When presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin began working five years ago on her newest book, Leadership in Turbulent Times, she didn’t know how apropos it would be to today’s political climate. The Pulitzer Prize–winning author profiled four presidents — Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson — who led the nation through some of its most difficult times. In the book, Kearns Goodwin chronicled their extraordinary strength and leadership acumen. She shared her insights on the Knowledge@Wharton radio show on SiriusXM.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.
**Knowledge@Wharton**: Is there a bit of irony in the timing of the release of this book?

**Doris Kearns Goodwin**: When I started it five years ago, I had no idea how relevant it would be to be studying these four leaders who lived in turbulent times. People kept asking me, “Are these the worst of times ever?”

At least I can point back to what it was like for Lincoln when he took office and 600,000 soldiers were about to die. The country was split in two. The economic situation and the social situation during the Industrial Revolution were even more fraught in terms of the gap between the rich and the poor, and the new inventions that were making people feel the country was changing too fast under Teddy Roosevelt, as it is under Trump.

[Franklin] Roosevelt comes in during the Depression, and Lyndon Johnson took office when the assassination of John F. Kennedy was making people wonder what was going on in the world. They all had the strength to bring us through those situations, so it has given me hope about history and [a feeling of] reassurance.

**Knowledge@Wharton**: When you look at these four men, are there commonalities in their leadership?

**Kearns Goodwin**: They obviously come from really different backgrounds. Both Roosevelts come from a privileged, wealthy background, Abraham Lincoln endured enormous poverty, and LBJ experienced sporadic hard times. They’re different in temperament. But they do have certain kinds of what I call “family resemblances” in terms of leadership.

They kept growing through loss and adversity. They had resilience. They eventually developed humility, even if they started without it. They knew how to talk to people with stories. They built teams of more strong-minded people who could disagree with them. They had the emotional intelligence to deal with those teams. Those words might not have been known then, but we know now. They somehow were able to connect to the people directly and control negative emotions. All these things shine a light on today, I think. And they all had an ambition that was larger than themselves, eventually. That’s the key thing.
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**Knowledge@Wharton:** You knew President Johnson from your days in Washington, and being there with his staff. Tell us your memories of him and what made him unique as a leader following the assassination of President Kennedy.

**Kearns Goodwin:** I think he was immediately aware that he had to grasp the reins of power right away. He took it like when the cattle are running around and you can’t get them to go in a straight line, you have to sort of take the lead. Someone has to lead on the horse to get the cattle to go forward. He made the civil rights bill of JFK, which was stuck in Congress with little hope it could get out, his first priority. He was told by his advisers, “You can’t do this. Your election is 11 months away. If you do this, you’re not going to get anything through Congress and you’re going to expend the coinage of the presidency.” And he said, “What the hell’s the presidency for?”

For all the problems that Lyndon Johnson had, and the war in Vietnam will always be cutting his legacy in two, he was the right man with the legislative wizardry to get the civil rights bill through Congress, to get Republicans on his side. At the end of his life, when he worried about it, would he be remembered for anything positive? Civil rights would be it.

**Knowledge@Wharton:** President Johnson grasped what needed to be done domestically, but international policy was a little bit different, correct?

**Kearns Goodwin:** Correct. He had a vision of what he wanted to achieve right from the start, even from that first night when he was watching the Kennedy assassination on television with his aides. He outlined that he knew he wanted to get a tax cut through to get the economy going, then he could get civil rights through, then he would get voting rights through, then he wanted aid to education. Finally, he wanted to get Harry Truman’s Medicare bill through. He had a vision that went larger domestically in terms of Medicare, immigration reform, PBS, NPR, etc.

But on foreign policy, what he was simply trying to do was not accomplish something with a positive goal — he was trying to prevent failure. At the very beginning, it was an impossible situation. He was told, “Unless you put more troops in here, the war is going to fail. The failure will be on you.” So, he adds troops, and then he adds more troops, and then he adds more
troops, and he doesn’t really allow the American people to know what he’s doing. He wants to keep the Great Society going so that he can have his domestic programs and the foreign policy thing on the back corner. You can’t do that in a matter of war and peace. The people have to know what they’re doing. They need a goal. All of the opposite qualities of his domestic leadership, unfortunately, were there in foreign policy and Vietnam.

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Knowledge@Wharton: Abraham Lincoln was in office during a pivotal time in the country’s history as well. What were the characteristics of his leadership?

Kearns Goodwin: What he brought into the presidency was resilience because that had been part of his life all along. You had to be resilient to go through those terrible Union losses in the early part of the war. Yet he kept believing it, in part because he had come through so much himself. Even the first time he ran for office and he lost, he warned the people that he would try five or six more times until it would be really disgraceful. Then he promised he wouldn’t try again.

He also had extraordinary empathy, so that even as he prosecuted the law, he understood where the Southern people were coming from. He was trying to make sure that, when it was all over, they could come back together as a union. That second inaugural is the most beautiful example of that. You know, the sin of slavery was shared by both sides. Once the North had won the war, he said that both sides read the same Bible, both prayed to the same God, and neither one’s prayers were fully answered. He said, “With malice toward none, with charity for all,” let us bind up a nation.

He was merciless when he had to prosecute the war, but he was also merciful. He would pardon soldiers. He was patient. He was persevering. And he had a gift for language that gave that struggle meaning, which probably no one else could have done. He’s an extraordinary character.

Knowledge@Wharton: How did he navigate the significant divisions that existed in the country at that time?

Kearns Goodwin: It’s hard to imagine what it was like when he first took office and the country was literally split apart. He said later that if he had known what he would face during those first months in office, he wouldn’t have thought he could have lived through it. That showed us how
intense that time was. You have to have had his sad sense of melancholy that got him through it, but lightened by his extraordinary humor, which he said “whistled off his sadness.”

I had no idea how funny he would be. I knew he’d be a great statesman to live with — because I spent about 10 years and now this additional five years that I’ve been living with him — and I wouldn’t change it for anything in the world.

**Knowledge@Wharton:** Franklin Roosevelt began his presidency at the height of the Great Depression, which had a tremendous impact on the country. Like Lincoln, FDR had to act for the greater good at a time when people were hurting, not from war but from economic collapse. How did he do it?

**Kearns Goodwin:** The case study that I do on FDR is to use him as an example of turnaround leadership. LBJ’s a visionary, Lincoln is transformative, and Teddy is crisis management. I’ve been giving lectures to business groups for these last 10, 20 years, so it was fun to really try and learn that literature and figure out how these guys fit into it.

But in FDR’s case, when he comes in, the entire financial system has collapsed. He finally has to call a bank holiday to close all the banks, so he can figure out how to reopen them with an emergency banking bill that would shore up the weaker banks and let the stronger ones go forward. But most importantly, even when he gave his inaugural address, his main concern was he has to give confidence back to a very badly frightened people, many of whom thought not having a job was their fault.

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He tells them, “It’s the system that’s at fault, and we are going to take action to make that system fairer. And if I don’t get the Congress to go with me, I’m going to take executive powers to do it.” Just because of his optimism and his confidence in that one speech alone, thousands of telegrams came into the White House, thousands of letters saying, “OK, we’re going to go with you because you are there.”
That’s the mystique of leadership, I think, that you can project your own optimism and confidence onto a people. Then he could start taking the action. After he takes the turnaround action, he has to systematically figure out what went wrong and what had to be changed in the relationship between the government and the business community.

Knowledge@Wharton: What made Teddy Roosevelt so unique for you?

Kearns Goodwin: It’s his energy. He’s unbelievable, a fiery character. I keep thinking that if one of these people had to be president today, he would probably be the most likely one because of the situation he faced after McKinley was assassinated, when the economy had been so shaken up at the turn of the 20th century.

It was so much like the situation that faced us in the 2016 campaign. You had rural areas that felt cut off from cities. You had lots of immigrants coming in and this threatening gap. He was able to be a fiery proponent of the centrist philosophy. It was going to be a square deal for the rich and the poor, for the capitalist and the wage worker. And he became a cartoon figure.

People loved his sayings: “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” He’d be good in the Twitter world today. “Don’t hit until you have to, but then when you have to hit, hit hard.” He even gave Maxwell House the slogan, “Good to the very last drop.”

He was able to make people feel that he was both a Westerner and an Easterner. He had gone out West when he was in a big depression after his wife and his mother had died in the same house, in the same place. He got himself back as a different person out there, loving nature and becoming the conservationist he became. They all went through terrible adversity and came out stronger at the other end.

Knowledge@Wharton: Would you say the skills and abilities that these four presidents had are still applicable for the office today?

Kearns Goodwin: Yes. In fact, I think they’re applicable to leadership, whether it’s in business or the nonprofit sector or in a community. It has to do with human nature. Think about these skills we’re talking about — to be able to control your negative emotions, let resentments go, hire people because they’ll be willing to argue with you and have the confidence to do that, and then figure out how to meld them together in a team and inspire their best performance.

My favorite one, which they were all able to do except for Lyndon Johnson, is to find time to relax and replenish their energy. We feel it’s impossible today to do that. Our days are so frenzied, our email is with us, and yet our demands clearly pale in comparison to theirs. But
Lincoln went to the theater more than 100 times during the Civil War. He was able to relax in a way that was the only way to get the anxiety away from him. Teddy Roosevelt exercised for two hours every afternoon. FDR had a cocktail party every night in the war, where you couldn’t talk about the war. That’s an important life lesson, I think — for all of us to find those moments when you can think and replenish your energy.

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Knowledge@Wharton: That’s interesting because it seems presidents always come out of the White House looking much older than when they went in. President Obama didn’t have any gray hair when he went in and is pretty much full of it now. It was the same for Presidents Bush and Clinton. Does that reflect a different view of the office in modern times?

Kearns Goodwin: That’s right. You’ll see a picture of Abraham Lincoln at the end that makes him look 40 years older than when he first went in. But people who saw him at the end, in those last days of his life, said he was probably more relaxed than he’d ever been because he knew the war had been won. There was this deep sense of fulfillment in him. On the last day of his life, he was probably happier than he had been in months or years. His face showed it. But the picture itself actually showed the weathering enormously, as they all do.

Knowledge@Wharton: How did FDR deal with his personal health problems while presenting strength and leadership to the country?

Kearns Goodwin: There’s no question that the polio that hit him when he was still in his 30s changed his being in a lot of ways. He’d been a natural politician. Before that, he was a handsome guy. He seemed to have led a charmed life. Then suddenly, months and years of striving lay ahead after he was paralyzed by polio, where he tried to walk on his own power. He wasn’t sure that the leaders and the people in the country would accept him if they knew he was a paraplegic. He was told that his upper body had the greatest likelihood of recovery, so he would crawl around on the floor of his library for hours, trying to strengthen his chest and shoulders.
But I think the big thing that happened to him was when he went to Warm Springs, Georgia, and created that center for polio patients. He made himself vulnerable. He let them see his withered legs. They aimed not simply to physically get better but to spiritually feel better about themselves, so he restored the possibility of joy in their lives. They played water polo and tag, and they had bridge tournaments and poker games and cocktail hours at night.

Once he got into the presidency, people saw what he had to go through to get in and out of his wheelchair, to even appear to be walking somewhere. The strength and the courage that he exhibited, I think, gave an enormous sense of feeling for those around him. The country saw this strong, big-chested guy. It was extraordinary. Through that experience, he learned to empathize with other people with whom fate had also dealt an unkind hand.

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Knowledge@Wharton: Many presidents have served in the military. Do you think there are important parallels between those two roles?

Kearns Goodwin: Teddy Roosevelt said that even within weeks of his taking command in the Spanish-American War of the group of soldiers he was with, he knew there were better horsemen there. There were better athletes there, better marksmen, but he knew that he was their leader. It’s one of the things I think about as a problem for the country today, because we used to have Republicans and Democrats that got together and were willing to think about the country beyond their partisanship.

A lot of those leaders had been in World War II or the Korean War, so they knew what it was like to have a mission that they put ahead of class, section or party lines. I think that’s one of the difficulties today. We just need to have that sense of a common mission. I sometimes wish that maybe we could have a national service program, in addition to military service, so that more people could know what it’s like to work with different people that you don’t see every day. That’s the problem. We have this sense of everybody being “other,” if you’re in a rural or urban area, if you’re on the West or the East Coast or in the middle.
Knowledge@Wharton: I think a lot of people believe that, no matter what you think of the president, we also have a dysfunctional Congress that just exacerbates the issues right now. Does the book reflect on what type of skills are needed to right that ship?

Kearns Goodwin: It’s been a long time since we’ve had a major bill that was able to attract bipartisan support, and you have the feeling that the congressmen aren’t feeling a sense of overwhelming loyalty to the institution — rather, it’s to the party and the particular part of the party they’re in. It’s a big thing. The only thing that gives me comfort is that FDR always used to say, “Problems created by man can be solved by man.”

Lincoln was called “The Liberator.” But he said, “Don’t call me that. It was the anti-slavery movement that did it.” The Progressive Movement was critical for the two Roosevelts, and the Civil Rights Movement was critical for LBJ. What’s interesting about these leaders is that they were right for the time. When you get a big crisis, you have more likelihood of having a great leader, but you could also have a failure.

McKinley didn’t deal with the Industrial Revolution like Teddy did. I don’t think JFK would have gotten the Civil Rights bill through. It’s really interesting to see what are the skills [needed, and whether it is] the man in the times or the times in the man? Is leadership born or made? Those are the big questions that I was playing around with in this book.