



# Prez Release



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February 2007

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## The Prez on Presidents

I am an avid reader of biographies of great leaders. February is the month that honors the birthdays of both George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. My first realization that these two presidents were unique was actually viewing their images carved into a mountainside in western South Dakota at Mt. Rushmore. I used to gaze at their faces as a young child and wonder why they had been chosen for this American memorial.

While books on Washington and Lincoln are not in short supply, two more recent volumes have been a great source of inspiration for me. Joseph Ellis' *His Excellency; George Washington* and Doris Kearns Goodwin's, *Team of Rivals: the Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* are unique in that they describe the factors that set these men apart from their contemporaries. Ellis frames Washington as a complex person who somehow towers above other forebears of American history. Even the likes of Ben Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams all acknowledge the superior leadership of Washington. For some reason these notable historical contemporaries of Washington view him as the only indispensable figure in that era. Washington is the one and only *His Excellency*.

Lincoln is also complex. He's not taken seriously as a lawyer or politician and enters his presidency to the

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**The Prez Release is a monthly commentary from the President of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. If you want to be removed from this mailing list or would like to update your email address, please contact [sstarkey@agts.edu](mailto:sstarkey@agts.edu).**

surprise of the elites of the nation. While he is a lightning rod for Southern leaders who loath his growing resoluteness on slavery and the Union, his Northern contemporaries simply view him as a country bumpkin who lucked out in winning the presidency. His strategy as he enters his presidency is to choose for his Cabinet the political rivals who view him as weak and easy to influence. Over the years of his presidency those who previously despised him became the leaders who most admired and supported him. How is this extraordinary strategy possible? Goodwin simply said Lincoln was a character that had been forged by experience that raised him above his more privileged and accomplished rivals. He had the capability to put himself in the place of other people and to experience what they were feeling. Lincoln seems to understand the motives and desires that others experience. This unique capability gave Lincoln the skill to bring out the best in each of his cabinet members and create a synergy among them that no one could generate themselves and Lincoln, by himself, could never hope to approximate.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the western world is a culture that is quite cynical about its leaders. Whether corporate, political or religious, leadership is viewed with suspicion. Personal greed, insatiable power seeking and a short supply of integrity seem to be the way that too many folks portray contemporary leaders. The seepage from post-modern influences keeps us from viewing historical figures like Washington and Lincoln as helpful. Rather, they all too often serve as no more than quaint historical figures that have little to do with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All too frequently, even followers of Jesus have allowed its leaders to take cues from the visions of success that predominant today. With little attention paid to biblical examples, particularly that of Jesus, we often value the slickness and self-satisfaction of visible triumph and quantifiable greatness.

Mark 10:35-45 chronicles a discussion that Jesus had with his disciples. These close colleagues of Jesus showed their clear deference for replicating the leaders of their day. Curiously, they despised these governmental and religious leaders, but since they had no other examples of leadership, they passionately wanted to have their turn at "being in charge." They aligned themselves with Jesus in the hope that he would be the champion that would install them as the

new “Kings of the mountain.” Verses 42-43 record Jesus’ clear correction to them and, I can only imagine that when they heard his words, they had to have been clueless as to what he was talking about. He concluded this conversation with a statement that must have puzzled them when Jesus said that He hadn’t come to be in charge, in the way that they envisioned. He had come to demonstrate in what He said and what He did, that His whole life was dominated by self-sacrifice and not self-service.

I am not suggesting that Washington and Lincoln patterned their lives after Jesus’ model of servanthood. I am saying that somehow people recognized that their commitment to a cause higher than themselves was not the only pattern for success. Compelling causes can also be destructive. Washington and Lincoln demonstrated that they understood that the ways you treated people along the way, allowed the values of the cause you espoused to guide the way you got to a goal and reveal that goal’s nature in the process. Human dignity and the value of the individual, regardless of class, were clear values of our American founding fathers. Arguably, these early leaders had some pieces missing in the grand American experiment, but the wiser Franklin, the more brilliant Hamilton and the more political astute Jefferson and Madison clearly understood that the embodiment of their values was seen most clearly in Washington.

Edwin Stanton and William Seward were politically much more savvy and powerful than Lincoln. They were his most vigorous political adversaries, yet these were the men he embraced in his early presidency to help him lead the nation. Lincoln’s capacity to use the strengths of people in a self-sacrificial cause was a journey of pain and difficulty. The reality is that Lincoln took those whose skill had been previously used to undermine him and created a *team of rivals* that Lincoln coordinated into saving the Union from destruction and freeing those whose very dignity had been destroyed by evil.

Jesus’ words still command the attention of those who would follow Him, particularly those who desire to lead His Church. Over a protracted time, the real character of who and what we represent will be very evident for most to see. I’m believing that serious followers of Jesus can stem the tide of cynicism towards the leadership of the Church that carries Jesus’ continuing

mission, but we're going to have to take Jesus more seriously than the current views of success in vogue.



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