

# Tryptych of American Political History

## *A Curated Group of Political History Volumes Concerning the Power of the Presidency*

**M**eacham, Goodwin and Beschloss may sound like a powerhouse law firm, but they are rather three of our foremost living historians of America, particularly of American politics.

Though hardly in danger of eclipsing the fame of their subjects, this trio of professional historians have had and continue to garner more national publicity than any others in their normally reserved profession. On any given day you will find one or more on television giving historical perspective and analogies to the most current of political events.

Do not, however, let their popularity and seemingly glib soundbites deceive. These are serious, well-respected, footnote-loving, prolific academics with lengthy credentials who have emerged from the dark halls of the academe to enlighten a broader audience of the importance of presenting politics of a historical perspective.

Stephen E. Ambrose (1936-2002) may have been the first American historian to successfully utilize the media to popularize American history. His legacy is immense and lives on in books, websites, films, a historical tour company and the amazing WWII Museum in New Orleans. David McCullough, Shelby Foote and Walter Isaacson and the above three followed his lead.

One of the gifts of a good historian and teacher is the ability to reduce and divine from an enormous amount of information, supportable principles, conclusions and maxims that may be useful to us in the present and future. These three wise academics do just that in delightful, flowing and, sometimes, majestic prose chock full of delicious historical facts. As for the latter, Beschloss' volume (and its footnotes) is particularly satisfying.

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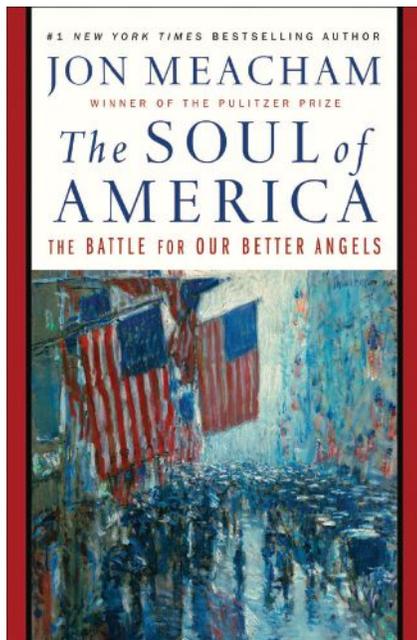
One expects these erudite pundits to address the present administration with withering pen. But, in this, they are much more subtle. Each, in his or her own way, makes clear the historical implications for the present but with finesse. Meacham mentions Trump by name nine times, Beschloss does so twice and Goodwin not at all. *The Art of Subtlety*.

The appearance of three major works by three of our most notable historians on the same topic in the same year could be coincidental, but I think not. These three, in particular, have, throughout their academic careers, sought to bring American history to the people and, especially, make it relevant, however indirectly, to current events. And Meacham, Goodwin and Beschloss have done so admirably in a new time of troubled presidential leadership. Though completely anecdotal, I simply cannot recall any similar confluence of historical authorship during any other modern presidency. Curiously, there appears to be a similar confluence today with books about impeachment. Meacham himself is also on this bandwagon with another new work, with co-authors Peter Baker, Jeffrey A. Engel and Timothy Naftali,

*“Impeachment: An American History.”*

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Goodwin teaches of leadership via case studies of four presidents she knows quite well: Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Although she only personally knew Johnson, she writes with an intimacy and understanding that almost makes the reader think she had been a confidante of each. Curiously, Johnson fancied himself heir to the legacy of Franklin Roosevelt, who molded his career on that of his fifth cousin Theodore, who consistently strove to do what Lincoln would do. With perception honed by thousands of hours spent in archives, Goodwin masterfully imparts lessons of leadership by taking each subject through their entry into public life, each's unique and dramatic career reversal and, finally, their unique exercise of power and moral purpose while in the White House.

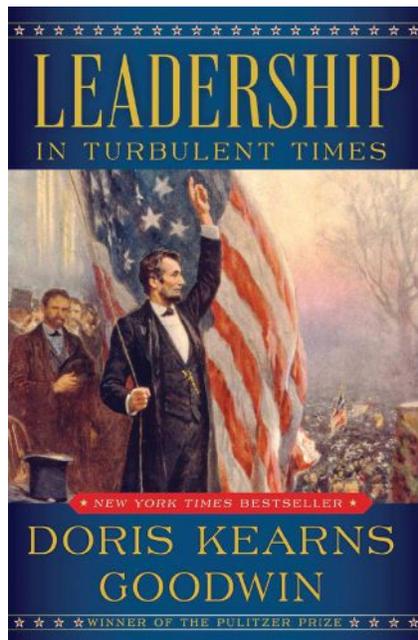


**The Soul Of America – The Battle For Our Better Angels**

by Jon Meacham

272 pages

\$30.00, Random House, 2018

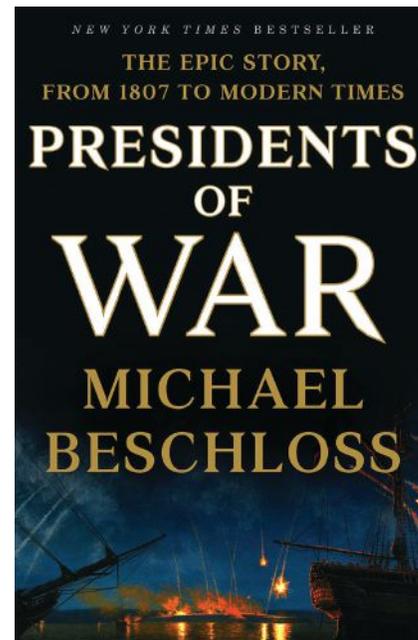


**Leadership In Turbulent Times**

by Doris Kearns Goodwin

473 pages

\$30.00, Simon & Shuster, 2018



**Presidents Of War**

by Michael Beschloss

739 pages

\$35.00, Crown, 2018

Readers familiar with Goodwin’s in-depth studies of each of these presidents will herein find much as familiar as one’s favorite slippers, but this is not just a clever regurgitation of old scholarship dressed up with platitudes and insight. It is actually a new and refreshing view of key aspects of the fascinating lives of these remarkable men. What is particularly striking is how Goodwin illuminates and draws cogent conclusions from their many similarities and often vast differences.

A recurring theme of Goodwin’s is one she attributes to political scientist Richard Neustadt in his 1980 classic study of presidential leadership, “Presidential Power and Modern Presidents”—that is, “Temperament is the great separator.” Beschloss and Meacham concur.

There is no escaping that Doris Kearns Goodwin entitled her book about four presidents “Leadership in Turbulent Times” because we live in turbulent times of questionable presidential leadership. Or that, likewise, John Meacham entitled his, “The Soul of America – The Battle For Our Better Angels,” because the current president is at war with fundamental American values. One can only hope that Michael Beschloss’ title, “Presidents at War,” is not a foreshadowing of something even more ominous.

Beschloss’ tome of leadership covers the wars of nine presidents from James Madison’s war with Britain in 1812 to Richard Nixon’s in Vietnam. His colleague, Jon Meacham, advised him “on all aspects of research, writing and publication.” The Constitution gives only Congress the power to declare war, but Beschloss explains in detail how we have come to the point never envisioned by the Founding Fathers, where one person holds the virtually unlimited power to take the nation into war. Through the years, he tells of how the great Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt and Truman and the not-so-great,

Polk, McKinley and Nixon, dealt with the coming and execution of war.

Meacham’s volume, dedicated to his friend, Beschloss, is the only one that is sometimes less than subtle in its reflection on the present state of politics. This is unsurprising as the author tells us the work had its genesis in his reaction to the awful events in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017. Meacham’s thesis is that the presidency is “pre-eminently a place of moral leadership” used most effectively to advance the common good based on agreed-upon, fundamental principles of equality before the law, due process, fair play, justice, honor, integrity, generosity of spirit, reaping rewards of hard work, faith in the future, free speech and—above all—the truth. He writes persuasively, showing that, when and where presidents have acted in accord with these principles, we have been a better people and nation. And, he more than implies that when they have not, as at present, we show the worst of ourselves.

Meacham takes the reader on a grand tour of Americana, from before the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era, with stops on the way with the KKK, the Progressive Era, the Women’s Movement, The Red Scare, The Great Depression, WWII and more. The reader embarks on a whirlwind of American history filled with searing insight and new and fascinating facts.

Any student of history or politics or, indeed, any engaged citizen would do well to read one or more of these impressive and excellent works. ■

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