

Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times¹

Reviewed by Major Aaron L. Lykling*

*Abraham Lincoln was the essence of leadership.*²

I. Introduction

Abraham Lincoln became president during the darkest hour of the nation's history. Seven states had already seceded from the Union when Lincoln took office on March 4, 1861.³ Just six weeks later, the Confederates fired the first shot of the Civil War at Fort Sumter.⁴ Lincoln inherited a political nightmare from his feckless predecessor, James Buchanan, and public confidence in the new president was low.⁵ Although Lincoln's legacy of leadership is firmly cemented today, his contemporaries widely regarded him as a "second-rate country lawyer."⁶ In the end, of course, Lincoln silenced his critics by saving the Union and paving the way for the abolition of slavery. What lessons can today's leaders learn from our sixteenth president?

In *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times*, Donald T. Phillips asserts that "Lincoln can be looked to as the ideal model for desirable, effective leadership."⁷ Phillips validates this claim by skillfully extracting Lincoln's enduring leadership principles for the benefit of today's leaders.⁸

At the outset, Phillips identifies a recurring problem in leadership literature: "Since leadership principles are usually

expressed rather abstractly, there is a great need for simple, concrete illustrations. Tangible examples make the difference; people relate to them."⁹ Phillips succeeds in avoiding the abstract, illuminating Lincoln's leadership genius through the lens of the president's own words and experiences in office.¹⁰ Phillips ultimately distills fifteen leadership lessons from his exhaustive survey of Lincoln. He logically organizes the lessons into four categories: People, Character, Endeavor, and Communication.¹¹ Fortunately, *Lincoln on Leadership* is more than just a laundry list of platitudes.¹² The book is a captivating account of the timeless leadership principles of our greatest president. The only significant flaw is Phillips's apparent inability to criticize Lincoln.

Although Phillips targets his message toward business leaders,¹³ he delivers invaluable insights for military leaders as well. The Army's current leadership doctrine, set forth in Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, states that "an ideal Army leader has strong intellect, physical presence, professional competence, high moral character, and serves as a role model."¹⁴ Remarkably, Lincoln displayed all these qualities as commander-in-chief, despite having no prior military or executive experience.¹⁵ Military

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¹ DONALD T. PHILLIPS, *LINCOLN ON LEADERSHIP: EXECUTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TOUGH TIMES* (1992).

² *Id.* at 173.

³ *Id.* at 7.

⁴ Mark Collins Jenkins, *Fort Sumter: How the Civil War Began With a Bloodless Battle*, NAT'L GEOGRAPHIC DAILY NEWS (Apr. 12, 2011), <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2011/04/110412-fort-sumter-civil-war-nation-150th-anniversary-first-battle/> (last visited May 17, 2013).

⁵ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 7-8.

⁶ *Id.* at 8.

⁷ *Id.* at 172.

⁸ Incidentally, Phillips's book apparently ignited the genre of historical leadership. These books draw on examples from the past to identify leadership lessons for the present reader. Even the titles usually mimic Phillips's format. *See, e.g.*, ALAN AXELROD, *EISENHOWER ON LEADERSHIP: IKE'S ENDURING LESSONS IN TOTAL VICTORY MANAGEMENT* (2006); STEVEN HAYWARD, *CHURCHILL ON LEADERSHIP: EXECUTIVE SUCCESS IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY* (1998); STEWARD HUSTED, *GEORGE C. MARSHALL: THE RUBRICS OF LEADERSHIP* (2006); JAMES REES, *GEORGE WASHINGTON'S LEADERSHIP LESSONS: WHAT THE FATHER OF OUR COUNTRY CAN TEACH US ABOUT EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND CHARACTER* (2007); JAMES STROCK, *THEODORE ROOSEVELT ON LEADERSHIP: EXECUTIVE LESSONS FROM THE BULLY PULPIT* (2003).

⁹ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at xii. Phillips's assessment is accurate. A recent example from this genre that effectively employs tangible examples to illustrate leadership principles is General (Retired) Colin Powell's book, *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership*.

¹⁰ *Id.* at xii. Phillips relies on primary sources when possible, such as Lincoln's personal writings. Although he frequently cites secondary sources, he acknowledges the inherent limitations they present in regards to the authenticity of Lincoln's quotations. *Id.*

¹¹ Here is the complete list: Part I—People: Get Out of the Office and Circulate Among the Troops; Build Strong Alliances; and Persuade Rather Than Coerce. Part II—Character: Honesty and Integrity Are the Best Policies; Never Act Out of Vengeance or Spite; Have the Courage to Handle Unjust Criticism; and Be a Master of Paradox. Part III—Endeavor: Exercise a Strong Hand—Be Decisive; Lead by Being Led; Set Goals and Be Results Oriented; Keep Searching Until You Find Your Grant; and Encourage Innovation. Part IV—Communication: Master the Art of Public Speaking; Influence People Through Convention and Storytelling; and Preach a Vision and Continually Reaffirm It.

¹² *See, e.g.*, KEVIN EIKENBERRY, *REMARKABLE LEADERSHIP: UNLEASHING YOUR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL ONE SKILL AT A TIME* (2007); JOHN MAXWELL, *LEADERSHIP 101: WHAT EVERY LEADER NEEDS TO KNOW* (2002).

¹³ *See* PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 9.

¹⁴ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, *DOCTRINE REFERENCE PUB. 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP*, at v (1 Aug. 2012) (C1, 10 Sept. 2012) [hereinafter ADRP 6-22]. Two of Lincoln's leadership principles, "Get Out of the Office and Circulate Among the Troops" and "Honesty and Integrity Are the Best Policies," mirror the Army ideals of "physical presence" and "high moral character."

¹⁵ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 8.

leaders will undoubtedly further their quest for self-improvement¹⁶ by studying Lincoln's leadership principles.

While all of the principles are noteworthy, two of them stand out. The first principle, "Get Out of the Office and Circulate Among the Troops," is more of a reminder than a revelation. Nevertheless, through Lincoln's actions, Phillips usefully reiterates the importance of a practice to which military leaders sometimes only pay lip service. The second principle, "Encourage Innovation," offers an intriguing parallel to the burgeoning concept of "adaptive leadership."¹⁷ Former Secretary of the Army Francis Harvey described the necessity of adaptive leaders as follows: \

Army leaders in this century need to be pentathletes, multi-skilled leaders who can thrive in uncertain and complex operating environments . . . innovative and adaptive leaders who are expert in the art and science of the profession of arms. The Army needs leaders who are decisive, innovative, adaptive, culturally astute, effective communicators, and dedicated to life-long learning.¹⁸

Although Phillips never explicitly refers to Lincoln as an "adaptive" leader, he communicates the same idea throughout the book. Indeed, the ability to adapt is the defining characteristic of Lincoln's leadership. He thrived on chaos.¹⁹

¹⁶ See, e.g., ARDP 6-22, *supra* note 14, para. 7-4 ("Self-improvement requires self-awareness and leads to new skills necessary to adapt to changes in the leadership environment."). Lincoln always sought improvement. His contemporary, Horace Greeley, described the result of his efforts as follows: "There was probably no year of his life when he was not a wiser, cooler, and better man than he had been the year preceding." PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 171.

¹⁷ As one commentator recently observed: "Today's Army leaders have accepted adaptive leadership as a practice and a methodology, integrating it into the way we train leaders to meet the challenges of the contemporary operating environment." William J. Cojocar, *Adaptive Leadership in the Military Decision Making Process*, MIL. REV., Nov.-Dec. 2011, at 29, available at http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20111231_art008.pdf. See also Major Sonise Lumbaca, *AWG Program Reinforces Adaptive Mindsets, Builds Adaptive Army Leaders*, U.S. ARMY HOMEPAGE (Mar. 2, 2012), <http://www.army.mil/article/74951/> (last visited May 17, 2013) (describing the Asymmetric Warfare Group's Asymmetric Warfare Adaptive Leader Program, a ten-day course "designed to enhance adaptability in leaders and promote innovative solutions in training").

¹⁸ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 23. The inglorious end of Secretary Harvey's career does not diminish the force of this quotation. See, e.g., Thomas E. Ricks & Ann Scott Tyson, *Defense Secretary Sends Stern Message About Accountability*, WASH. POST, Mar. 3 2007, at A8, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/02/AR2007030201432.html> (discussing the firing of Secretary Harvey in relation to the scandal over the poor treatment of outpatient Soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center).

¹⁹ See, e.g., PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 139 (noting how Lincoln's leadership philosophy dovetails with the innovative and adaptive leadership model propounded by Tom Peters in his 1987 book, *Thriving on Chaos*).

II. Face Time Matters

Phillips does not rank order Lincoln's leadership principles, but he unwittingly begins the book with one of the most vital principles for military leaders: "Get Out of the Office and Circulate Among the Troops."²⁰ While the importance of this command should be self-evident, military leaders often neglect to interact with their subordinates, a phenomenon that tends to increase with rank. Phillips shows how Lincoln's regular practice of visiting the troops paid enormous dividends.

During the Civil War, Lincoln spent much of his time away from the White House visiting troops.²¹ Simply put, he went where they were—no matter how dangerous the location.²² Lincoln's "roving leadership style"²³ served multiple purposes. First, he used the visits to show the troops that he valued their sacrifice for shouldering "the hardest work in support of the government."²⁴ Second, the trips allowed Lincoln to check the pulse of the troops and to hear their unvarnished opinions.²⁵ By soliciting the Soldiers' feedback, Lincoln showed his commitment to them and gained their trust. Finally, Lincoln used the visits to gather facts and to educate himself about military operations.²⁶ As a Washington outsider with no prior military experience, Lincoln "realized that people were a major source of information and that to be a good leader he had to stay close to them."²⁷

Lincoln demanded that his generals stay close to their subordinates as well. General John Fremont learned this lesson the hard way when Lincoln relieved him of command in October 1861. Although Fremont had many flaws, Lincoln believed that "[h]is cardinal mistake is that he isolates himself, and allows nobody to see him; and by which he does not know what is going on in the very manner he is dealing with."²⁸

²⁰ *Id.* at 13.

²¹ *Id.* at 22. Phillips includes a chart that depicts, by month, the staggering number of days that Lincoln was away from the White House during his first term. *Id.* at 23. In 1861, he actually "spent more time out of the White House than he did in it." *Id.* at 19. When Lincoln was in Washington, he followed an unprecedented "open-door" policy, regularly meeting with virtually anyone that came to the White House. *Id.* at 15-18.

²² *Id.* at 14. Lincoln occasionally "went to the field to observe or take charge of several battle situations himself, coming under fire at least once (one of the few American presidents to do so while in office)." *Id.*; see also *id.* at 120 (describing Lincoln's personal direction of the attack on Norfolk, Virginia, in early May 1862).

²³ *Id.* at 22.

²⁴ *Id.* at 19-20.

²⁵ *Id.* at 21. As Phillips put it, Lincoln wanted "honest talk with honest people." *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.* at 13-15.

²⁷ *Id.* at 15.

²⁸ *Id.* at 14.

Lincoln's habit of spending time with the troops directly applies to contemporary military leaders at all echelons. This principle is enshrined in Army leadership doctrine, albeit imperfectly. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22, Army Leadership, outlines three levels of leadership: "direct, organizational, and strategic."²⁹ Direct leadership is "face-to-face or first-line leadership" that generally occurs at the company level and below.³⁰ Organizational leadership occurs "at the battalion through corps levels."³¹ Finally, strategic leaders "are responsible for large organizations and influence several thousand to hundreds of thousands of people. They establish force structure, allocate resources, communicate strategic vision, and prepare their commands and the Army as a whole for their future roles."³²

Surprisingly, the organizational level of leadership is the only one that stresses Lincoln's practice of circulating among the troops.³³ Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22 states that "[g]etting out of the office and visiting remote parts of their organizations is important for organizational leaders."³⁴ However, the Army's rationale for this practice is incomplete. The publication advises that organizational leaders should observe their subordinates "to verify if their staff's reports and briefings match their own perceptions of the organization's progress toward mission accomplishment."³⁵ Thus, Army doctrine largely regards troop visits as a means to verify processes rather than to understand people.

Lincoln's approach provides a stark contrast. He had several reasons for visiting the troops, but one reason was paramount: to motivate them and express his appreciation for their hard work.³⁶ Army doctrine defines leadership as "the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization."³⁷ Lincoln recognized that to influence people, a leader must first understand them. He had little formal education, but he had a lot of common sense.

Strategic leaders will benefit most from applying this principle, since they are most prone to violate it. These leaders "have very few opportunities to visit the lowest-level

organizations of their commands."³⁸ However, Lincoln created opportunities. He showed that "by entering your subordinate's environment . . . you create a sense of commitment, collaboration, and community."³⁹ Leaders at all levels need to make time for this endeavor, but it is especially important for strategic leaders, since their decisions impact so many people.⁴⁰ Lincoln validated the utility of "roving leadership"⁴¹ at the highest level of command. His example is a strong reminder of the importance of circulating among the troops.

III. Lincoln on Adaptive Leadership

Lincoln on Leadership also provides food for thought in regards to "adaptive leadership,"⁴² an increasingly significant component of Army leadership and operational doctrine.⁴³ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, considers the development of adaptive and agile leaders "the number-one imperative for the continued health of our profession."⁴⁴ During his tenure as TRADOC commander, General Dempsey "launched a campaign of learning for our Army to consider how we learn and adapt to meet the challenges of the 21st century security environment."⁴⁵ He explained, "It should be clear to all after more than nine years of conflict that the development of adaptive leaders who are comfortable operating in ambiguity and complexity will increasingly be our competitive advantage against future threats to our nation."⁴⁶ Amazingly,

³⁸ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP: COMPETENT, CONFIDENT, AND AGILE para. 3-47 (12 Oct. 2006).

³⁹ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 25.

⁴⁰ ADRP 6-22, *supra* note 14, para. 2-38.

⁴¹ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 22.

⁴² Harvard lecturer Ronald Heifetz conceived the theory of adaptive leadership in the early 1990s. See RONALD A. HEIFETZ, LEADERSHIP WITHOUT EASY ANSWERS (1994).

⁴³ See generally ADRP 6-22, *supra* note 14, para. 8-11 (underscoring the importance of adaptability); General Martin K. Dempsey, *Driving Change Through a Campaign of Learning*, ARMY MAG., Oct. 2010, at 68, available at http://www.ausa.org/publications/armymagazine/archive/2010/10/Documents/Dempsey_1010.pdf (discussing the "major shift in how to develop adaptive leaders through the introduction of design" into Field Manual 5-0, *The Operations Process*). This article is one of six that General Dempsey authored in his "Campaign of Learning" series in *Army Magazine*.

⁴⁴ General Martin K. Dempsey, *Leader Development*, ARMY MAG., Feb. 2001, at 28, available at http://www.ausa.org/publications/armymagazine/archive/2011/2/Documents/Dempsey_0211.pdf.

⁴⁵ General Martin K. Dempsey, *A Dialogue About Our Army: A Campaign of Learning to Achieve Institutional Adaptation*, ARMY MAG., Nov. 2010, at 34, available at http://www.ausa.org/publications/armymagazine/archive/2010/11/Documents/Dempsey_1110.pdf.

⁴⁶ Dempsey, *supra* note 45, at 26. Cf. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling, *A Failure of Generalship*, ARMED FORCES J., May 2007, available at <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198/> (arguing that "America's generals failed to adapt to the demands of counterinsurgency" in Iraq, and calling for Congress to "change the officer promotion system in ways that reward adaptation and intellectual achievement.").

²⁹ ADRP 6-22, *supra* note 14, para. 2-24.

³⁰ *Id.* para 2-28.

³¹ *Id.* para 2-32.

³² *Id.* para 2-35.

³³ In fairness, the definition of "direct leadership" in ADRP 6-22 implies that direct leaders will necessarily abide by this principle because of the relatively small size of their units. See *id.* para. 2-28.

³⁴ *Id.* para. 2-34.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ See PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 19-20.

³⁷ ADRP 6-22, *supra* note 14, para. 1-1.

Lincoln echoed this strategic imperative 150 years earlier: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”⁴⁷ Although Phillips never attempts to articulate a unifying theme to Lincoln’s leadership, one theme does resonate throughout the book: Lincoln was adaptive. The book is replete with examples of this trait.

To illustrate, in the chapter, “Encourage Innovation,” Phillips discusses how the nation’s military was completely unprepared to suppress an insurrection at the outset of the Civil War.⁴⁸ Lincoln had to adapt the force quickly to modernize its weaponry, so he embraced “an atmosphere of entrepreneurship that fostered innovative techniques.”⁴⁹ Lincoln was essentially a “one-man research and development department,” personally reviewing dozens of technology demonstrations.⁵⁰ The project paid off, resulting in the development of hot-air reconnaissance balloons, pontoon bridges, ironclad ships, and, most importantly, reliable breech-loading rifles.⁵¹

Lincoln’s leadership style was fundamentally agile and adaptive.⁵² He described his philosophy to Horace Greeley in 1862:

I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.⁵³

Phillips ably demonstrates how Lincoln was “consistent yet flexible”⁵⁴—he was consistent in his treatment of subordinates and management of government, but he always left “an opportunity for a change of mind” in other respects.⁵⁵ In short, when the situation demanded it, Lincoln adapted.⁵⁶ He personified agile and adaptive leadership.

⁴⁷ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 7, 137.

⁴⁸ *See id.* at 137.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 140.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 140–41.

⁵² *See generally id.* at 87–92 (providing numerous examples of Lincoln’s adaptive leadership, including his unprecedented expansion of presidential war power, enactment of conscription, wholesale reorganization of the military command system, and issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation).

⁵³ *Id.* at 78–79.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 79.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 78.

⁵⁶ *See, e.g.,* ADRP 6-22, *supra* note 14, para. 8-11 (“The leader must be prepared to replace portions of the original plan with new ideas and

IV. No One Is Perfect

One of the book’s few shortcomings involves Phillips’s inability to find fault in his subject. Ironically, Phillips himself succumbs to the “Lincoln Myth”—the notion that Lincoln’s extraordinary exploits, and eventual assassination, “bestowed on him a certain amount of saintly virtue.”⁵⁷ The tendency to view Lincoln through rose-colored glasses is understandable, but even Lincoln had flaws. The most glaring example is his weakness as a talent evaluator; specifically, his protracted failure to appoint an effective commander during the Civil War. Lincoln famously fired several inept generals before finally settling on Ulysses S. Grant.⁵⁸ Phillips casts this debacle as a success, suggesting that Lincoln’s perseverance in finding the right commander is a virtue.⁵⁹ The better conclusion is that Lincoln lacked military experience and struggled mightily to find the right person for the job. Theodore Roosevelt said, “The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.”⁶⁰ Lincoln fell short in this regard, and Phillips does the reader a disservice by glossing over this flaw.

V. Concluding Thoughts

Lincoln on Leadership ultimately succeeds in its aim to harvest the leadership lessons of Lincoln’s past for present-day executives and officers. Phillips is an able storyteller, and his book is succinct and easy to read. Twenty years after its release, Lincoln on Leadership still stands out from the pack in the popular historical leadership genre. Military, business, and political leaders would be wise to read this book and apply Lincoln’s strategies for success. For, as Phillips observes, “it is only by examining individuals such as Abraham Lincoln that we can ever hope to understand how effective leadership works.”⁶¹

initiatives. Leaders must have the confidence and resilience to fight through setbacks, staying focused on the mission and the intent two levels up. Leaders preserve freedom of action by adapting to changing situations.”)

⁵⁷ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 76.

⁵⁸ *See id.* at 115–23 (describing Lincoln’s legendary struggles with his commanders).

⁵⁹ *See id.* at 130–35.

⁶⁰ ROY B. ZUCK, THE SPEAKER’S QUOTE BOOK 295 (2009). Phillips lauds President Lincoln as a “hands-on” leader. PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 24. However, Lincoln also had a penchant for micromanaging his generals. *See id.* at 31–32 (describing Lincoln’s “fatherly advice” and frequent visits to General George McClellan).

⁶¹ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 1, at 4.