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## Abe's Hope

Gleaves Whitney  
*Grand Valley State University*

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## Abe's Hope

### Why Does Abraham Lincoln Remain So Popular and Admired?

By Gleaves Whitney

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, so our 16th president is being lavished with media attention. Moreover, during the past several months, President Barack Obama has used the bully pulpit to express admiration for his Illinois predecessor.

When I ask students and audiences to tell me why they think Lincoln is great, I get the usual nod to the big themes. Some say it's because he preserved the Union by refusing to let the South win the Civil War. Others say it's because he got the ball rolling on civil rights for blacks by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and pushing for the Thirteenth Amendment. Still others cite the political genius Lincoln possessed to forge his opponents into a "team of rivals."

These are all good reasons. But behind them lies an even more basic explanation for our admiration. I believe we admire Abraham Lincoln because he gives us hope that we can improve our lives and achieve our dreams, no matter how difficult our circumstances. This hope is the source of Lincoln's mythic power over the American imagination.

Booker T. Washington observed that people's lives should be measured not by what accolades they receive, but by what obstacles they overcome. By that measure, Lincoln wins the prize. It's one thing for John Quincy Adams to follow his father John Adams into the White House; or for Benjamin Harrison to follow his grandfather William Henry Harrison into the Executive Mansion; or for George W. Bush to follow his father George H. W. Bush into the Oval Office. They were "to the manor born" and enjoyed a privileged background that helped propel them to the highest office in the land.

No so with Lincoln. He had no famous father or grandfather leading the way. Nor were his relatives politically connected to any significant degree. Abe struggled every step of the way to the top from total obscurity on the frontier. He did it through hard work, intelligence, persistence, and the unquenchable desire to make something of his life.

If you had met young Abe in the Indiana wilderness in the 1820s, you would never guess that the gawky boy could make it to the White House. His family's log cabin was not even nice by frontier standards. He grew up in a hardscrabble environment with distant neighbors, little money, few books, and only a handful of good role models. Over the course of his life, he received one year of formal schooling – at a primitive "ABC school" in which he learned some reading, writing, and reckoning to the rule of three.

Worse than the material privation was the emotional poverty Abe grappled with. He felt estranged from his father, Thomas Lincoln, who never understood why Abe could not be more like other boys on the frontier. Abe was his own person. He hated farming, nor did he like hunting. He preferred to read, crack jokes, and tell stories. As a result, Thomas thought his son was lazy and self-indulgent and would beat him for not doing the chores on time. Abe was never close to his father and couldn't wait to grow up and leave the farm.

In addition to being estranged from his father, Abe was still just a boy when he witnessed many close family members die. A baby brother passed away soon after birth. His mother died an agonizing death – in their little cabin before his very eyes – when he was just nine. His sister Sarah passed away while giving birth to a child. Especially traumatic was the experience of losing the love of his life, Ann Rutledge, to disease. Indeed, Lincoln was so depressed by Ann's loss that friends worried he would commit suicide. They would not even let him carry a pocketknife.

Despite being dogged by emotional struggles, Lincoln was driven to make a significant contribution to his country. He knew that his success would depend on education. As a child, he took every opportunity to absorb the books neighbors lent him. In his twenties, he mostly taught himself the law and went on to become a prominent Illinois attorney. Although he never earned a degree of any kind, he became brilliantly educated through his reading, listening, speech making, and practice of law.

Lincoln's life can be an inspiration to us all because he started so low, yet rose so high. All along the way he overcame poverty, depression, and personal setbacks. No wonder we look to him and have the courage to dream.



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Gleaves Whitney is the director of Grand Valley's Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies. [Ask your question.](#)

*(Question from Mark Couturier, freshman writing major)*