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The Master of the Game

By Doris Kearns Goodwin

Lincoln's political resume was meager, his learning derided, and his election considered a stroke of luck. And yet the prairie lawyer from Springfield would emerge the undisputed captain of his distinguished Cabinet, earning the respect of colleagues who had originally disdained him, and become, as Whitman wrote, "the grandest figure yet, on all the crowded canvas of the Nineteenth Century."

As it turned out, unbeknownst to the country at the time, Lincoln was a towering political genius--not because he had mastered the traditional rules of the game, but because he possessed a remarkable array of emotional strengths that are rarely found in political life. He had what we would call today a first-class emotional intelligence.

To appreciate the magnitude of Lincoln's political success, it helps to understand just how slight a figure he appeared to be when he arrived in Washington. "Never did a President enter upon office with less means at his command," Harvard professor James Russell Lowell wrote in 1863. "All that was known of him was that he was a good stump-speaker, nominated for his availability--that is, because he had no history." His entire national political experience consisted of a single term in Congress that had come to an end nearly a dozen years earlier and two failed Senate races. He had absolutely no administrative experience and only one year of formal schooling. Newspapers described him as "a third-rate Western lawyer" and a "fourth-rate lecturer, who cannot speak good grammar."

In contrast, his three chief rivals for the Republican nomination were household names in Republican circles. William Henry Seward had been a celebrated Senator from New York for more than a decade and Governor of his state for two terms before he went to Washington. Ohio's Salmon P. Chase, too, had been both Senator and Governor, and had played a central role in the formation of the Republican Party. Edward Bates was a widely respected elder statesman from Missouri, a former Congressman whose opinions on national matters were still widely sought. All three

men, knowing they were better educated, more experienced and more qualified than Lincoln, were stunned when he received the Republican nomination and went on to win the election.

Then he, in turn, stunned the political world by putting all three of his rivals into his Cabinet. It was a seemingly dangerous act, since it risked building up a potential opponent in the next election and ensured that he would be seen by many as a mere figurehead. His opponents were certain that he had failed this first test of leadership. "The construction of a Cabinet," one critical editorial suggested, "like the courting of a shrewd girl, belongs to a branch of the fine arts with which the new Executive is not acquainted. There are certain little tricks which go far beyond the arts familiar to the stump, and the cross-road tavern, whose comprehension requires a delicacy of thought and subtlety of perception, secured only by experience."

In fact, it was a subtlety of perception about what he needed, and a deep emotional strength, that lay behind Lincoln's move. As his secretary, John Nicolay, later wrote, Lincoln's "first decision was one of great courage and self-reliance." A less confident man might have surrounded himself with personal supporters who would never question his authority. Later Lincoln was asked why had chosen his chief rivals for his official family, knowing each of them was still smarting from his loss. Lincoln's answer was simple and shrewd: "We needed the strongest men of the party in the Cabinet. We needed to hold our own people together. I had looked the party over and concluded that these were the very strongest men. Then I had no right to deprive the country of their service."

The decision to appoint his political enemies to his Cabinet was perhaps the most obvious example of his emotional strength. But there were many others, all of which highlighted a different aspect of it.

EMPATHY

Perhaps the most important of his emotional abilities was empathy--the gift of putting himself in the place of others, to experience what they were feeling, to understand their motives and desires. Even as a child, he was uncommonly tender-hearted. He once stopped and tracked back half a mile to rescue a pig caught in a mire--not because he loved the pig, recollected a friend, "just to take a pain out of his own mind." As a young member of the state legislature, he was known for his insight

into the opposition's strategy. Even after leaving the body, he would be called upon by his Whig colleagues not only to predict the moves that their Democratic opponents were likely to take, but to spell out the countermeasures needed to block them.

Unusual among antislavery orators in the 1850s, Lincoln sought to comprehend the Southerners' position through empathy rather than castigate slave owners as corrupt and un-Christian men. He argued, "They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up." It was useless, he explained in another address, to employ "thundering tones of anathema and denunciation," for denunciation would be met by denunciation, "anathema with anathema."

Far better, he believed, to reach into the heart of one's opponents--which, of course, he memorably did in his second Inaugural when he suggested that the sin of slavery was shared by North and South. "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other ... let us judge not that we be not judged." In the largest sense, Lincoln's empathy allowed him to absorb the sorrows and hopes of his countrymen, to sense their shifting moods so he could shape and mold their opinion with the right words and the right deeds at the right time.

HUMOR

Though a strain of melancholy was part of his nature, Lincoln possessed a remarkable sense of humor and a gift for storytelling that allowed him, time and again, to defuse tensions and relax his colleagues at difficult moments. Many of his stories, taken from his seemingly limitless stock, were directly applicable to a point being argued. Many were self-deprecatory, all were hilarious. When he began one of them, his "eyes would sparkle with fun," one old-timer remembered, "and when he reached the point in his narrative which invariably evoked the laughter of the crowd, nobody's enjoyment was greater than his."

One of his favorite anecdotes, a Springfield friend recalled, sprang from the early days just after the Revolution. Shortly after the peace was signed, the story began, the Revolutionary War hero Ethan Allen "had occasion to visit England," where he was subjected to teasing banter. The British would make "fun of the Americans and General Washington in particular and one day they got a picture of General

Washington" and displayed it prominently in the outhouse so Allen could not miss it. When he made no mention of it, they finally asked him if he had seen the Washington picture. Allen said "he thought that it was a very appropriate [place] for an Englishman to keep it ... Why they asked, for said Mr. Allen there is nothing that will make an Englishman s_____ so quick as the sight of Genl Washington."

But Lincoln's stories provided more than mere amusement. Drawn from his own experiences and the curiosities reported by others, they frequently conveyed practical wisdom that his listeners could remember and repeat. For instance, when the Civil War was coming to an end and the debate began over what to do with the rebel leaders, Lincoln wished they could somehow "escape the country," even though he could not say this publicly. "As usual," General William Sherman recalled, "he illustrated his meaning by a story: 'A man once had taken the total-abstinence pledge. When visiting a friend, he was invited to take a drink, but declined, on the score of his pledge ... his friend suggested lemonade, which was accepted. In preparing the lemonade, the friend pointed to the brandy-bottle, and said the lemonade would be more palatable if he were to pour in a little brandy; when his guest said, if he could do so 'unbeknown' to him, he would not object.'" Sherman grasped the point immediately. "Mr. Lincoln wanted [Jefferson] Davis to escape, 'unbeknown' to him."

MAGNANIMITY

He refused to bear grudges or pay people back for previous hurts. While his colleagues tended to let things fester and brooded over perceived slights, he argued that "no man resolved to make the most of himself has time to waste on personal contention." So rare in a politician, this attitude allowed him to form friendships and alliances with those who had previously opposed him. In the 1850s, Edwin Stanton had humiliated him when they were partners in a law case, referring to him as a "long-armed ape," refusing to deal with him as an equal, deliberately shunning him at a hotel, never even opening the brief he had painstakingly prepared. Yet, when the time came for Lincoln to replace Simon Cameron, his first Secretary of War, he appointed Stanton, believing him to be the best man for the all-important post. He recognized that the very qualities that had brought the hotheaded Stanton to treat him badly--his intensity, his bluntness, his determination to succeed--were precisely the qualities he needed in his War Secretary.

GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT

When Congress voted to censure Cameron for wasteful contracts given out to suppliers in the early days of the war, in which middlemen had made off with scandalous profits for unworkable pistols, for blind horses and for knapsacks that disintegrated in the rain, Lincoln publicly took the blame. He explained that the unfortunate contracts were part and parcel of the emergency situation that faced the government in those first days of the war. If fault was to be found, then he himself and his entire Cabinet "were at least equally responsible." For this, Cameron would be forever grateful. Similarly, colleagues of Lincoln were grateful when he shared credit for successes. When General Ulysses S. Grant, the hero of Vicksburg and Chattanooga, arrived in the nation's capital in March 1864 to take command of all the Union armies, he was greeted as a conquering hero at a White House reception. Standing to the side, Lincoln willingly ceded the place of honor he normally occupied, fully aware, as few other ambitious politicians would have been, that "the path to ambition" was wide enough, as an observer phrased it, for the two of them "to walk it abreast."

Above all, he was quick to concede error. When Grant was moving toward Vicksburg, Lincoln thought he "should go down the river," where he could meet up with General Nathaniel Banks. Instead, Grant decided to turn northward. "I feared it was a mistake," Lincoln acknowledged after Grant's spectacular victory. "I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong." Then, to lessen the censure of another general, Lincoln wrote, "I frequently make mistakes myself, in the many things I am compelled to do hastily."

PERSPECTIVE

Lincoln's Secretary, John Hay, described the mental torture of waiting for an hour with Secretary of State Seward and Lincoln in George McClellan's house for the general to return from a wedding. When McClellan finally did come back, he simply passed the room in which the President was sitting; another half an hour went by before a servant informed Lincoln that McClellan had gone to bed. Young John Hay was enraged. "I wish here to record what I consider a portent of evil to come," he wrote in his diary as he recounted the story of what he considered an inexcusable "insolence of epaulettes." To Hay's surprise, Lincoln "seemed not to have noticed it

specially, saying it was better at this time not to be making points of etiquette & personal dignity." Another story is told of the time when a Congressman had received Lincoln's authorization for something to be carried out by the War Department. When War Secretary Stanton refused to honor the order, the disappointed petitioner returned to Lincoln, telling him that Stanton had not only countermanded the order but had called the President a damn fool for issuing it. "Did Stanton say I was a damn fool?" Lincoln asked. "He did, sir, and repeated it." At which point, the President remarked, "If Stanton said I was a damn fool, then I must be one, for he is nearly always right and generally says what he means. I will step over and see him."

Perhaps the most memorable instance of Lincoln's ability to yield lesser concerns for more important ones related to Grant, whose weakness for alcohol may have contributed to his resignation from the Army in the 1850s. His return to the Army during the war, however, had been marked by a string of great successes before rumors of drinking problems began once again to surface in early 1863. After dispatching an investigator to look into Grant's behavior in the field, Lincoln concluded that Grant's drinking did not affect his unmatched ability to plan, execute and win battles. When a delegation brought further complaints about Grant's drinking to the President, he told them that if he could find the brand of whiskey Grant used, he would distribute it at once to the rest of his generals.

SELF-CONTROL

When angry at someone, Lincoln would occasionally write a hot letter, but then would invariably put it aside until he had cooled down, at which point he no longer needed to send it. Lincoln had rarely been more "dejected and discouraged," as Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles observed, than when he learned that General George Meade had allowed Robert E. Lee's army to escape after Gettysburg. In a frank letter to Meade, Lincoln acknowledged that he was "distressed immeasurably" by "the magnitude of the misfortune ... He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely." But Lincoln delayed sending it, knowing the great pain it would cause the general, until his emotions settled down. And when they did, he placed the letter in an envelope on which he wrote, "To Gen. Meade, never sent, or signed."

To be sure, there were times when Lincoln lost his temper, but then he would promptly follow up with a kind gesture. "I was a little cross," he wrote one of his generals, "I ask pardon. If I do get up a little temper I have no sufficient time to keep it up." By such gestures, repeated again and again, he repaired injured feelings that might have escalated into lasting animosity.

A SENSE OF BALANCE

In contrast to most of his colleagues who worked themselves to the point of exhaustion, Lincoln understood the importance of finding ways to relax. In the evenings, he regularly entertained friends by reading aloud from Shakespeare, sharing a favorite poem or telling a few of his inexhaustible stories. His ability to think creatively and retain an even keel was rooted in the constructive ways he would dispel worry and anxiety. In the most difficult moments of his presidency, nothing brought him more refreshment and repose than immersing himself in a play. The manager of Grover's Theatre in Washington estimated that Lincoln had come "more than a hundred times" during his presidency. During a performance of Henry IV, one of his assistants observed, "He has forgotten the war. He has forgotten Congress. He is out of politics. He is living in Prince Hal's time."

A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Lincoln's ambition was never simply for office or power, but rather to accomplish something worthy that would stand the test of time, that would allow his story to be told after he died. "Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition," he told the voters of Sangamon County when he announced his candidacy for the Illinois state legislature at the age of 23. "I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem." He acknowledged that he was "young and unknown to many," that he had been born in humble circumstances and had "no wealthy or popular relations" to stand up for him, but he promised that if elected, he would "be unremitting" in his efforts "to compensate." Should he lose, he confessed, he had "been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined." Not surprisingly, when the votes were tallied, the little-known Lincoln found that he had been defeated.

Lincoln never lost heart. His spacious ambition propelled him forward--through his laborious efforts to educate himself, his willingness to try again to reach the state

legislature, the death of his first love, Ann Rutledge, and his incapacitating depression during the winter of 1841, when he was in his early 30s. His decision to break off his engagement to Mary Todd had left him devastated, not only because he had hurt Mary but also because he had long considered his ability to keep his word "as the only, or at least the chief, gem of [his] character." Now he could no longer trust himself in that regard.

His biggest political project had fallen apart during this same period. Throughout what eventually turned out to be four terms in the state legislature, he had championed government support for a series of public works to construct bridges, roads and canals so that people in rural areas could bring produce to market. He believed, he later said, that the "leading object" of government was to "lift artificial weights from all shoulders--to clear the path of laudable pursuit for all--to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." When a depression hit the state in the late 1830s, however, his plans were stopped in midstream. As a major proponent of the costly system that had contributed to his state's travails, Lincoln received a significant share of the blame. Now, beyond sadness over a lost love, he carried the added burden of a damaged reputation and forlorn hopes for the future.

"I am now the most miserable man living," he wrote a friend at the time. "If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I can not tell; I awfully forebode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me."

His friends were worried that he was suicidal and removed all razors and knives from his room. Throughout the nadir of Lincoln's depression, his best friend, Joshua Speed, stayed by his side. In a conversation both men would remember as long as they lived, Speed warned Lincoln that if he did not rally, he would most certainly die. Lincoln replied that he was more than willing to die, but that he had "done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived," and that "to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man was what he desired to live for."

Even in this moment of despair, the strength of Lincoln's desire to leave "the world a little better for my having lived in it" carried him forward. It became his lodestar, providing a set of principles and standards to guide his everyday actions.

Not long after he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, his old friend, Speed, visited him at the White House. Lincoln reminded him of their talks during his depression two decades earlier. "I believe that in this measure," Lincoln said, referring to the proclamation, "my fondest hopes will be realized." Nearly two centuries after his birth, we can say with certainty that the ambition that powered Lincoln from his earliest days--the desire to establish an admirable reputation on earth so that his story could be told after he died--has been realized far beyond his fondest hopes.

Goodwin's book on the political genius of Abraham Lincoln is to be published in October by Simon & Schuster

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