

Blount: The current state of publishing is up in the air. I hope I don't live to see the day that it is all on the Web.

Taylor: Along the same lines, for much of your career you have been one of the more prolific magazine freelancers in the country, with many of your stories later collected into books. How has the current crisis in the magazine industry affected you and your work?

Blount: I've enjoyed writing for magazines over the years, but I don't do it much lately. Fortunately I've never had to depend on one medium for my living. When I haven't had a book to write, I've had speeches to make, and vice-versa. So far. And then there is the trickle of revenue that is public radio.

Taylor: What do you think this means for American writers and readers?

Blount: The Web is running a lot of print media out of business and replacing them with opportunities for writers not to get paid. So it's a lot harder for freelance writers to support themselves now, not that it was ever more than narrowly feasible.

Taylor: You are founding member of the Rock Bottom Remainers, the all-writer rock band which member Dave Barry has described as playing music "as well as Metallica writes novels." We haven't heard much from the band lately. Any plans for a reunion tour?

Blount: A three-city Remainers tour is planned for March. I think Denver, L.A. and somewhere in between. It's hard to get everybody together since we range geographically from Miami to San Francisco to Maine. Not to mention all out of key.

Capturing Presidents: A Conversation with Doris Kearns Goodwin

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Abstract

An interview conducted via email with popular historian Doris Kearns Goodwin.

When President Obama chose his chief Democratic rival as Secretary of State, it was widely reported that the decision had been informed by his reading of *Band of Rivals*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Abraham Lincoln, which emphasized how the 16th President led by drawing together opponents. For bestselling historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, influencing today's leaders with her knowledge of the past was nothing new. She was an assistant to

President Lyndon Johnson during his final year in office, and helped him in the preparation of his memoirs. She has taught a Harvard course on the American Presidency, and has been a widely sought-after speaker to business and political groups. More recently she has become a frequent television commentator on politics, history, and current affairs.

Kearns is the author of three widely acclaimed histories besides *Band of Rivals*, along with an autobiography (which explains that her love of history was kindled by her childhood as a nearly rabid baseball fan). In the fall of 2009, she has been chosen to receive the sixth Nashville Public Library Literary Award; previous recipients included the novelists John Updike and the John Irving. In advance of a lecture on her history and public life that took place Nov. 7, Kearns agreed to an interview via email for Chapter 16, an online publication of Humanities Tennessee.

Taylor: The historian who sets out to examine great American presidents must cover ground that many others have trod. How do you carve out your own space in such an undertaking?

Goodwin: When choosing historical subjects about which many books have been written, it is especially important to find an angle that can bring a fresh approach to the subject. This is perhaps the largest challenge in writing. With FDR and Eleanor, for example, since a very good book on the two of them had already been written, I decided to focus on the home front in World War II, which would allow me to bring out their relationship but in a different context. With Lincoln, about whom 14,000 books have already been written, I finally came up with the idea of focusing on his leadership style as evidenced by his willingness to put his chief rivals into his cabinet.

Taylor: In the course of research, have you ever located source material that had eluded all previous historians? If so, could you give an example, and tell us how you were able to use it?

Goodwin: In writing the Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys I was given access to hundreds of cartons of letters and documents belonging to Rose and Joe Kennedy that had been stored in their attic in Hyannis port and just shipped to the Kennedy Library. They had saved everything - every dance card, report card, letters to each other and to the children, so it proved a true treasure.

Taylor: In *Team of Rivals*, you observe that ordinary people seemed to have an almost unlimited ability to approach Lincoln personally, to shake hands and offer a word of advice or encouragement — even during the war, when assignation threats were common. Do you think the country — and democracy — has lost something, now that such contact is no longer common?

Goodwin: For Lincoln, the chance to meet with ordinary people who lined up outside his oval office to talk with him in the mornings was critical. He said these meetings were his public opinion baths, critical for him so that he never forgot the public assemblage from which he had come. This regular contact with ordinary people is much less possible today for our presidents, given security concerns, and is a great loss.

Taylor: As a public intellectual, you speak and write intelligently on broad aspects of history and the American presidency, and to a general public you trust to understand. How will the state of current academic research—which has become increasingly narrow and inaccessible to all but a few specialists—affect the role of public intellectual in years to come?

Goodwin: The state of academia in modern times, with its emphasis on specialization, has made it less likely that commentators on our country and our culture have the breadth and insight that public intellectuals had even thirty or forty years ago. Too often, academic research focuses on small topics rather than addressing the large questions that need to be answered by our presidents and our country.

Taylor: As someone who spends time commenting on important issues both in writing and on television, what do you think current form of cable news debate has done for (to?) democracy and public discourse?

Goodwin: The problem with cable news debate is that it puts a premium on people arguing from more extreme views. The thought is that this makes better television but it has helped to undermine the middle.

Taylor: What other historians, past and present, do you most admire, and why?

Goodwin: My heroine is Barbara Tuchman, a first rate narrative historian who taught me that even if you are writing about a war you have to imagine you do not know how that war ended so you can carry your reader with you every step along the way, from beginning to middle to end.

Taylor: What significance, if any, do you think the Nobel Peace prize will have on the Obama presidency?

Goodwin: Hopefully the Nobel Prize will remain for President Obama a challenge of excellence in public leadership that he will try to live up to.

Taylor: What are you currently working on?

Goodwin: I am currently working on the progressive era from 1900- 1912 told through Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and the muckraker journalists.

Taylor: Who do you like in the World Series this year? (Or are you too deep into “Wait Till Next Year” mode to care?)

Goodwin: After so many years of watching the Yankees beat my teams — first the Brooklyn Dodgers and then the Boston Red Sox — there is a big part of me that hopes the Phillies win!