

No Ordinary Time by Doris Kearns Goodwin

About the book....

This book presents a chronicle of a nation and its leaders during the period when modern America was created. Presenting an aspect of American history that has never been fully told, Doris Kearns Goodwin writes a narrative account of how the United States of 1940, an isolationist country divided along class lines, still suffering the ravages of a decade-long depression and woefully unprepared for war, was unified by a common threat and by the extraordinary leadership of Franklin Roosevelt to become, only five years later, the preeminent economic and military power in the world. At the center of the country's transformation was the complex partnership of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Franklin's main objective from the war's onset was victory, and he knew the war could not be won without focusing the energies of the American people and expanding his base of support

- making his peace with conservative leaders and gaining the cooperation of big business. Eleanor, meanwhile, felt the war would not be worth winning if the old order of things at home prevailed and was often at odds with her husband in her efforts to preserve the gains of the New Deal and achieve reforms in civil rights, housing, and welfare programs. While Franklin manned the war room at the White House and held meetings with Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, Mackenzie King, and other world leaders to discuss strategy for the war abroad, Eleanor crisscrossed the country, visiting the American people, seeing how the war and policies her husband made in Washington affected them as individuals. Using diaries, interviews, and White House records of the president's and first lady's comings and goings, Goodwin paints a detailed, intimate portrait not only of the daily conduct of the presidency during wartime but of the Roosevelts themselves and their extraordinary constellation of friends.

About the author...

A one-time professor of government at Harvard University, Doris Kearns became a White House Fellow, assisting Willar Wirtz. She came to the attention of President Lyndon Johnson when she co-wrote a very critical article on Johnson for the *New Republic* magazine. Several months later, when they met in person at the White House, Johnson asked her to work with him in the White House. He soon asked her to help write his memoirs.

During and after Johnson's Presidency, Kearns visited Johnson many times, and, three years after his death, published her first book, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. She drew on the friendship and conversations with Johnson, supplemented by careful research and critical analysis, to present a picture of his accomplishments, failures and motivations.

She married Richard Goodwin in 1975. Her husband, an advisor to John and Robert Kennedy as well as a writer, helped her to gain access to people and papers for her story on the Kennedy family, begun in 1977 and finished ten years later. This book, too, was acclaimed

critically, and was made into a television movie.

In 1995 Doris Kearns Goodwin was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for her biography of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, *No Ordinary Time*. She then turned to writing a memoir of her own, about growing up as a Brooklyn Dodgers fan, *Wait Till Next Year*.

In 2005, Doris Kearns Goodwin published *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. When Barack Obama was elected as president in 2008, his selections for cabinet positions were reportedly influenced by his wanting to build a similar "team of rivals."

Doris Kearns Goodwin is a regular political commentator for television and radio.

Book Reviews

From Library Journal

Goodwin (The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys) here focuses upon the wartime White House, "a small, intimate hotel" frequented by Churchill, Harry Hopkins,

Lorena Hickock, Missy LeHand, and other guests of the state and of the Roosevelts. Goodwin's eye for life's details catches Franklin's ongoing quarrel with the kitchen, the feel of the map room, Eleanor's unease at the cocktail hour, FDR's delight in this ritual, and many other scenes. Her portraits of ER and FDR are highly sympathetic, showing them heroically-but by no means flawlessly-leading an unwilling nation into the wartime effort that helped defeat the Axis and changed America unimaginably. Goodwin's narrative, based upon interviews and other primary research and deeply informed by the scholarship of others, will keep company with the best works in the vast Roosevelt canon and will absorb and delight a wide readership.

From [Booklist](#)

People often say they don't like to read history because it's so dry. They apparently have not read history the way Goodwin writes it. The subtitles set the order of importance here: first come the Roosevelts--the ever cool, ever charming Franklin, and his conscience, Eleanor--set against the background of World War II

as it was waged on the home front. By the time we finish this more than 800-page study, we feel as if we have been present during the events described, as if we have known the players. And what a group of players they were. Goodwin uses the setting of the home front quite literally, focusing on the White House itself, which was a veritable boardinghouse, home to an odd assortment of ducks including the president's sickly, irreplaceable associate Harry Hopkins; Hopkins' young daughter, Missy LeHand, FDR's secretary and confidant, who was desperately in love with her boss; and Lorena Hickok, a onetime journalist who was desperately in love with Eleanor--and those were just the regular roomers. The story could turn on that plot alone, but there was also a war going on, and Goodwin is as capable of deciphering world events as she is people. Though she never shies away from discussing battle strategy when appropriate, she always maintains her focus on how the war affected life over here. In this context, the evolution of social problems in the U.S.--especially the treatment of minorities and women (shepherded by their patron saint,

Eleanor)--becomes a major theme in the book. In fact, readers gain a real understanding of the genesis of many of our current social ills. But always, Goodwin makes us see the Big Picture in terms of individual lives. Emerson once said, "There is no history, only biography." This book makes that quote a living, breathing reality.

From Kirkus Reviews

A superb dual portrait of the 32nd President and his First Lady, whose extraordinary partnership steered the nation through the perilous WW II years. In the period covered by this biography, 1940 through Franklin's death in 1949, FDR was elected to unprecedented third and fourth terms and nudged the country away from isolationism into war. It is by now a given that Eleanor was not only an indispensable adviser to this ebullient, masterful statesman, but a political force in her own right. More than most recent historians, however, Goodwin (*The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, 1987) is uncommonly sensitive to their complex relationship's shifting undercurrents, which ranged from deep mutual respect to

lingering alienation caused by FDR's infidelity. One element creating tension was tactical politics: FDR, seeing increased arms production as crucial to the war effort, sought to close the divide between businessmen and his administration, while Eleanor prodded him not to forget about labor, civil rights, and Jewish refugees. As grateful as he was to her for acting as his political eyes and ears, Franklin also could react testily to her unremitting lobbying at times when he desperately needed relief from the strains of running the war effort. Equally fascinating here are the often semi-permanent White House guests who filled the couple's "untended needs": their daughter and four sons; FDR alter ego Harry Hopkins, shaking off grave illness to go on critical diplomatic missions; Franklin's secretary Missy LeHand, prevented by a stroke from serving the man she loved; exiled Princess Martha of Norway, who gave Franklin the unqualified affection of which Eleanor was incapable; two of Eleanor's confidantes, future biographer Joe Lash and the lesbian ex-journalist Lorena Hickok; and Winston Churchill. A moving drama of

patchwork intimacy in the White House, played out against the sweeping tableau of the nation rallying behind a great crusade.

Discussion Questions

- Goodwin characterizes FDR as a brilliant, energetic, cheerful man who rarely folded under pressure or displayed his innermost feelings. How might the elements of FDR's character and of his time have blended to create a man so successful in marshaling America's forces to defeat the Axis powers? Compare FDR to other wartime presidents such as Lincoln and Nixon. Why is FDR's place in history so secure?**
- With deft ability, Goodwin brings Eleanor Roosevelt to life. Who was she and what were her concerns? How did she alter America's conception of the role of First Lady? What innovative and lasting contributions did she make to the civil rights movement and to women? Why was she called, during her last years, "the greatest woman in the world"? Compare**

Eleanor to other prominent First Ladies, such as Jacqueline Kennedy and Hillary Clinton.

- **Franklin and Eleanor had a very unconventional marriage, even by today's standards. What bound them? What kept them from living more completely as man and wife? What helped to make them such an extraordinary team? How did the combination of their characters serve to create such a remarkable and successful partnership?**

- **Both Franklin and Eleanor found other people to fill the needs they could not seem to satisfy in one another. Eleanor at various times turned to her daughter, Anna, to Lorena Hickok, and to Joe Lash for her personal needs. What did these three people contribute to Eleanor's life that Franklin either could not or would not? At various times, Franklin relied on Lucy Mercer Rutherford, Missy LeHand, and Princess Martha of Norway for companionship. What did these women offer him that Eleanor did not? What are the various portraits that emerge of these important characters?**

- **Who are the other people, either personal or political, that populated the Roosevelt years, such as Harry Hopkins and Frances Perkins? What were their roles in FDR's life and his presidency?**
- **What characterized the celebrated and remarkable friendship that grew between Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill? How did this friendship affect the war's outcome? What was their relationship to Stalin, and how did the three of them function as a united group that served to change the world?**
- **When Eleanor came back from visiting the front, she fell into a deep depression. Goodwin writes, "Nothing in her previous experience had prepared her for the misery she encountered in the hospitals: the mangled bodies, the stomachs ripped by shells, the amputated limbs, the crushed spirits. Only a few photographs of dead American soldiers had appeared in magazines and newspapers since the war began. The Office of War Information, established by Roosevelt, had so sanitized the war experience that few people on the**

home front understood what the war was really about." What purpose did it serve to keep Americans from truly witnessing the horrors of war? Do you think if Americans had seen, as Eleanor did, the firsthand horrors of war, they would have continued to support the war effort?

· In an effort to help European Jews, Roosevelt requested a new war-powers bill that would have given him power to suspend laws that were hampering "the free movement of persons, property, and information." Had it passed, it might have helped open the gates of immigration to Jewish refugees. "Once this was made clear, the bill had no chance," Goodwin writes. "The powerful conservative coalition strengthened immeasurably by the by-elections crushed it." Newsweek observed, "The ugly truth is that anti-Semitism was a definite factor in the bitter opposition to the president's request." Do you think FDR could have done more for the Jews? How as a nation do we reconcile such a horrible fact?

· At the end of *No Ordinary Time*, Goodwin recaps Franklin's presidential

career, underscoring his successes as well as his failures. For example, Roosevelt's success in mobilizing the nation was extraordinary. However, his forcible relocation of Japanese-Americans during the war was certainly a failure of vision. What are FDR's other successes and failures?

- After the war, America emerged as a different, modern nation. Goodwin writes "No segment of American society had been left untouched." Discuss the many strides that were made, as well as the fundamental changes that occurred. For example, as a result of the war, numerous advancements were made on behalf of African-Americans. Additionally, many women continued to work outside the home after the war was over, forever changing the domestic front.**

- It was truly amazing how America, a nation completely unprepared for war, rose up to become an unprecedented leader in war production. "The figures are all so astronomical that they cease to mean very much," historian Bruce Catton wrote. "The total is simply beyond the**

compass of one's understanding. Here was displayed a strength greater even than cocky Americans in the old days of unlimited self-confidence had supposed; strength to which nothing—literally nothing, in the physical sense—was any longer impossible." What does this reveal about America and the spirit of the American people?

- Would a presidency like FDR's be possible today? How would the contemporary American public view a relationship such as FDR had with Missy LeHand? How might we as a nation react to a man handicapped as FDR was?**

- What is the legacy left to us by Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt? Count the ways in which we are indebted to them. How might they feel about contemporary America and its role in the world today? How does it differ from their America? How is it the same?**