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Lincoln's Mentors

The Education of a Leader

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Leadership

Politics / Political Figures

History

Take-Aways

- Abraham Lincoln set out to be one of America's greatest presidents.
- Lincoln mentored himself from an early age.
- Henry Clay's ideal of the self-made man inspired Lincoln.
- Clay's missteps cost him several presidential elections.
- Lincoln's stances on slavery placed him as a moderate on the national stage.
- Lincoln's 1860 victory ensured his responsibility for fixing the deepest crisis in American history.
- Andrew Jackson was Lincoln's model for a strong executive during wartime.

Recommendation

Abraham Lincoln lives in the common imagination as a political savant. However, his political success came about largely because he read avidly and selected and studied powerful role models including Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, John Todd Stuart and Orville Browning. Born in a log cabin, Lincoln received little formal education. A voracious reader, he turned to a chosen few leaders for guidance. By the time he won the presidential election in 1860, Lincoln – thanks in part to his mentors – had risen far above his humble beginnings.

Summary

Abraham Lincoln set out to be one of America's greatest presidents.

Without Abraham Lincoln's leadership during the Civil War, the United States might still be two nations. Lincoln succeeded against long odds. He gained election despite a thin résumé that included only one term in Congress. He possessed no particular leadership experience. A small-town lawyer with a brief episode of military experience during the Black Hawk War, Lincoln also lacked the credentials of a great leader.

“He was not born to greatness but earned his way, his map drawn by the men, books, plays, and poetry that he took inspiration and instruction from.”

Lincoln excelled in large part because he closely studied a handful of role models. Several were prominent politicians, men whom Lincoln could emulate as he learned to campaign and then worked to guide a troubled nation.

Throughout his life, Lincoln looked to these men as mentors:

- **Henry Clay** – Clay was the standard-bearer of the Whig Party. When Lincoln cast his first ballot in a presidential election in 1832, he voted for Clay. Lincoln often referred to Clay as his political ideal, and he hewed to Clay's ideology for a long time. Historians studied Clay's dazzling oratory long after he died.
- **Andrew Jackson** – Jackson is hardly an obvious choice as one of Lincoln's mentors. Lincoln ardently opposed Jackson and his allies on most issues, except for Jackson's fight against secession. Yet Lincoln displayed Jackson's portrait in his presidential office in the White House. Jackson fomented genocide against Native Americans and was the primary architect of the Trail of Tears.
- **Zachary Taylor** – Lincoln closely watched Taylor's military successes, and supported Taylor over Clay in his presidential campaign.
- **John Todd Stuart** – Lincoln never met Jackson, and it's unclear whether he and Clay ever came face to face. He observed both men from a distance, but he enjoyed a close personal relationship with Stuart, a cousin of Lincoln's wife Mary Todd. Stuart was a politician and lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, and Lincoln modeled his debate speeches and courtroom style after Stuart's performances. Lincoln relied on Stuart's connections to get his start in politics.
- **Orville Browning** – Browning, an Illinois politician, developed the Republican Party platform in 1856, when Lincoln ran for office.

Lincoln mentored himself from an early age.

Born in rural Kentucky, young Lincoln was nine when his mother died in front of him after drinking milk that had turned poisonous. Lincoln's mother could read, but his father couldn't. Lincoln learned to read, but spelling errors riddled his letters throughout his life. His father thought little of Lincoln's urge to learn or his work ethic, and sometimes beat him for shirking manual labor. Lincoln didn't consider his father a role model.

Young Lincoln began reading more widely, and developed an interest in politics. He gravitated toward Clay, who lost the 1828 presidential election and later launched the Whig Party. Clay earned the nickname of the Great Compromiser for his efforts to find common ground between the proslavery and antislavery factions in Congress. In 1820, Clay brokered a deal that admitted two new states to the union, with slavery legal in Missouri but illegal in Maine. For decades, Clay would seek compromises to keep the fractious nation intact.

"Lincoln was ever mindful of his failures and limitations."

At age 22, Lincoln went to the hamlet of New Salem, Illinois. In a tale that became legendary, he accepted a public wrestling match with a local bully who was famous for his toughness. Lincoln battled the man to a draw, then became friends with him. The episode underscored Lincoln's physical toughness and his aptitude for converting enemies to allies. He also kept studying and learning. He read constantly and analyzed people tirelessly.

Henry Clay's ideal of the self-made man inspired Lincoln.

Clay's 1832 platform painted the United States as a meritocracy, a place where any man from humble beginnings could rise to great heights, so long as he was willing to work hard and impose self-discipline. Clay viewed the federal government as a foundational support network for the self-made man. He believed that by building roads, bridges and schools, the public sector could help self-motivated Americans prosper.

"Of course, Lincoln himself was intensely ambitious and well understood the lure of power."

Lincoln's first run for the Illinois House in 1832 placed him eighth among 13 candidates. When Lincoln ran again in 1834, his new mentor, Stuart, guided his strategy. For the 1832 campaign, Lincoln had traveled his county delivering speeches. For the 1834 race, Stuart devised a different approach – Lincoln would personally meet voters. Lincoln won the election and launched a law practice with Stuart. They were so close that for a time they shared a room.

As a young politician, Lincoln decried slavery, referring to it as "both injustice and bad policy." He spoke out against lynchings. After Lincoln and Stuart dissolved their law partnership in 1841, Lincoln continued to practice law. He used his appearances before judges and juries to practice his speaking skills and to polish his ability to make his arguments clear and powerful.

Clay's missteps cost him several presidential elections.

Clay narrowly lost the 1844 presidential race to James Polk, in part because he lacked discipline in his public pronouncements. Clay published letters that meandered off message and provided fodder for his opponent. Lincoln had a gift for clear-eyed analysis, and despite his near-idolization of Clay, he learned this lesson well. In his subsequent races, Lincoln always remained on message.

President Polk named Gen. Zachary Taylor to lead the US military's defensive effort against Mexico. A Southerner, Taylor supported slavery. In one of Taylor's signature victories, he engineered a triumph in 1847 against a much larger Mexican force. This angered Polk. The president had ordered Taylor to take defensive measures only, and Taylor's victory at the Battle of Buena Vista struck Polk as insubordinate.

While Lincoln learned from Clay's mistakes, he became a keen student of Clay's speeches. Lincoln seemed to be a naturally gifted speaker and worked tirelessly at his craft through study and repetition. Lincoln analyzed Clay's words, identified Clay's rhetorical tactics and adapted them to his purposes. Lincoln owned a copy of the book *The Life and Speeches of Henry Clay*, with a handwritten inscription by Clay.

"Clay's mistakes would be among the most lasting lessons Lincoln learned from his mentor."

No one knows if Lincoln ever met his idol, who died in 1844, but the note in the book indicates that they crossed paths at least once. As much as Lincoln modeled his rhetoric on Clay's, Lincoln understood Clay's shortcomings as a politician. Clay had lost three presidential races. Lincoln was savvy enough to discern politicians' strengths and weaknesses, including how they manifested among his role models.

Lincoln's stances on slavery placed him as a moderate on the national stage.

In 1848, Taylor won the presidency, but illness cut his term short; Taylor died of an intestinal ailment in 1850. With the Whig Party in shambles, antislavery politicians established the Republican Party in 1854. Lincoln's star rose during this period. The divide over slavery was deepening, and Lincoln had been learning from his electoral defeats and honing his speaking skills in the mold of Clay.

Lincoln gained momentum from his opposition to the Dred Scott decision, a landmark 1856 Supreme Court ruling holding that a slave couldn't be free even after living for years in free states and territories. The chief justice asserted that the Declaration of Independence didn't intend to include African-Americans among its claim that "all men" were created equal. Lincoln felt that this Supreme Court ruling did "violence to the plain unmistakable language of the Declaration."

Lincoln took his antislavery message on the campaign trail as he stumped for a Senate seat. "A house divided against itself cannot stand," Lincoln famously said during an address at the Illinois State Capitol. Stephen Douglas, a Democrat who long had debated Lincoln, held the seat Lincoln wanted. As the two rivals embarked on a series of campaign debates, Lincoln employed one of Clay's old tricks: Lincoln praised Douglas while mocking his own underdog status and "poor, lean, lank face."

"Oratory was instrumental to Lincoln's success, as it had been for Clay's."

In a debate in Ottawa, Illinois, that kicked off the Lincoln-Douglas match-ups in 1858, Lincoln cited Clay dozens of times. Lincoln took pains to cast himself as a moderate rather than a revolutionary. African-American leader Frederick Douglass considered Lincoln an enemy to the cause of abolition because of his wishy-washy stand, but Lincoln knew he had to appeal to middle-of-the-road voters. Lincoln lost the Senate election to Stephen Douglas, but his performances catapulted him to national prominence.

Lincoln's 1860 victory ensured his responsibility for fixing the deepest crisis in American history.

Taking advantage of a divided Democratic Party and his distance – as a midwesterner – from the political chaos in Washington, Lincoln won the presidency. He did so in part by being silent where Clay had spoken too much. From May to November of 1860, Lincoln stayed out of the public eye and delivered no speeches.

A crisis was on the horizon. Several slave states had threatened to secede if Lincoln gained the presidency. Once in the White House, Lincoln turned his gaze from Clay to Jackson, a man who had faced similar crises. In 1833, South Carolina had threatened to secede, and Jackson had issued a denunciation. Lincoln studied that episode as he formulated his response to the looming secessions in the South.

“Lincoln was always closely watching people and learning from them.”

An armed skirmish at Fort Sumter in South Carolina kicked off the Civil War; Lincoln looked to the portrait of Jackson on the wall of his office. When the governor of Maryland and the mayor of Baltimore visited Lincoln to ask him for a peaceful breakup of the nation, Lincoln responded that the honor-bound, short-tempered Jackson would never endorse such a limp response. Jackson – with his habit of flaunting his strength in the face of conflict – took over as Lincoln's new role model. In April 1861, Lincoln followed Jackson's lead by suspending the writ of *habeas corpus*. With insurrectionists in Maryland burning bridges and cutting telegraph lines, Lincoln ordered federal authorities to imprison suspected traitors without due process.

Andrew Jackson was Lincoln's model for a strong executive during wartime.

In the decades leading up to Lincoln's election, Jackson was the rare president willing to remove Cabinet officers and other high-level appointments without congressional approval. Lincoln embraced this power to fire ineffective appointees such as Gen. George McClellan. Lincoln knew McClellan was a loyal Democrat, and hoped the young general's familiarity with Confederate president Jefferson Davis would give the Union forces an advantage. Instead, McClellan proved incompetent and openly contemptuous of Lincoln, who sacked him. Lincoln also emulated Jackson by keeping his Cabinet members on a short leash and at a safe distance.

“There was no dramatic moment when Lincoln suddenly became the man who would be the mythic, beloved president he became.”

As Lincoln matured as a leader and a speaker, he grasped when to reject the example of his role models. The Gettysburg Address, which he delivered on the Pennsylvania battlefield in 1863, illustrated Lincoln's ability to turn away from Clay's style when necessary. Clay favored long sentences in long speeches, a pattern

Lincoln typically followed. The speech in Gettysburg was fewer than 275 words. Lincoln grew to appreciate that presidents were speaking to the masses, and that clarity and brevity were crucial.

In the big picture, Lincoln remained a Clay man. The 13th Amendment, a formal abolition of slavery, was an achievement Clay had dreamed of – a measure that would bring the US Constitution in line with the ideals of the Declaration of Independence.

About the Author

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