

Presidents' Eyes 2011 [EyeSmart](#) News feature:

Why “Honest Abe” Couldn’t Look You Straight in the Eye and Other Eyesight Challenges of U.S. Presidents

We recognize the United States’ great presidents as visionaries, but did some of these leaders have trouble seeing—literally? This Presidents’ Day, EyeSmart takes a look at the vision problems of three of the best-known US presidents.

Abraham “**Honest Abe**” **Lincoln** actually couldn’t look a person straight in the eye, because he had [strabismus](#). You can see this in some photos or portraits of the 16th president. Lincoln’s left eye tended to roll upward, especially when he was tired or excited. News reports of his fiery 1860 presidential election debates with Stephen Douglas describe Lincoln’s eye as “rolling wildly” as he spoke! His dominant right eye did most of the work of seeing, especially for near work like reading.

Lincoln’s left eye was set slightly higher in his head than his right, and his left eyelid drooped a bit. When he was 10 years old Abe was kicked in the head by a horse, and may have suffered nerve damage that led to a mild paralysis of his eyelid. Lincoln also suffered from double vision (diplopia) at times.

America’s 25th president, **Theodore Roosevelt**, was a Rough Rider and adventurer, and his move into the White House hardly slowed him down. In one of his many boxing matches while president, Roosevelt received a blow to the head that some sources say left him partially blind in his left eye. (Others say earlier injuries caused the damage.) If the tough punch was the culprit, Roosevelt’s loss of sight would probably have been due to a [detached retina](#) (undiagnosed), say Eye M.D. historians. Athletes who play impact sports today can take a lesson from TR, and make sure to use [protective eyewear](#) and seek immediate medical care for any eye or head injury.

Woodrow Wilson was shocked to awaken one morning in 1906, seven years before he became the 27th president, and find himself nearly blind in his right eye. He’d suffered a hemorrhage (severe bleeding) in his retina, the sensitive area at the back of the eye that relays images to the brain. Other than resting his eye for several months on orders from his Eye M.D., no real treatment was available in those days. Wilson had high blood pressure, a risk factor for “central retinal vein occlusion,” a blockage in the main retinal vein, and this probably caused the bleed and damage, say Eye M.D. historians. Eventually his vision improved some, and though Wilson complained his golf game was never again as good, he seems to have coped fairly well.

Several presidents have had trouble with eye “twitches” or “spasms” or “rapid blinking,” conditions that are more likely when a person is under pressure (especially emotional stress) and/or exhausted or sleep-deprived. Given the intense demands of the presidency, it’s a wonder these annoying conditions haven’t been more common.



[Theodore Roosevelt, 1904](#)