

# LEARNING HISTORY:

## Two Presidents from Illinois



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Great Public Schools  
for Every Child

- Grades:** 6-12, with adaptations for elementary grades
- Content Areas:** Social Studies, Language Arts, Technology
- Objectives:** Students will compare and contrast the background and inaugurations of President Lincoln and President Obama. They will develop knowledge of some of the characteristics of the two presidents and their inaugurations.

**Materials Needed:** Comparison chart, President Lincoln's speeches, President Obama's speeches

### Instructional Procedures:

Many historians, politicians and citizens are comparing President-elect Obama to President Lincoln. Ask students to brainstorm how they think Obama is similar to or different from Lincoln. Chart their responses and post them so everyone can see them.

Give students time to research Lincoln and Obama in small groups to develop their own charts listing the similarities and differences between the two.

*Sample Chart:*

	Similarities	Differences
<b>Where they lived</b>		
<b>Education</b>		
<b>Public office</b>		
<b>Issues they faced as they entered the presidency</b>		
<b>Families</b>		
<b>Other</b>		

Have students review news articles, interviews and op-eds to learn what historians and others have written about the similarities and differences between Lincoln and Obama. Possible resources to use:

"A Talk with Douglas Wilson: Obama's Writing Suggests a Surprising Lesson from Abraham Lincoln: Style Matters"

[www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/01/04/a\\_talk\\_with\\_douglas\\_wilson?mode=PF](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/01/04/a_talk_with_douglas_wilson?mode=PF)

"Can Lincoln's Playbook Help Obama in the Years Ahead?"

[www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/18/obama.lincoln/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/18/obama.lincoln/index.html)

“Historian Sees Lessons, Lincoln Parallels for Obama”

[www.cnn.com/2008/SHOWBIZ/books/12/23/mcpherson.lincoln/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2008/SHOWBIZ/books/12/23/mcpherson.lincoln/index.html)

“Obama Picks Bible for Inauguration, but What Verse?”

[www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/12/24/inauguration.scripture/index.html#cnnSTCText](http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/12/24/inauguration.scripture/index.html#cnnSTCText)

“Finding the Lincoln in Obama”

[www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2008-11-14/finding-the-lincoln-in-obama/full/](http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2008-11-14/finding-the-lincoln-in-obama/full/)

“Obama as Lincoln”

[www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/dec/19/obama-as-lincoln/print/](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/dec/19/obama-as-lincoln/print/)

Students also should review the text of both men’s speeches to identify common themes and differences. Possible resources include:

Abraham Lincoln Online: “Speeches & Writings”

<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/speeches.htm>

“Barack Obama—44th President of the United States”

[www.aft.org/tools4teachers/americaelects/Obama.htm](http://www.aft.org/tools4teachers/americaelects/Obama.htm)

Once students complete their charts, have each group share their findings with the rest of the class. Students may want to compare their findings against the initial brainstorm list the class made together. Did their research confirm or refute their initial thinking? (If needed, we’ve provided a list of similarities on the next page to help teachers and/or students generate ideas and discussion about Lincoln and Obama.)

**Adaptations for elementary teachers:** Talk to your students about the inauguration and how the country will soon have a new president: Barack Obama. Share some basic details about Obama (he is from Illinois, he is the first African-American president) and about the inaugural ceremony (Obama will take an oath of office, the role of the Bible). Talk about Obama’s respect for President Lincoln and highlight some of the things he is doing to honor Lincoln (using his Bible, riding the train into Washington, D.C.). Ask students to talk about their heroes: Whom did they select? Why did they select that person? What can they do to do to honor or remember their hero? Depending on the age of the students, you might ask them to draw a picture of their hero, write a short essay, or write journal entries about their hero.

**To assist teachers with this activity, we've compiled a list of some of the similarities between Lincoln and Obama. This is not an exhaustive list. Instead, it is intended to help teachers generate discussions with their students, if needed.**

- Both reached political prominence in Illinois, but both were raised elsewhere. Lincoln was raised in Kentucky and Indiana; Obama was raised in Hawaii and Indonesia.
- Both were raised by women other than their mothers. Lincoln was raised by his stepmother; Obama was raised by his grandmother.
- Both were relatively young when they took office. Lincoln was 51; Obama will be 47.
- Both were tall and lanky.
- Both were lawyers before entering politics.
- Both wrote best-selling books before becoming president.
- Both served eight years in the Illinois Legislature: Lincoln served in the state House; Obama in the state Senate.
- Both were elected to the U.S. Congress and spent two years in Washington before running for president. Lincoln served one term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Obama served two years of his first U.S. Senate term.
- Both were criticized for being too inexperienced to run the country.
- While serving in the U.S. Congress, both spoke out against U.S. declarations of war. Lincoln spoke out against the Mexican-American War; Obama spoke out against the war in Iraq.
- Both rose to national prominence based on their speaking abilities.
- Both selected political rivals to serve on their cabinets.
- Both men entered the presidency during a time of war, and neither had any personal military experience.
- Both used the same Bible for the swearing-in ceremony on Inauguration Day.
- Both took a train to the inauguration.

### **A Critical Link between Lincoln and Obama**

Another key connection between the men is that, without Lincoln's determination to keep the United States together and to end slavery, Obama could not have made his successful and historic run for the presidency.

Throughout his presidency, Lincoln spoke of equality for all men, which was in direct conflict with slavery. Lincoln's campaign to bring equality to all men was waged on battlefields throughout the South, in the press and on Capitol Hill. There are numerous resources available on the Internet for teachers and students to use to examine this critical link more closely. One recommended resource to start with is Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which students can read here: <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/emancipate.htm>.