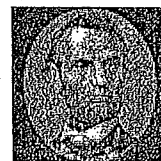


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On President's Day, Remember Your 5 Black Presidents

Compiled by the DiversityInc staff



We keep hearing that this year will mark the first time a major political party in the United States nominated a woman or a Black person as its presidential candidate. For women, that is true, but some historians say Sen. Barack Obama, if elected, would not be the nation's first Black president. They say he certainly won't be the first president with Black ancestors--just the first to acknowledge his Blackness.

Which other presidents hid their African ancestry? Well, it's not Bill Clinton, even though the Congressional Black Caucus honored him as the nation's "first Black president" at its 2001 annual awards dinner. Presidents Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge all had Black ancestors they kept in their genealogical closets, according to historians.

Harding did not deny his African ancestry when Republican leaders called on him to deny his "Negro" history. He said, "How should I know whether or not one of my ancestors might have jumped the fence?"

Does African ancestry make these men Black? If the bar is the one-drop rule, then yes. The one-drop rule is a historical term used during the Jim Crow era that defines a person with one drop of sub-Saharan-African ancestry as not white and therefore must be Black. If that's the bar, then there have already been other Black presidents, says historian Leroy Vaughn, author of *Black People and Their Place in World History*.

The first president with African ancestry was Jefferson, who served two terms between 1801 and 1809. Jefferson was described as the "son of a half-breed Indian squaw and a Virginia mulatto father," as stated in Vaughn's findings. Jefferson also was said to have destroyed all documentation attached to his mother, even going to extremes to seize letters written by his mother to other people.

President Andrew Jackson, the nation's seventh president, was in office between 1829 and 1837. Vaughn cites an article written in *The Virginia Magazine of History* that states Jackson was the son of an Irish woman who married a Black man. The magazine also stated that Jackson's oldest brother had been sold as a slave.

Lincoln, the nation's 16th president, served between 1861 and 1865. Lincoln was said to have been the illegitimate son of an African man, according to Vaughn's findings. Lincoln had very dark skin and coarse hair and his mother allegedly came from an Ethiopian tribe. His heritage fueled so much controversy that Lincoln was nicknamed "Abraham Africanus the First" by his opponents.

President Warren Harding, the 29th president, in office between 1921 and 1923, apparently never denied his ancestry. According to Vaughn, William Chancellor, a professor of economics and politics at Wooster College in Ohio, wrote a book on the Harding family genealogy. Evidently, Harding had Black ancestors between both sets of parents. Chancellor also said that Harding attended Iberia College, a school founded to educate fugitive slaves.

Coolidge, the nation's 30th president, served between 1923 and 1929 and supposedly was proud of his heritage. He claimed his mother was dark because of mixed Indian ancestry. Coolidge's mother's maiden name was "Moor," and in Europe, the name "Moor" was given to all Blacks, just as "Négro" was used in America. It later was concluded that Coolidge was part Black.