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Doris Kearns Goodwin on "The Bully Pulpit"

DAVID GREGORY, anchor:
This is press pass. Your all-access pass to an extra Meet the Press conversation. This week on press pass, the presidential bully pulpit and the rise of muckraking journalism is the subject of a new book looking at Presidents Roosevelt and Taft by presidential historian, the great Doris Kearns Goodwin. The book is The Bully Pulpit- Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism. Just a little bit of an ambitious topic there for-- for Doris. Doris, great to have you here, great to have this book. I’m early into it. I think I’ll finish it by the 2016 campaign but that’s only because I’m a slow reader, not that this isn’t a fantastic read. But I want to start on something that-- that-- that we were just talking about off camera. You-- you have this-- there’s a tenderness in your approach to the subject, to the writing, to the treatment of them as men, as husbands, as fathers that really-- I told you I was-- I was-- I was feeling inadequate about, you know, comparing myself to Theodore Roosevelt’s father because he seemed like such a great guy. Talk about the tenderness.

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, Presidential Historian: You know, I think what happened because of my experience with Lyndon Johnson, when I was twenty-four years old, watching him at a vulnerable stage of his life where he opened up to me in ways he never would have if I hadn't known him at that time of his life. I began to feel empathetic toward him someone whom I’d yelled hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today? From then on that privilege of working with Johnson made me want to choose subjects that I would basically like and respect so that I could feel empathetic to him. I don’t want to live with Hitler or Stalin. I loved living with Teddy Roosevelt, the most colorful, interesting, fascinating character. And then William Howard Taft, I began to feel more empathetic toward him than I imagined. So it really
is a way of trying to make them come alive through the stories of their lives. And then I’m with— with them day after day for seven years in this case.

GREGORY: But there is life. I mean, I-- you know, not to compare the book but I’ll do it anyway to night— the film Night at the Museum, but there is this aspect of these characters coming to life in a— in a fully-formed way. How crushed Taft is by the stroke that afflicts his wife who was this— I mean, this is amazing, the role of women. And here we are in the middle of the nineteenth century and basically his best political advisor and the one who’s pushing him to become President. So we’re— we’re feeling for them in ways that feels so contemporary.

KEARNS GOODWIN: Well that’s the one— that’s what you hope. If history’s ever going to mean anything to us, we have to really get back in these people’s lives, see their struggles and their triumphs, feel great when they feel joy, feel sad when they feel sad. I mean, what really interests me about women in this book is you have three different kinds of women. One, Edith Roosevelt, who becomes Teddy’s wife, who had a very troubled childhood and all she wanted was a home and a sanctuary. So here’s this manic Roosevelt. She provides him with this safe harbor. He could come home to Sagamore Hills, six boisterous children, and know that he had a home. Nellie Taft, as you mentioned, from the time she was young, was unconventional. She smoked. She went to beer holes in Cincinnati. She wanted a life beyond her own idea of getting a society girl and getting married. And she finds the perfect partner in Taft who makes her his partner. She spurs him onto politics. And then you have Ida Tarbell, one of the great muckrakers who prays when she’s fourteen “I never want to get married because I want a career.” And think about it today, we can do all these things.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

KEARNS GOODWIN: Sometimes difficultly. But we can do them all. What a great movement, the women’s movement has been.

GREGORY: So Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism, you know, we’re talking about their lifetimes, middle of the— of the nineteenth century and the turn of the century, why does this period matter?

KEARNS GOODWIN: The period matters so many ways partly because it was the response to the Gilded Age. I mean what happened after the Industrial Revolution, once you had— it will sound eerily familiar— a huge gap between the rich and the poor; you had monopolies that were squeezing out small businesses; you had ordinary people having a much harder time living; people moving from the country to the city; lots of nervousness around; pace of life having sped up. And the progressive era, which starts really with Teddy Roosevelt and is sponsored by these muckraking journalists, deals with those problems. I mean, it— it gets meatpacking regulation. It gets railroad regulation. It breaks up the big trusts. It protects children and women on the workplace, gets worksmen’s compensation. It’s the role of government for the first time being used in the social and economic sphere. Before that laissez–faire was a religious fervor. They didn’t think government belonged at all. It’s the same fight we’re having today a hundred years later. And then of course in the end the Republican Party’s splits apart in 1912 like we may have today. So if I wait long enough because I write these book, it takes me so long, history cycles back somehow.

GREGORY: So Teddy Roosevelt decides not to seek a third term as FDR would do later, well, in that
case a fourth term, right?
KEARNS GOODWIN: Right.
GREGORY: But he’s fifty-one. Well, he goes on a year-long safari, he comes back to New York, he’s only fifty-one years old.
KEARNS GOODWIN: Right.
GREGORY: Is that right at that time?
KEARNS GOODWIN: Exactly.
GREGORY: And he is celebrated as this beloved figure. Why was he so beloved?
KEARNS GOODWIN: I think because he loved being President, and he loved the people. He went out on train trips, months at a time in the country. And he would wait at village stations while people could give him gifts and he would be warm toward them. He’d pull away. He’d be waving at them forever. This one time when he waved at a group of people and he thought, gee, they’re pretty cold. It turned out it was a herd of cows. But he knew how to communicate to the country. He spoke in shorthand language. He had great-- he said my Harvard buddies might think that I talk too folksy, but he explained his program simply so they got behind him. But mostly he took on. He had villains. He had the trusts. He had the robber barons. He took them on and he made the people feel I’m your guy. So it’s us against them. He was the most popular President maybe that we’ve had in his lifetime because he was so-- and he was fun. Right. I mean, he-- he had-- he was boxing. He was, you know, wrestling. He took these walks in the afternoon with ambassadors over the hills of Rock Creek Park. And, you know, he’d make them take off their cloths to go through a stream. Nobody was quite like him. He had many, many interests. So he’d have bushwhackers. He’d have football people. He’d have academics to lunch. And he knew something about all of them. He was genius in some level of his mind. But then he just was a character, cartoonists loved him. You have cartoons all the time, the big teeth and the spectacles.
GREGORY: Right.
KEARNS GOODWIN: And he said how come they like me when these cartoons show me ridiculous fighting. They said because the cartoonists were good-natured. He could take the criticism of the press. And-- and he had the best relationship with the press of any President I’ve read about.
GREGORY: And this is kind of progressive politics working hand-in-hand with this muckraking journalism which was a kind of crusading, change-oriented, let’s get change kind of journalism that starts.
KEARNS GOODWIN: Without a question. In fact, he knew that he couldn’t move the Republican old guard in the Congress. They’re his guys. They are the Republicans. They don’t want legislation. They’re often in league with the big businesses and the communities that don’t want any legislation. He had to pressure them from the outside in. And the way he did that was through the journalists and through his own words so he builds up a head of steam where the people tell these guys you’ve got to act. Somebody said at the time, Congress might ignore a President, but it can’t ignore a President and the people. And that’s what he understood.
GREGORY: So more contemporary history we’ve talked a bit on the program this week about Secretary John Kerry letting slip I guess his views on Lee Harvey Oswald. In his view did not act alone which is-- which raises a lot of eyebrows mostly because he’s such a high government official letting, you know,
those views out. But it says something about that generation now in-- in leadership circles who don’t view
this as settled and a lot of people would like it to be settled. I guess that was true then.
KEARNS GOODWIN: Right.
GREGORY: And it still feels unsettled to some.
KEARNS GOODWIN: I mean, I think the importance of having the Warren Commission at the time was
there was a real fear that the country itself might unravel because of this terrible event. So at least you had
the power of a very respected commission saying at the time it settled. Those answers probably may never
be reached. And I think as I-- I was saying when we were talking before, I think there’s a desire on
people’s part to not have it just be a random act. Such a big hap-- that changes history in such way,
maybe you want to believe its part of something bigger. I’m not sure we’ll ever know. And I think people
still have questions.
GREGORY: But it-- I mean it was a fairly tangled web right that the Kennedys had weaved at that point,
whether there were mafia connections and question about the Cuba and Soviets. That feel still unsettled to
people?
KEARNS GOODWIN: I think that’s right. There were possible players.
GREGORY: Right.
KEARNS GOODWIN: So it’s not like this guy had no connection. He may have had connections to
people. But he may still have acted alone. It's something that I know I’ll never answer in my lifetime.
GREGORY: Let me-- I want to ask you about your-- your craftsmanship at this stage of your career
because you-- you’ve got to be thinking a little bit differently. Jon Meacham made this observation to me
that that they you have-- that your-- your prose is-- is cinematic. And of course for, you know, people now
they think of the-- the Lincoln book, Team of Rivals, but they think now about the film. So these have
become iconic. And already early on into this book, I-- I see scenes in my-- because of how you’re
writing. Have you changed as you kind of walk back through history and then create it and analyze it and
distill it for people, do you think more cinematically?
KEARNS GOODWIN: You know it’s possible that you do. I mean, it’s-- I think it’s a subtle thing if it
happens. But I think I’m aware, you know, having worked to some extent, reading the drafts of Tony
Kushner script on Lincoln. My husband had the Quiz Show movie made. There was an earlier miniseries
made about the Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys. I think I try to make more physical details come to life as if
somebody’s going to have to know how to film this thing. But I’m not sure it’s obvious in my mind. It's
just because I love movies and now they’ve become a part of my life. And Steven Spielberg has gotten the
rights for this one. So the big fun is who's going to play Taft.
GREGORY: Any favorites?
KEARNS GOODWIN: Well, the only one-- people think of is John Goodman. I mean--
GREGORY: Yeah. Yeah.
KEARNS GOODWIN: -- he-- he ranged in weight from two fifty to three fifty. I mean, the funny thing
about Taft, he too like Chris Christie, was able to make fun of himself when he needed to.
GREGORY: Yeah.
KEARNS GOODWIN: But bizarrely his campaign song in 1908 was "Get on a Raft with Taft." If you got
on a raft with a three-hundred-and-fifty-pound Taft, I don’t think you’d be on the raft very long. But the interesting thing is he went on diets just as Chris Christie had the lap band surgery done. So at least he showed he was trying. And he was fat from the time he was a kid. But I’m not sure it was as important then as now because obesity wasn’t as much of an issue. I think that’s what makes it complicated today.

GREGORY: You know, you have these outsized figures and I don’t mean that literally. I-- but they are outsized figures and you wonder if part of that was just the-- the sheer frailty of life at this point in our history. Chi-- children would die with some regularity, first-born children. People will be afflicted by disease or die when they were much younger. And then you have the likes of these figures who lived life to the fullest.

KEARNS GOODWIN: No. There’s no questions about that. In fact even when Taft was a little baby his mother noted that she didn’t have enough milk for him.

GREGORY: Right.

KEARNS GOODWIN: She couldn’t fit him into the clothes in a year. But she was thrilled because her first child had died of frailty.

GREGORY: Yeah.

KEARNS GOODWIN: And the interesting thing about Roosevelt is that he grows up contrast to Taft's healthy nature. He grows up with life-threatening asthma and becomes timid, becomes a reader, observes birds until finally his father says to him, Theodore, you have the mind but not the body. And without the body your mind can’t go where it can. So he starts out becoming a workaholic, in terms of exercise every single day and it took years before his body filled out. But he then becomes the exemplar of the strenuous life and nobody’s more physical in office then he. But he made that happen.

GREGORY: So who’s next?

KEARNS GOODWIN: I don’t know. I can’t go back to Millard Fillmore and Franklin Pierce. I think I might do something on leadership. I mean I’ve lived with all my guys--FDR and Lincoln and Teddy and Taft and LBJ for so long now. I think there are universal traits of leadership--

GREGORY: Yeah.

KEARNS GOODWIN: --that the best leader show. And if I can illustrate them with stories-- storytelling is what I’m always about.

GREGORY: Yeah.

KEARNS GOODWIN: That’s what I think history is about. Then I think I won’t be spending ten more years on yet another person.

GREGORY: But it is-- there's always the-- what is the leadership lesson of so and so.

KEARNS GOODWIN: Exactly.

GREGORY: I always think the answer to that question is interesting.

KEARNS GOODWIN: Me too. That’s-- that’s-- that’s what’s underneath all these books actually.

GREGORY: Yeah. Thank you for this one.

KEARNS GOODWIN: Thank you.

GREGORY: It’s The Bully Pulpit. Doris Kearns Goodwin, thanks as always.

KEARNS GOODWIN: Thank you.