

# Of Presidential Politics and Life Lessons Learned

**Renowned historian Doris Kearns Goodwin talks about FDR's challenges, Lincoln's integrity and LBJ's brashness and brains**

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After a lifetime spent writing about American presidents, world-renowned presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin has a bit of anxiety about what might happen to her in the afterlife.

“My only fear is that there will be a panel of all the presidents and every single one is going to be telling me every single thing I got wrong about them. And the first one to scream out will be Lyndon Johnson, ‘How come that book on the damn Kennedys was twice as long as the book on Lyndon Johnson?’” she joked.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author was on campus Monday night, speaking as part of the Rutman Distinguished Lecture Series on the American Presidency. She spoke to a packed Johnson Theatre about the lessons learned from presidents she has studied and written about over her 40-year career.

“I’ve found that while problems change over time, there are universal traits and behaviors that are held in common by our most successful leaders,” Goodwin said. Using colorful anecdotes, she illustrated how Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt each faced those challenges, which surfaced in both their professional and personal lives. She talked of Lincoln’s great desire to leave behind a meaningful legacy, and the way Teddy Roosevelt and FDR faced their own physical shortcomings during times of great turmoil in this country.

Goodwin was the second speaker in UNH's Rutman Distinguished Lecture Series on the American Presidency, which is generously supported by J. Morgan '84 and Tara Rutman in collaboration with the President's Distinguished Speakers Series. The lecture series focuses on American political history with an emphasis on the modern and historical context of the American Presidency.

The original idea of the speaker series, which kicked off last September with Pulitzer Prize winning author Robert Caro, was to focus on American political history through the eyes of the world's most trusted scholars, Morgan Rutman said.

"It's a great opportunity to expose the UNH community to that level of scholarship. New Hampshire and UNH have a unique place in American political consciousness, with the first in the nation primary, the largest house and senate," Rutman said. "This series is a chance to shine the light on New Hampshire in general, and UNH in particular, from these great speakers."

Tobi Afolayan, a political science graduate student, said although his studies typically focus on international politics, he finds Goodwin's work fascinating.

"She really humanizes the presidents, where you feel like you are sitting right next to them. It's very absorbing, all the details she shares," Afolayan said. "There's the saying that you have to know where you've been to know where you're going — she does a really great job of telling us where we've been. It helps you contextualize what's happening now."

The lecture series is in honor of Morgan Rutman's parents, Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman. Darrett Rutman was a distinguished scholar of early American history who served on the faculty of the UNH history department from 1968 to 1984. Morgan's mother, Anita Rutman, was a historical researcher and co-author with his father on several works, including 12 books.

"This is a great way to honor my father's passion. He'd be proud of what we're doing," Rutman said.

The study of history was very close to Darrett Rutman's heart, as it is to Goodwin's.

On Monday, she talked about what she believes is the source of her interest in history: as a young girl, her father taught her "the mystery art" of keeping score while listening to Brooklyn Dodgers baseball games on the radio, as a way of recording the history of the game.

"My father made me feel I was telling him a fabulous story. I am convinced I learned the narrative art from those nightly sessions with my father," she said.

Now, attending Red Sox games with her husband and sons, and picturing her own late father there with them, she said she often finds herself reflecting on the idea of the past and present connecting through the study of history.

"I shall always be grateful for this curious love of history, allowing me to spend a lifetime looking back into the past. Allowing me to believe the private people we have loved and

lost in our families, and the public figures we have respected in history, really can live on, so long as we pledge to tell and retell the stories of their lives,” Goodwin said.

### **Goodwin on Past and Present Politics**

Before, during and after her lecture, Doris Kearns Goodwin answered questions on a variety of topics:

*On the disillusionment with the present day Congress:* An audience member asked if Goodwin might provide some examples of bad behavior by past Congressmen that could rival the dysfunction of present-Congress.

“You can take some solace that in the 1850s I think the Congress was worse than it is now, in the sense that they carried revolvers, one Southern congressman hit a Northern congressman, Sen. Charles Sumner, over the head with a cane, so badly that Sumner was out of the Senate for two years.

I do fear that in my lifetime the dysfunction of the Congress is as bad as I’ve seen it. And I’m trying to understand why, as we all are. I think part of it is that the political culture has just changed in Washington. It used to be years ago that Republicans and Democrats would stay down there for weekends, they weren’t racing home to raise these enormous funds for these escalating campaign costs, which is a poison to our system — everybody knows it and nobody does anything about it. ... They stayed in Washington, they played poker together, they drank together, they formed friendships across party lines, their wives and children knew each other. ... They wanted to accomplish things; they went to Washington to get together, to make compromises. Part of it I think is the tribal alliances that are now against one other ... the districts are so districted that there’s often not-heard voices, the special interests push them in one way or another ... and they don’t much have the common experience that a lot of the people of the 1950s and 1960s did of having been in World War II or Korea, where they were on a common mission ... All that seems really lost.

I’m not sure what’s going to bring it back, except for the one solace that history also provides: We have things that go up and down. There are generations that really are activists; there are some that want private life. There are generations that are progressive; there are others that are conservative. So, something’s got to break the fever, so that the people in Washington feel they have a responsibility at least to do our business ... I hope I live long enough to see that fever break.”

*On the possibility of a President Goodwin:* Having spent her career studying the successes, failures, foibles and missteps of some of the country’s greatest leaders, it might make sense that Goodwin herself think about a run for president, having gained a vast amount of knowledge about what it takes to be a good one. But don’t start making space on your lawn for her campaign signs yet, she says.

“I suspect knowing about presidents in the past and knowing their strengths and weaknesses probably would help a person who was a political leader in the first place, and you would hope that some of our best presidents [have studied other presidents]. And they have —Teddy Roosevelt read a lot about Lincoln, FDR read about Teddy

Roosevelt, but there's a big gap between knowing about presidents and actually getting involved in politics from the ground up.

I think sometimes if I had started it when I was younger, it's something I would have loved, because I do love being with people, and I love the idea of what politics can be when it at it's best. But I think this stage, I think I'm better off writing about history than making it.

*On her relationship with LBJ:* During her third year of graduate school at Harvard, Goodwin received a White House fellowship and then a brief assistantship in Washington, working as an aide to a member of President Johnson's administration. When she co-authored a magazine article disparaging LBJ's further involvement in the Vietnam War, she thought she'd be fired, but she was happily surprised when Johnson later asked her to assist him with writing his memoirs.

"He was absolutely responsible for my lifelong interest in the presidency. It was astonishing to me that he didn't just kick me out of the program. Instead he said, 'Oh bring her down here for a year, if I can't win her over, no one can.'" Win her over he did, in his final year of his presidency, when sadness over the Vietnam War seemed to overshadow all of the good work he had done as president. She said perhaps it was that she sat and listened to him in this hour of disappointment rather than at the height of his power that helped him open up to her.

She told Monday's audience about the time that LBJ, who had what she called "a minor league womanizing reputation," told her he wanted to meet to talk about their relationship. She agreed, but grew even more nervous when he took her to a lakeside setting complete with plaid picnic blanket, wine and cheese — all the romantic trappings. "He started out, 'Doris, more than any other woman I have ever know...' and my heart sank and he said, 'you remind me of my mother.'"

Romantic worries clearly set aside, they continued to work together. "He was a great storyteller, fabulous, colorful anecdotal stories. There was a problem that later I realized half of them weren't true," she said.

- WRITTEN BY:

[Michelle Morrissey '97](#) | UNH Donor Communications  
| [michelle.morrissey@unh.edu](mailto:michelle.morrissey@unh.edu) | 603-862-0527



University of New Hampshire

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