

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

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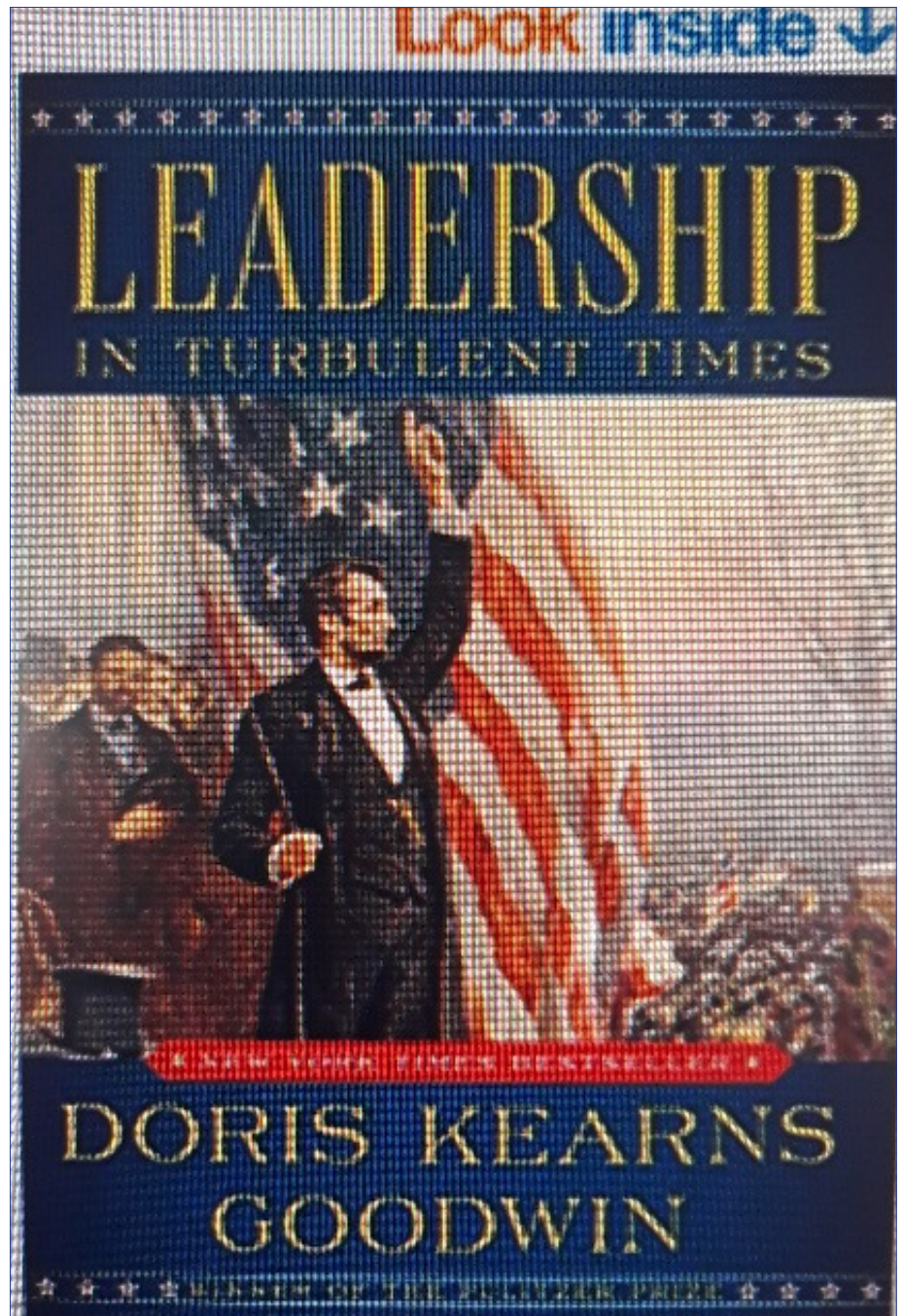
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Leadership : In Turbulent Times

Author: Doris Kearns Goodwin

Book Review



By Ambassador Moses M. Akol

“It is a great book about a great subject”

Awut Deng Acuil

Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Juba, South Sudan

October 2019

Countless books have been written about leadership. Whereas several of these books read like superficial self-help manuals, a substantial number of books on leadership are more often than not mired in the futile academic debate of whether leaders are born or they are made. Pulitzer Prize winning author Doris Kearns Goodwin has written a book that gives the thereto abstract concept of leadership both human faces and persona replete with a set of values and beliefs, character and grit. *Leadership: In Turbulent Times* is a breathtaking documentation of biographies of four former presidents of the United States with vastly diverse social backgrounds, but who also overcame personal tragedies and unprecedented cataclysmic political and epochal events that shaped their individual lives and essentially defined leadership in its archetypical, elemental form.

Each of the book’s principal actors; presidents Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Lyndon Baines Johnson, had his life shaped by social status, early life experiences, personal tragedy and socio-political issues of the day. Each of these men, who became president against great personal and political odds, went on to become synonymous with major events that accelerated the formation of the United States of America. Born in a log cabin and grew up in a poor family on the frontier in Indiana, Abraham Lincoln, the 16th US president, abolished slavery, preserved the union, and strengthened the federal government. His Emancipation Proclamation of 1868 is considered the most courageous and defining edict in American history.

Although born into a wealthy family and home-schooled, Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th US president, had to overcome a debilitating childhood asthma before studying law at Harvard. His wife died while giving birth to their first child only a few hours before his own mother died. Terribly distraught, Roosevelt sought refuge in cowboy life in the Dakotas where the rigorous wilderness life rid him of asthma. He led the Rough Riders volunteers into the Spanish-American War and emerged a war hero thereafter. He became the youngest American president following the assassination of President William McKinney in 1901, and won the Noble Peace Prize in 1906 for his role in brokering the end to the Russo-Japanese War. He successfully challenged big corporations, including railroads, that sought to monopolize industries across the country. Roosevelt’s antitrust policy and his “speak softly and carry a big stick” foreign policy strategy continue to permeate modern day US domestic and foreign policies.

Like his cousin Theodore Roosevelt, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was also born into a rich family. He also attended Harvard, studied law, and was a congressman, a mayor of New York, and a Secretary of the Navy. FDR did not allow the paralytic illness that confined him to a wheelchair to define either his private life or his political leadership. He became the 32nd president of the United States on his own merit, and entered history as the only US president to win unprecedented four terms of office. FDR exercised great leadership, including

the implantation of policies that sought to ameliorate the negative impact of major economic and political phenomena such as the Great Depression of the early 1930s, the Great Recession of 1937-1938, and World War II. Although FDR's Great Deal policy, a panacea which consisted of a variety of programs to provide relief to the unemployed and farmers while the government sought economic recovery, was perceived to be antithetical to the American capitalism of the day, the policy and its myriad social programs have withstood the test of time. FDR was also instrumental in laying the groundwork for the establishment of the United Nations.

Leadership: In Turbulent Times also shines an intense light on the leadership traits and leadership acumens of Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), who weathered the harsh poverty of the prairies of rural Illinois to become the 36th U.S. president and whose name has become synonymous with a raft of important pieces of legislation, including civil rights, voting rights for African Americans and other minorities, Medicare, Medicaid, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and public broadcasting, among others. LBJ's Great Society and 'war on poverty' programs also boosted education, rural and urban development, and the arts immeasurably. President Johnson's 'war on poverty' was informed by both his own childhood poverty in rural Illinois and the compassion he learnt firsthand when he taught disadvantaged high school students of Mexican American descent in Cotulla, Texas, in the 1950s. Although his presidency was widely successful, LBJ, who supported the Vietnam War vigorously, declined to seek a second term of presidency in the face of a growing protest against the war in 1968.

It is obvious that great leaders set into motion long-term policies and programs that need not come to fruition in the leaders' lifetime. Therefore, just as President Lincoln died only six days after General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant's Union Army following the decisive Battle of Appomattox Court House of April 9, 1865; and just as FDR died only three months before the Axis Powers surrendered to the Allies on 8 May 1945, President Lyndon B. Johnson died only five days before the Vietnam War ended unceremoniously on 27 January 1973. Nevertheless, the enduring legacies of the inspirational leadership which these four men exhibited in the turbulent times in the history of the United States of America of yesteryear continues to define leadership in first quarter of the 21st century.

Leadership: In Turbulent Times is a book after my own heart because it is the kind of book that my former director at the Advocacy Institute of Washington, D.C., Mr. David Pesach Cohen, would have not only enjoyed reading, but he would have also placed photocopied parts of the book in the mailbox of each of the Institute's researchers and research associates such as myself. Mr. Cohen would have also gone to great length to invite Dr. Doris Goodwin and Washingtonians of diverse social backgrounds and various political stipes to discuss the book in the bookshop which he and his wife, Carla, co-owned in uptown Washington, D.C. Mr. Cohen was a leader in his own right and under whose mentorship many young leaders honed their public advocacy leadership skills over the years. He was also acutely aware of the perennial debate about whether leaders are born or they are made long before he left the presidency of public advocacy Common Cause in order to establish the Advocacy Institute of Washington with his friend Michael Pertschuk in 1984. Believing that such a debate was mute, Mr. Cohen proceeded to build and bill the Advocacy Institute as a practical answer to the debate question. The think tank graduated leaders in the US and in places as far away as Bangladesh, India, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, South Africa, and Ukraine.

It goes without saying that *Leadership: In Turbulent Times* does not make any pretends to settle the debate about whether leaders are born or are made. Instead, Dr. Doris Goodwin eloquently narrates the personal story of each of the four former US presidents whom many scholars consider to be among the best five US presidents. In addition to shining a bright light on numerous leadership trait

that make greater leaders even greater, the author also brings into sharp focus the phenomenally expansive and effective labyrinth of personal contacts that served each of the four former US president well during turbulent times. Readers who have been fortunate enough, as I have been, to brush against inspirational leaders cannot help but recall the time when a mentor had at a point in time introduced them to someone or some organization that would later influence the trajectory of their own leadership growth. I remember vividly how my Advocacy institute colleague Vanessa Kirsch and I walked a few city- blocks on a wintry afternoon in Washington, D.C. to meet one of Mr. Cohen’s numerous longtime contacts. Mr. Sargent Shriver, of Peace Corp fame and President John F. Kennedy’s brother-in-law, welcomed us with breathtaking humility. As if the frequent visits to the Advocacy Institute by Clinton administration’s cerebral Labor Secretary Robert Reich were not surreal enough, standing with Mr. Cohen for nearly two hours outside the Washington National Cathedral to attend the funeral service of Thurgood Marshall on a cold January day in 1993 was an indelible watermark. Mr. Cohen marched with Marshal and Dr. Martin Luther King to demand more civil rights for minorities in the 1960s before President Lyndon Johnson appointed Marshal to become the first African-American Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court in 1967. Marshall, a great leader in his own right, came to the US Supreme Court after having successfully won landmark legal decision, including the famous 1954 Brown v the Board of Education which outlawed segregation in public schools in the country.

Leadership: In Turbulent Times is greater by leaps and bounds than the total sum of the words contained in its four hundred and ninety-six pages. Just as a river overflows its banks, this book overflows its pages, causing a vast flood of practical knowledge and inspiration. It is the most inspiring book written in this century about both the DNA and exercise of inspirational leadership!



David Cohen (far right) with Senator John Kerry (far left) in an undated photo

- Thanks to my friend Ambassador Akuei Bona Malwal for sending me the hardcopy of Leadership: In Turbulent Times from New York, USA.



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