Commandant’s Professional Reading List

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln
- Discussion Guide -

This guide is intended to help Marines analyze ideas from the book Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln. The guide facilitates small group PME that helps Marines blend the perspective of the book with their own views on leadership and warfighting, resulting in a better understanding of history, context and purpose.

Prep Work: Read the Book; Watch the movie “Lincoln.”

Discussion Questions: All responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant points for debate.

1. What personal attribute(s) made Abraham Lincoln so well suited to lead the country through the crisis of the Civil War? (Pages 102, 252, 254, 262, 266, 292, 483, 582, 596, 648, 675, 704, 748) What are the similarities to Presidents Bush and Obama as we have fought the Global War on Terror; specifically in Iraq and Afghanistan?

2. What did Abraham Lincoln see as advantages to composing his cabinet of former rivals? [(Pg. 283 – 293): William Seward (Whig) - Secretary of State, Solomon Chase (Whig) - Secretary of the Treasury (Democrat), Edwin Stanton - Secretary of War, Montgomery Blair (Democrat) - Postmaster General, Thomas Bates (Democrat) - Attorney General, Gideon Welles (Democrat) - Secretary of the Navy, Caleb Smith (Whig) - Department of the Interior] How did Lincoln recruit and manage his team? Does our current system support that direct influence by the President?

3. How did Lincoln wield the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to bolster the survival of the United States during this dilemma? (Pg. 585) How does President reconcile the use of the Constitution as an argument and then suspend the writ of habeas corpus? (Pg. 354, 368, 503, 522, 524, 573) To what extent do current Presidents rely on the same core arguments? (For instance, how does President Lincoln’s suspension compare to the classification of detainees in Gitmo?)

4. During the course of discussion, Lincoln and Seward are said to have agreed that “one fundamental principle of politics is to be always on the side of your country in a war. It kills any party to oppose a war.” (Pg. 546) Did that prove to be true during the Civil War? How has their stance on the Global War on Terror affected our current political parties?

5. In July, 1963, President Lincoln had the Army Chief of Staff prepare an Order of Retaliation in response to a Confederate Ordinance that threatened “death or slavery to every negro taken in arms, and every white officer who commands Negro troops.” (Pages 550, 551) Have retaliatory policies of this nature been used in more recent wars? If not, why not?

6. For what purposes did the President communicate directly with the citizens of the United States in the form of letters or speeches? (First and Second Inaugural address, Letter to Conkling, letters to McClellan, letters to Greeley and Corning). (Pg. 553 –555) Was he successful in that communication; and how did
the media affect his attempts? In the contemporary United States, what have been the effective means of a President’s communication to the people?

7. How did President Lincoln directly influence and manage Congress during the Civil War? Discuss some examples. (The reconstruction question…Pg. 588) How do current Presidents “manage” Congress?

8. What was the importance of civilian control of the military during the Civil War? Discuss some specific examples where President Lincoln reversed decisions made by Generals as they impinged on his authorities/prerogatives. (Pg. 389 – Fremont, Pg. 522 - Burnside, Pg. 714 - Grant) What current methods support civilian control of the military in the United States?

9. What Principles of War were not followed by the string of Union Generals that were ultimately relieved by President Lincoln during the Civil War? (Pg. 478 –McClellan) Can you cite any examples of modern day Generals (since 9/11) that suffered from the same pitfalls?

10. What were the key traits of General Ulysses S. Grant’s success? Do you think a leader like Grant could survive long in today’s military? (Pages 417-418, 528-529, 533-534, 559, 614-684)

**Key Take Aways:**

1. President Lincoln’s personal leadership traits and principles were critical to his success.
2. President Lincoln was a strong leader and diplomat. He chose to apply that diplomacy to relationships with his cabinet, the Congress and Senate, and most importantly, the people.
3. President Lincoln won many of his fights using the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as the basis of his conviction and his arguments.
4. Lincoln knew the value of information based on truth and the reality of perception, and he found ways to capitalize on the former and influence the latter.
5. Lincoln firmly believed in civilian control of the military and did not hesitate to enforce it. He expected competent, aggressive generalship within the bounds of military authority.

**To the Discussion Leader:**

This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book. Encourage Marines to read, from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually. Avoid leading the discussion group to a particular interpretation. Support continuous conversation. There is no single right answer. The following additional readings for the discussion leader are offered:
