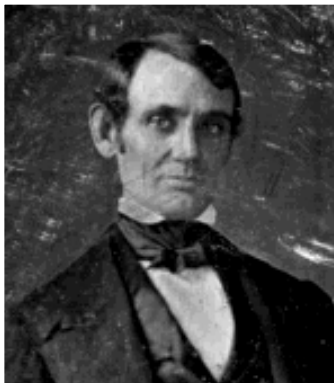


## Chapter 13

### Lincoln vs. Douglas

Imagine standing in a hot, dusty town in central Illinois during the summer of 1858 as excursion trains bring thousands of visitors from all over the state. A hastily-prepared speakers' platform has just been constructed, and partisans on both sides are cheering for their champions in a hotly contested race for a seat in the U.S. Senate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas.



**Abraham Lincoln  
before the beard**

This campaign for the United States Senate began in Springfield, Illinois on June 16th when Lincoln was nominated by the Republican convention. That evening, the Republican nominee delivered his famous 'House Divided' speech, that set the tone for the Senate race. "I believe," he told a packed house, "this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free." It would, he added, become all one or all the other. In Chicago three weeks later, Stephen Douglas attacked Lincoln for advocating boldly and clearly a war of sections, a war of the North against the South. And he asserted that the fundamental principle underlying our Constitution contemplated diversity and dissimilarity in the domestic affairs of each and every state. That evening, Lincoln responded by addressing an audience about 3/4th as large and four times as enthusiastic as Douglas's. The issues

were thus joined, and Lincoln's managers scheduled their candidate's speaking engagements to follow Douglas's announced appearances. On July 24th, Lincoln challenged his opponent to a series of debates. Douglas accepted this challenge on the same day. Altogether, seven debates of about three hours apiece were held in seven different towns.

#### The Debaters and the Issue

As the debates progressed, Lincoln defined the fundamental differences between himself and Douglas as the sentiment on the part of one class that looks upon the institution of slavery as a wrong, and of another that doesn't. Douglas too, claimed to be supporting a fundamental principle: that of self-government, the right of the people to rule. Indeed ideals basic to our system of government — the right of men to be free as well as the right of men to make their own laws — were at issue in the debates. This clash over cherished and conflicting values, articulated by their most powerful spokesmen, gave these debates an importance far greater than the election that inspired them. As Lincoln and Douglas wearily criss-crossed Illinois, every word and gesture of theirs was followed by newspapermen and reported to an entire nation. The debaters argued over the rights of blacks under the Constitution, the Dred Scott decision, and the charge that slavery could become national. Their arguments helped formulate and crystallize opinions on both sides. The winner in Illinois was Stephen Douglas. Though Lincoln lost this race for the Senate he defeated Douglas two years later in his bid for the presidency, a victory made possible by these debates.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Imagine a long, lanky, clean-shaven man in his late 40s wearing a suit just a little too short and a stove-pipe hat accentuating his height. Look into his homely face, but observe the light emanating from his features as he rises to his subject and, above all, listen to the humor and logic peppering his remarks. Evaluate this man and his ideas as he faces the little giant, Stephen Douglas, veteran of a thousand speeches, whose imposing chest and deep tones thundered forth his positions in a rich baritone voice. Judge for yourself between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas on each of the following issues:

## Can the Union Remain Half Free and Half Slave?

### Lincoln

"A House divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not doubt the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, shall it be alike lawful in all the states, old as well as new — North as well as South.

Have we no tendency to the latter condition?

### Douglas

Now, my friends, I must say to you frankly, that I take bold, unqualified issue with him upon that principle. I assert that it is neither desirable nor possible that there should be uniformity in the local institutions and domestic regulations of the different states of this Union. The framers of our government never contemplated uniformity in its internal concerns. The fathers of the Revolution, and the sages who made the Constitution well understood that the laws and domestic institutions which would suite the granite hills of New Hampshire would be totally unfit for the rice fields of South Carolina or suit the agricultural districts of Pennsylvania . . . or the lumber regions of Maine. They well understood that the great varieties of soil, of production and of interests, in a republic as large as this, required different local and domestic regulations in each locality, adapted to the wants and interests of each separate state.

The Fundamental Difference Between Lincoln and Douglas

## Lincoln

The real issue in this controversy — the one pressing upon every mind — is the sentiment on the part of one class that looks upon the institution of slavery as a wrong. The sentiment that contemplates the institution of slavery in this country as a wrong is the sentiment of the Republican party. . . . They look upon it as being a moral, social and political wrong; and while they contemplate it as such, they nevertheless have due regard for its actual existence among us, and the difficulties of getting rid of it in any satisfactory way and to all the constitutional obligations thrown about it. Yet have a due regard for these, they desire a policy in regard to it that looks to its not creating any more danger. They insist that it should as far as may be, be treated as a wrong, and one of the methods

## Douglas

He says that he looks forward to a time when slavery shall be abolished everywhere. I look forward to a time when each state shall be allowed to do as it pleases. If it chooses to keep slavery forever, it is not my business—not mine. I care more for the great principle of self-government, the right of the people to rule, than I do for all the Negroes in Christendom. (Cheers) I would not endanger the perpetuity of this Union. I would not blot out the great inalienable rights of the white men for all the Negroes that every existed. (Renewed applause.) Hence, I say, let us maintain this government on the principles that our fathers made it, recognizing the right of each state to keep slavery as long as its people determine, or to abolish it when they please. Our fathers, I say, made this government on the

## Lincoln

of treating it as a wrong is to make provisions that it shall grow no larger. They also desire a policy that looks to a peaceful end of slavery at sometime.

## Douglas

principle of the right of each state to do as it pleases in its own domestic affairs, subject to the Constitution, and allowed the people of each to apply to every new change of circumstance such remedy as they may see fit to improve their condition. This right they have for all time to come.

### **On the Dred Scott Decision**

Judge Douglas said last night, that before the decision he might advance his opinion, and it might be contrary to the decision when it was made; but after it was made he would abide by it until it was reversed. Just so! We let this property abide by the decision, but we will try to reverse that decision (Loud applause-cries of good.) We will try to put it where Judge Douglas would not object, for he says he will obey it until it is reversed. Somebody has to reverse that decision, since it is made, and we mean to reverse it, and we mean to do it peaceably.

If the decision of the Supreme Court, to decide the question, is final and binding, is he [Lincoln] not bound by it. Is every man in this land allowed to resist decisions he does not like, and only support those that meet his approval? What are important courts worth unless their decisions are binding on all good citizens? It is the fundamental principle of the judiciary that its decisions are final. It is created for that purpose so that when you cannot agree among yourselves on a disputed point you appeal to the judicial tribunal which steps in and decides for you, and that decision is then binding on every good citizen. . . .

## On Negro Rights

I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, I have no inclination to do so. I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary, but I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (loud cheers). I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white Man. I agree with Judge Douglas that he is not my equal in many respects— certainly not in color, perhaps not in

intellectual and moral endowment, but in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anyone else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal, and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man. (Great applause)

Judge Douglas, and whoever like him teaches that the Negro has no share, humble as it may be, in the Declaration of Independence . . . is blowing out the moral lights around us, when he contends that whoever wants slaves has the right to hold them; he is . . . eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty. . . .

I hold that the signers of the Declaration of Independence had no reference to negroes at all when they declared all men to be created equal. They did not mean negro, nor the savage Indians, nor the Fejee Islanders nor any other barbarous race. They were speaking of white men. (It's so, it's so, and cheers.) They alluded to men of European birth and European descent — to white men, and to none others, when they declared that doctrine. (That's the truth.) I hold that this government was established on the white basis. It was established by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and should be administered by white men, and none others. But it does not follow that merely because the Negro is not our equal he should be our slave. We ought to extend to the Negro race and to all other dependent races all the rights, privileges, and all the immunities which they can exercise Humanity requires that we should give them all these privileges; Christianity commends that we should extend those consistently with the safety of society. what is But it does not follow, by any means, that merely follow, that we ought to extend to the Negro because the Negro is not a citizen, and merely

the nature and extent of them. My answer is that is a question which each state must answer for itself. We in Illinois have decided it for ourselves. We tried slavery, kept it up for twelve years, and finding that it was not profitable we abolished it for that reason, and became a free state. We adopted in its stead the policy that a Negro in this state, shall not be a slave and shall not be a citizen. We have a right to adopt that policy. For my part I think it is a wise and sound policy for us.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Paul M. Angle, *Created Equal? The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debate of 1858*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 195, pp. 1-2, 18-19, 390, 400, 374-75, 311, 230-31.

# Digital History

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## **Suggested Student Exercises:**

1. As your teacher directs, prepare to present and defend either Lincoln's or Douglas's position on each of the issues to the class:

- Whether the Union can remain half free and half slave
- The Fundamental Difference Between Lincoln and Douglas
- On the Dred Scott Decision
- On Negro Rights

**or**

2. Prepare to question either 'Lincoln' or 'Douglas' on his/her presentation in class.