is not merely a combination of ingredients from a recipe book, the final section of *Leadership* demonstrates that how leaders interact with the times in which they live is what truly reveals their greatness.⁶² The virtue of a list of leadership traits is limited by the imagination of the reader. By placing those traits in context, future leaders can see them in action and explore their limitations.

One of many examples Goodwin offers is how Lincoln, with incredible foresight, mediated among factions and provided a moral purpose for the Civil War. The issue of slavery had been debated for years before the Emancipation Proclamation; the timing was not right.⁶³ Lincoln expertly found the right moment.⁶⁴ Another example is FDR’s immediate recognition that the country demanded more involvement from its Government. The weekend after his inauguration, he worked tirelessly to find a legal path to support the banking system and stem the tide of lost savings in failed banks.⁶⁵ He also led an unprecedented expansion of Federal powers⁶⁶ in creating jobs for the quarter of the Nation that was unemployed, all the while comforting the country with his fireside chats.⁶⁷

One limitation of *Leadership*, and any book aiming this high, is that it cannot tell the whole story. Not every aspect of these leaders’ lives can be presented to the reader. To maintain balance and ensure that the reader continues to view these leaders as human, Goodwin reserved precious real estate in her book to show us their flaws;

she acknowledges that there are limits to the examples they provide.

Roosevelt’s resilience after the death of his wife and mother caused him to work harder and to serve in the military.⁶⁸ But he did so at the expense of his family: He essentially abandoned his infant daughter.⁶⁹ Further, his insubordination toward his leader while serving as Assistant Secretary of the Navy⁷⁰ is not an example for military leaders to follow. FDR was often duplicitous: “He would give the same assignment to different people in the same agency or allocate the same projects to different agencies”⁷¹ to stimulate rivalry and competition, but it incurred the resentment of his subordinates who had to work under his “inherently disorderly nature.”⁷² Johnson’s toxic behavior toward his staff, including belittling them⁷³ and forcing them to dictate letters while he was in the bathtub,⁷⁴ was so pervasive that it received a name: The Johnson Treatment.⁷⁵ Goodwin offers a balanced picture of these men to show that leaders can be great despite their shortcomings. Like their triumphs, their shortcomings and failures are part of the story.

Conclusion

You cannot read *Leadership* without wondering if the attributes and experiences of these men would be practical now. In *Leadership*, Goodwin uses the power of narrative to provoke the kind of critical thinking necessary for hopeful leaders. Like Theodore Roosevelt, we have read the stories of great men and want to be like them.⁷⁶ How would Lincoln handle the divisiveness in our day? Would Roosevelt’s direct approach be effective in combating corruption now? How would the modern civil service respond to FDR’s ingenuity? Would Johnson’s forceful buttonholing keep modern politicians in line?

We are inextricably linked to our times, and our leadership must fit our times like a key to a lock.⁷⁷ As our future leaders see their reflection in the mirror⁷⁸ of *Leadership* and wonder whether they will shape the times or be shaped by them,⁷⁹ Army leadership should respond: Let me tell you a story. **TAL**

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Notes

1. DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *LEADERSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES*, at xiii (2018) (“I found myself engaged in an unexpectedly personal and emotional kind of storytelling.”).
2. Marjan Boerma et al., *Point/Counterpoint: Are Outstanding Leaders Born or Made?*, 81 AM. J. PHARM. EDU. 58, 58 (2017).
3. GOODWIN, *supra* note 1.
4. LIB. OF CONG., + Books Published in the United States with Leadership in the Title, < 12,000 results (Dec. 30, 2025) (on file with The Army Lawyer).
5. U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, DOCTRINE, PAM. 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP AND THE PROFESSION (31 July 2019) [hereinafter ADP 6-22].
6. See, e.g., Lieutenant General Stuart W. Risch & Lieutenant Colonel John E. Swords, *Lawyers as Leaders: Servant Leadership and Our Dual Professions*, ARMY LAW., no. 2, 2024, at 11 (stating the authors’ firm belief that leaders are made). But see GOODWIN, *supra* note 1, at xv (quoting *The Conditions of Success*, in 13 THE WORKS OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT 575 (Hermann Hagedorn, ed. 1923-1926) (“If there is not the war, you don’t get the great general; if there is not a great occasion, you don’t get the great statesman; if Lincoln had lived in times of peace, no one would have known his name now.”)).
7. ADP 6-22, *supra* note 5, para. 22.
8. GOODWIN, *supra* note 1, at 345.
9. See *Prize Winners*, PULITZER PRIZES, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/doris-kearns-goodwin> [<https://perma.cc/83H8-7UCD>] (last visited Dec. 30, 2025) (listing Goodwin as a winning author).
10. GOODWIN, *supra* note 1, at 25.
11. *Id.* at 389–447.
12. *Id.* at 6.
13. See *id.* at 345.
14. *Id.* at 7.
15. *Id.* at 281.
16. See *id.* (describing FDR’s willingness to assume responsibility and to do it with a smile).
17. *Id.* at 29.
18. See ROBERT A. CARO, *MASTER OF THE SENATE: THE YEARS OF LYNDON JOHNSON* (2003).
19. GOODWIN, *supra* note 1, at 337.
20. *Id.* at xvii.
21. DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *LYNDON JOHNSON AND THE AMERICAN DREAM* (1991); DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *NO ORDINARY TIME: FRANKLIN AND ELEANOR ROOSEVELT: THE HOME FRONT IN WORLD WAR II* (1994); DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *TEAM OF RIVALS: THE POLITICAL GENIUS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN* (2005); DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *THE BULLY PULPIT: THEODORE ROOSEVELT, WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT, AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF JOURNALISM* (2013).
22. See sources cited *supra* note 21; see also DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY: HOW FOUR KIDS BECOME PRESIDENT* (2024) (using the same four subjects but intended for eight- to twelve-year-old readers).

23. See GOODWIN, *supra* note 1, at xvii, 187 (suggesting that stacking Johnson next to the other three presidents might be an “exercise in hyperbole”).
24. *Id.* at xiv.
25. See generally *id.* (discussing storytelling in every chapter except chapter 6).
26. See generally *id.* (mentioning storytelling throughout the book).
27. *Id.* at 103 (quoting MICHAEL BURLINGAME, ABRAHAM LINCOLN: A LIFE 750–51 (2008)).
28. See *id.* at 9 (explaining that when reading distracted Lincoln from his labors, his father would whip him and destroy his books).
29. *Id.* at 5 (quoting 1 IDA M. TARBELL, THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 43–44 (1903)).
30. See *id.* at 6 (quoting HERNDON’S INFORMANTS: LETTERS, INTERVIEWS, AND STATEMENTS ABOUT ABRAHAM LINCOLN 113 (Douglas L. Wilson & Rodney O. Davis eds., 1998)).
31. *Id.*
32. *Id.* at 27.
33. *Id.* at 4 (quoting Abraham Lincoln, Communication to the People of Sangamon County (Mar. 9, 1832), in 1 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 9 (Roy P. Basler ed., 1953)).
34. *Id.* at 8.
35. *Id.* at 24.
36. *Id.*
37. *Id.*
38. *Id.* at 28 (quoting HERMANN HAGEDORN, THE BOYS’ LIFE OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT 45 (1941)).
39. *Id.* at 44.
40. *Id.*
41. *Id.* at 47.
42. *Id.*
43. *Id.* at 42.
44. *Id.*
45. *Id.* at 72.
46. *Id.*
47. *Id.*
48. *Id.* at 75.
49. *Id.*
50. *Id.* at 76.
51. *Id.* at 75.
52. *Id.* at 307.
53. *Id.* at 75 (quoting LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON, THE VANTAGE POINT: PERSPECTIVES OF THE PRESIDENCY, 1963-1969, at 172 (1971)).
54. *Id.* at 96.
55. *Id.* at 98.
56. *Id.* at 131.
57. *Id.* at 166.
58. *Id.* at 188.
59. See *id.* at 97 (explaining the ability to sustain ambition in the face of frustration is at the heart of leadership development).
60. See *id.* at xviii (“It is my hope that these stories . . . will prove instructive and reassuring. These men set a standard and a bar for all of us. Just as they learned from one another, so we can learn from them.”).
61. *Id.*
62. See *id.* at xvi (quoting Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, (Jan. 19, 1780), in 3 THE ADAMS PAPERS, ADAMS FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE, APRIL 1778-SEPTEMBER 1780, at 268–69 (L.H. Butterfield & Marc Friedlaender eds., Harv. Univ. Press 1973) (“The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues.”)).
63. *Id.* at 14.
64. See *id.* at 233 (quoting FRANCIS B. CARPENTER, SIX MONTHS AT THE WHITE HOUSE WITH ABRAHAM LINCOLN 77 (1995) (quoting Lincoln as saying that “[i]t is my conviction that, had the proclamation been issued even six months earlier than it was, public sentiment would not have sustained it”).
65. *Id.* at 279.
66. *Id.* at 178–79.
67. *Id.* at 289.
68. *Id.* at 148.
69. See *id.* at 128 (quoting WILLIAM WINGATE SEWALL, BILL SEWALL’S STORY OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT 47 (1919) (stating that Roosevelt’s daughter, Alice, was raised by his sister and Roosevelt “insist[ed] that she would be just as well off without me”).
70. See *id.* at 147 (recounting Roosevelt’s decision to launch a series of unauthorized peremptory orders at the height of tension with Spain in February 1898, before the outbreak of the Spanish-American war).
71. *Id.* at 296.
72. *Id.*
73. *Id.* at 71–72.
74. *Id.* at 192.
75. *Id.* at 319.
76. See *supra* note 37 and accompanying text.
77. See GOODWIN, *supra* note 1, at 319 (“While there is neither a master key to leadership nor a common lock of historical circumstance, we can detect a certain family resemblance of leadership traits as we trace the alignment of leadership capacity within its historical context.”).
78. See *id.* at xviii.
79. See *id.* at xv (seeking an answer to the question, “Do leaders shape the times, or do the times summon their leaders?”).