

Obama joins list of seven presidents with Harvard degrees

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Barack Obama

When sworn in on Jan. 20, Barack Obama will become the eighth U.S. president to have graduated from Harvard. President-elect Obama is a 1991 graduate of Harvard Law School. He joins current President George W. Bush (M.B.A. '75) and Presidents John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Rutherford B. Hayes, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy as Harvard graduates chosen to serve as the nation's chief executive.

Journalist Robert Windrem notes that Harvard has educated more U.S. presidents than any other university. Yale University has produced five U.S. presidents, with [George W. Bush counting for both Harvard and Yale](#).

Short biographical sketches of U.S. presidents from Harvard

'I read forever . . .'

John Adams, 1735-1826

A.B. 1755, A.M. 1758, LL.D. (honorary) 1781

President, 1797-1801

The entrance exam to Harvard in 1751 was rigorous and proved a frightening prospect to many an applicant. The young John Adams was no exception. After mounting his horse and starting the ride from nearby Braintree to Cambridge, Adams experienced sensations familiar to almost

all of us. He was so “terrified at the Thought of introducing myself to such great Men as the President and fellows of a Colledge, I at first resolved to return home: but forseeing the Grief of my father . . . I aroused my self, and collected Resolution enough to proceed.”

Though grueling, the experience ended happily, and Adams “was as light when I came home as I had been heavy when I went.” Soon after entering the school, Adams fell in love with learning, to the point where he might today be considered not quite well-rounded: “I perceived a growing Curiosity, a Love of Books and a fondness for Study, which dissipated all my inclination for Sports, and even the Society of the Ladies. I read forever . . .”

Before 1773, the graduates of Harvard were arranged in a hierarchy not of merit but “according to the dignity of birth, or to the rank of [their] parents.” By this rather undemocratic standard, Adams graduated 14th in a class of 24.

Nothing new under the sun

John Quincy Adams, 1767-1848

A.B. 1787, A.M. 1790, LL.D. (honorary) 1822

President, 1825-29

In Harvard’s Spring Exhibition conference of 1787, the young student John Quincy Adams was given what today might be considered a difficult assignment: the defense of the practice of law. Indeed, Adams’ words continue to ring remarkably familiar. He began: “At a time when the profession of the Law labours under the heavy weight of popular indignation; when it is upbraided as the original cause of all evils . . . and when the mere title of lawyer is sufficient to deprive a man of public confidence, it should seem this profession would afford a poor subject for a panegyric; but . . .” The fledgling orator went on to make a spirited defense of his future profession.

At the festive Commencement Day exercises, the famously dour Adams graduated second in a class of 51, but not until he had discharged his first duty of the day, playing the flute in the College band.

‘The Rudeness of a Student’

Rutherford B. Hayes, 1822-93

LL.B. 1845, LL.D. (honorary) 1877

President, 1877-81

Not long after graduating from Kenyon College, the young Rutherford B. Hayes decided to attend Harvard Law School and soak in the “intellectual atmosphere of Boston.” He entered the School in 1843, where he attended lectures by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and speeches by fellow Harvardian and former president John Quincy Adams, that “venerable but deluded old man” whose abolitionist stance Hayes found “very unreasonable and unfair.”

Hayes did enjoy going to temperance meetings and the theater, although upon his graduation he decided to set such frivolities aside. As the future president soberly put it, “The rudeness of a student must be laid off, and the quiet, manly deportment of a gentleman put on.”

Zookeeping at Harvard

Theodore Roosevelt, 1858-1919

A.B. mcl 1880, LL.D. (honorary) 1902

President, 1901-09

Theodore Roosevelt, Class of 1880, was apparently considered odd by his classmates, at least at first. The naturally ebullient, excitable young man with the high, breaking voice and the thick-lensed spectacles simply could not master the current standards of “cool” in the Harvard of the 1870s, neither the slow, lazy “Harvard drawl” nor the shuffling “Harvard swing.” Undeterred, Roosevelt pursued his activities with characteristic enthusiasm — boxing, rowing, and bird-watching, as well as joining the rifle club and the Natural History Club, among others, and founding a whist club and a finance club.

He was, nevertheless, still thought of by some as “eccentric,” and others went further, calling him “half-crazy.” Perhaps the small zoo he kept in his room, consisting of lobsters, snakes, and a huge tortoise had something to do with it.

No doubt there were some who thought his senior thesis was crazy, as well, in which he wrote “Viewed purely in the abstract, I think there can be no question that women should have equal rights with men . . . Especially as regards the laws relating to marriage [sic] there should be the

most absolute equality preserved between the sexes. I do not think the woman should assume the man's name.”

Blackballed

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1882-1945

A.B. 1903, LL.D. (honorary) 1929

President, 1933-45

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was an ambitious student, but not academically. Captain of the freshman football team, reporter for the student paper, *The Crimson*, and sporting a C average, Roosevelt's driving ambition was to attain the pinnacle of Harvard's social world.

Although when his cousin Theodore became president, the younger Roosevelt was kidded about being a member of the “royal family,” he would not feel he had accomplished his social goals until he became accepted by the Porcellian, Harvard's most exclusive club.

Members were chosen by a vote of the 16 juniors and seniors in the current membership. The tally was taken with the use of white and black balls: each member held a white ball and a black ball, and, after the candidate was discussed, a wooden box was passed around the room, into which everyone put one ball. At the end, if there were any black balls in the box, the candidate was rejected.

It was forever galling to Roosevelt that he was blackballed from the Porcellian, and he never was to learn who had made the deciding negative vote.

‘Attractive, witty, and unpurposeful’

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 1917-63

S.B. cl 1940, LL.D. (honorary) 1956

President, 1961-63

When John Fitzgerald Kennedy entered Harvard's freshman class, the most popular young man in the school was his brother Joe. It was difficult for Jack, already plagued with myriad physical ailments, to get out from under Joe's shadow. Too small to play intercollegiate football, he joined the swim team. He was remembered by the coach as “a fine kid, frail and not too strong, but always giving it everything he had.”

At first, Kennedy was not particularly devoted to academics. One classmate recalls him as “attractive, witty, and unpurposeful.” As an upperclassman, Kennedy deepened, developing a profound interest in political philosophy. In his junior year he made the Dean's List. His senior honors thesis, about Great Britain's lack of preparation for World War II, became, after his graduation, the best-selling book “Why England Slept.”

Hot fudge sundaes on Sundays

George W. Bush, 1946-

M.B.A. '75

President, 2001-2009

Like his father before him, George W. Bush attended Yale as an undergraduate, earning a history degree in 1968. For further training, though, the younger Bush came to Harvard Business School, graduating with a master's degree in business administration in 1975.

Those were tough years, however, for the son of a prominent Republican because of the political atmosphere surrounding the Watergate scandal that played out in 1973-74. The Cambridge area was a “miserable place to be a Republican,” especially considering Massachusetts' reputation as a Democratic stronghold, recalled Bush's aunt, Nancy Bush Ellis, who spoke to the *Lexington, Mass., Minuteman* newspaper during the 2000 presidential campaign.

Ellis lived nearby in Lincoln, Mass., however, and Bush often went to her house for Sunday dinners, which his aunt recalled as his favorite times during his graduate school years. After dinner they would enjoy their favorite dessert: vanilla ice cream with hot fudge sauce.

‘She poured everything she had into me.’

Barack Obama, 1961-

President-elect

J.D. mcl '91

Barack Obama was born in Hawaii on Aug. 4, 1961. He was named after his father, Barack Obama Sr., a government economist from Kenya. His mother was Ann Dunham, an anthropologist from Kansas. The couple, who met at the University of Hawaii, divorced when Obama was 2. In 1967, his mother remarried an Indonesian oil manager and moved the family from Hawaii to Indonesia. Obama returned to Hawaii when he was 10 and grew up largely under the care of his maternal grandparents. He credits his late grandmother, Madelyn Payne Dunham, with having a major influence on his life. “She poured everything she had into me,” Obama told the capacity crowd at the Democratic National Convention in August.

Obama attended Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii. He graduated from Columbia University in 1983 with a degree in international relations.

After working in Chicago as a community organizer, Obama entered Harvard Law School (HLS) in 1988. By his graduation, he had national news media exposure and a book contract.

Obama’s father had graduated from Harvard with a master’s degree in economics in 1965. The younger Obama told friends that he needed the credential of a Harvard Law education to become a more effective community organizer. After winning a slot on the prestigious Harvard Law Review, Obama at first declined to run for its presidency, but he was persuaded to give it a try. He won when conservatives decided to support him.

After graduation from Harvard Law School, Obama returned to Chicago — and to community organizing. He practiced civil rights law and taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago. Through his advocacy work he was inspired to run for public office. He served in the Illinois State Senate for eight years.

Obama was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2004 and first captured national attention that same year with his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Boston.

On Nov. 4, 2008, Obama was elected president of the United States.

He is married to Michelle Obama, a 1988 graduate of HLS. They have two children, Sasha and Malia.

