

For the People

A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association

Volume 4, Number 2

Summer 2002

Springfield, Illinois

Illinois Ideological Battleground of the Nation

by Daniel Willis *

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates occupy a unique position in Illinois history. For a short time, the Prairie State represented and highlighted the divisive forces affecting the nation. In the aftermath of the debates, the positions held by Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas came to be seen as a direct conflict of two great principles. Lincoln is perceived as “the Great Emancipator,” champion of a moral absolute: the complete abolition of slavery. Douglas championed a different lofty principle: popular sovereignty, or the right of the people to decide issues for themselves by popular vote on a state-by-state basis. The conflict between these two ideals is what makes the debates such an interesting and important part of history.

To understand the impact of these debates on American history, one must examine the effects of these ideas on subsequent historical events. In the case of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, the short-term intentions and practical goals of the speakers were to secure a seat in the United States Senate. However, the long-term significance and ideological implications of the arguments put forth by the participants were more far-reaching and provoked strong reactions that led to revolution and reform.

Slavery, of course, was the major issue in the nation at the time, and as such it dominated the debates.¹ Lincoln, as a member of the Republican party, had to run on its platform, which called for the preven-

tion of the spread of slavery under any conditions whatsoever.² Douglas was a believer in the theory of popular sovereignty, which advocated that each territory should make the slavery decision when it applied for statehood.

Douglas’s personal belief was that slavery was unjust, but that the blacks were his intellectual and moral inferiors.³ Douglas argued that white voters in Illinois, Maine, and South Carolina had the same right to enact their opinions as law, no matter how different, as long as the Constitution did not forbid it.⁴ The most appealing feature of popular sovereignty was that it appeared to represent a workable compromise on the volatile subject of slavery. In comparison, Lincoln’s approach, the complete halt of the spread of slavery and its gradual elimination, seemed to be an inflammatory course of action, perhaps leading to war. The fear of the consequences of Lincoln’s plan, coupled with Douglas’s greater fame coming into the debates, certainly contributed to Douglas’s election.

The occasion for the debates was the Illinois Senate election of 1858. Neither candidate was a stranger to the political arena. Douglas, a Democrat, was the incumbent, and one of the most well known, if not universally liked, men in American politics.⁵ Lincoln, a Republican, was a former Illinois and United States Representative, and a respectable man, if not a famous one. Douglas’s Democratic party had been established in the time of Thomas Jefferson, whereas the Republican party had suddenly risen within only four years to become one of the major national par-

ties, largely in response to the growing controversy over the slavery issue sparked by the 1854 passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, proposed by none other than Stephen Douglas.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act in effect repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which declared that all new states north of 36°30’ north latitude would be free states (that is, slavery would be forbidden within their boundaries) and all new states south of that line would be slave states. This compromise was far from perfect, but it kept tempers cool on the slavery topic for roughly thirty years, until the end of the Mexican War, when the United States claimed a huge area of land as the spoils of war, much of it south of the compromise line. Debate about whether the new territories would be slave or free was sparked by the Wilmot Proviso, which stated that slavery would be prohibited in any territory won as a result of the war. Congress was deadlocked until Henry Clay, the venerable statesman, and the silver-tongued Daniel Webster were able to work out a long, complex compromise deal in 1850.⁶

Four years later, Douglas proposed the fateful Kansas-Nebraska bill. The measure would open the Kansas Territory to popular sovereignty, which meant that when the territory had sufficient population to apply for statehood, the legality of slavery would be decided by a majority of all voters in the area. Kansas would otherwise have been a free state.

When Kansas applied for statehood as a slave state, both pro- and

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President's Column

by Robert S. Eckley

The Civil War and Lincoln, that forever-linked and unsymmetrical couple, which began several weeks after Lincoln's first inauguration and virtually ended in the same interval after his second, brought together puzzling combinations of memories and memorabilia which filled me with intrigue when I encountered these objects as a teenager. As we approach the opening of the new Lincoln Library in November and construction of the co-joined museum, with their extensive conjunction of books, manuscripts, and artifacts, perhaps family collections have broader relevance.

In the small drawer inside the top of the secretary, I found an envelope containing two wooden chips. Pasted around one was the following typed statement: "A piece of platform floor from the historic 'Lincoln Car' saved while repairing the 1904, Worlds Fair, St. Louis, MO," signed W.O. (?) Siron. The second label said: "A piece of frame work from the historic 'Lincoln Car,' etc.," and signed as the first, except that Siron's initials are indistinct, causing me to doubt my first reading of the initials. I would be less than candid if I did not indicate that I have always thought the provenance of the chips could be doubtful, that my grandfather perhaps was taken in by a side show entrepreneur at the St. Louis World's Fair a century ago. That is, until recently, when the Illinois State Historical Library displayed some of its Lincoln artifacts.

Among the items displayed was a collection from Grace Bedell, the eleven-year-old girl who wrote to Lincoln urging him to grow whiskers, and with whom he visited enroute to Washington in February 1861. The collection included a chip from the "Lincoln Car" authenticated by the same person. Actually, the Lincoln funeral car was on display at the World's Fair. Do other remnants still exist, and who was the enterprising Mr. Siron?

The second item recalling the Civil War in the old secretary was a small copy of the New Testament published in New York in 1861. Scratched inside the back cover in pencil is this message: "Found in the Rebel fort at New Madrid after the Bombardment march 13th 1862 and signed G.W. Yates, Co. D, 10th Regt Ill Vol." On that same day, Confederate General John P. McCown ordered evacuation of his forces from New Madrid to avoid capture, for which he was relieved of his command. George Yates was my grandfather's cousin. New Madrid is, of course, just downstream from Island No. 10 in the Mississippi River near where wise maneuvering of Union forces led to an almost bloodless surrender of several thousand Confederate troops on April 7 to those under the command of Union General John Pope. I am reminded as I hold the tiny book in my hand of Lincoln's line from his second inaugural address: "Both [parties] read the same Bible, and pray to the same god, and each invokes His aid against the other."

The third and most significant heirloom also is the most difficult to evaluate. Henry J. Raymond's *Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln*, was an early, if not the first, biography published in 1865 after the assassination. Mark E. Neely, Jr., called it "an undistinguished biography which mostly stitched together Lincoln's state papers," Paul Angle ignored it in his 1946 selective bibliography, and Allen C. Guelzo, in his introduction to the 1998 republication of Holland's 1866 *Life*, comments on its lesser emphasis on Lincoln's early years. My chief counter is that the presentation of speeches and state papers were a necessary trove prior to the Nicolay and Hay 1890 *History*, and that the assessments, although limited, are on target and reflect Raymond's acquiescence in Lincoln's views on such issues as the border states and the timing of emancipation. Raymond was, after all, in his positions as editor of the *New York Times* and chairman of the Republican

National Committee, a key player in the Civil War political scene. How this volume ended up in my grandfather's desk remains a mystery because he became an orphan in 1865 at age fifteen.

The purpose of this recital is to pose the question: What similar cache of letters, books, or memorabilia do you have in an attic, desk, chest, or just in boxes? And are you considering, as I am, what is the best disposition of those that may have historic value beyond the confines of purely family traditions? Letters, manuscripts, and documents, in particular, could be of interest to scholars in pursuit of Lincoln and Civil War questions, and their accessibility in public libraries could enhance their usefulness. The opening of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library on November 18 is a fitting occasion to be thinking about such questions.

Stimulated to collect Lincoln memorabilia by a son of Henry Clay Whitney, author of *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*, Governor Henry Horner (1932–1940) gathered together 5,500 Lincoln items of varying description, which he left to the Illinois State Historical Library in 1940. This added meaningfully to the Library's Lincoln Collection, which began with the Library in 1889. In 1953, the Abraham Lincoln Association donated its papers to the Collection, including many letters written by Mary Todd Lincoln. Later, more Lincoln family papers were obtained from Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith. These and other increments have made the Library's holdings the largest pre-presidential collection in existence, as well as the largest assemblage of Lincoln family writings. Beginning in 1958, the collection has been under the leadership of three eminent scholars who have served as Curator: James T. Hickey, Thomas F. Schwartz, and Kim M. Bauer. This could be the most appropriate place for additional Lincoln materials to make them available for scholarly and educational use.

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Summer Book Sales

The following books are being offered for sale for your summer reading pleasure. Take one or more with you to the beach, woods, or on the boat.

Wayne C. Temple, Deputy Director of the Illinois State Archives, has revised and expanded his detailed history of the Lincoln Home.

Mark Washburne provides the second volume of his study of the important Illinois political figure, Elihu

Benjamin Washburne.

Daniel Stowell has edited a series of important essays written by the Lincoln Legal Papers' staff. This collection plumbs the magnificent collection of legal documents to show how Lincoln's legal practice touched the lives of everyday individuals in significant ways.

Christopher A. Thomas provides an engaging study of the Lincoln Memorial and its changing meanings.

Wayne C. Temple, *By Square and Compass: Saga of the Lincoln Home*

Retail: \$24.95 ALA: \$18.00 IL Sales Tax: \$1.31

Mark Washburne, *Elihu Benjamin Washburne, A Biography... Vol. II*

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Daniel Stowell, editor, *In Tender Consideration: Women, Families, and the Law in Abraham Lincoln's Illinois*

Retail: \$34.95 ALA: \$25.25 IL Sales Tax: \$1.83

Christopher A. Thomas, *The Lincoln Memorial and American Life*

Retail: \$35.00 ALA: \$25.25 IL Sales Tax: \$1.83

Shipping costs are: Up to \$49.99, add \$7.50
\$50 and over, add \$12.00

Lincoln Never Said That

by Thomas F. Schwartz

Printed inside the top flap of a multigrain cereal is found the following: "You can be anything you want to be, do anything you set out to accomplish if you hold to that desire with singleness of purpose." Abraham Lincoln is cited as the source of the sage advice. But did he say these words?

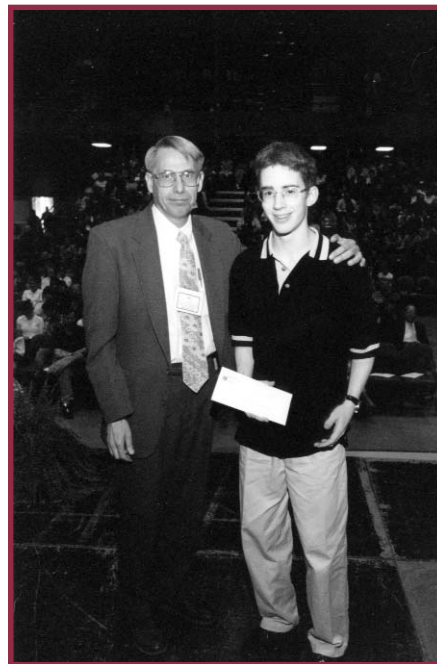
An examination of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* reveals that the quote is at best suspicious. The phrase "singleness of purpose" is found only in Lincoln's eulogy of

Zachary Taylor. In it, Lincoln said: "The fruits of his [Taylor's] labor, his name, his memory and example, are all that is left us—his example, verifying the great truth, that 'he that humbleth himself, shall be exalted' teaching, that to serve one's county with a singleness of purpose, gives assurance of that country's gratitude, secures its best honors, and makes 'a dying bed, soft as downy pillows are.'" Moreover, this is the only time that Lincoln used the word "singleness" in any of his writings. A careful study of Fehrenbacher's *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* produces empty results.

First Abraham Lincoln Association Award Presented at the 2002 Illinois History Expo

Recent news reports once again show that high school students are woefully ignorant of basic historical facts. The Abraham Lincoln Association has often grappled with the best way to encourage the study of Lincoln and his times among students of all ages. The Website of the Lincoln Legal Papers (<http://www.lincolnlegalpapers.org/>) now offers teacher curriculum materials (funded in part by the Association) so that teachers can incorporate the documents into their lesson plans. Another initiative is to provide awards to students using Lincoln as their topic in the Illinois history fairs. The Association Board of Directors approved establishing two \$500 prizes for the best essay and the best media project on Abraham Lincoln presented at the Illinois History Expo, a statewide competition of middle and high school history students. Many of those receiving superior ratings at the Expo advance to the National History Day competition in Washington, D.C. The winner of this year's essay competition is Daniel Willis, a student at University High School in Normal, Illinois. His teacher is Peggy Scott who spent countless hours of her own time to work with Daniel and other students, preparing them for the Expo. The Association extends its congratulations to both Daniel and Ms. Scott for their outstanding efforts. When asked how he came to write about the topic of his paper, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Daniel provided the following: "Initially, I did not intend to write my paper on the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. After I rejected perhaps a dozen topics, a friend suggested the debates, which sounded like an excellent idea. Most history textbooks

cannot devote space to the actual transcripts of the debates, beyond a few telling quotes, so I was curious about their content.



*Dr. Keith Sculle (l) presents the
Abraham Lincoln Association Award
to Daniel Willis.*

The most significant thing I learned was probably not any single fact or group of facts, although I found out a great many things about Lincoln, and Douglas, as well, that I did not know previously. What made the largest impression me was the way that Lincoln and Douglas debated—the language they used, the arguments they made, the way they behaved. The newspaper accounts of the debates taught me more about who these men really were, and about life in general just before the Civil War, than any textbook ever could. I was surprised to

discover the extent to which Lincoln was a man of his era. He was a man of principle, to be sure, but he was capable of compromise with those who opposed him. His rare blending of political finesse and moral principle, his understanding of the opposition's concerns, his humor—in sum, his awareness of the emotional currents of his day—made him a more effective spokesperson than he would have been if he was the unidimensional man most people revere.

I was born in 1985 in Cincinnati, Ohio. I moved to Illinois in 1995 and attended Parkside Junior High School before going to University High in 1999. I am a member of the chess team, and I enjoy volunteering at chess events and at the Children's Discovery Museum. I like to travel, especially if it provides a chance to use the French language. My primary academic interests, besides history, are chemistry, math, French, and literature."

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photographs are courtesy of the
Illinois State Historical Library,
Springfield

For the People (ISSN 1527-2710) is
published four times a year and is a
benefit of membership of the
Abraham Lincoln Association
1 Old State Capitol Plaza
Springfield, Illinois
62701

Newsletter design and layout
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antislavery factions turned to violence to influence the vote. Proslavery raiders attacked the abolitionist settlement of Lawrence, burning part of it.

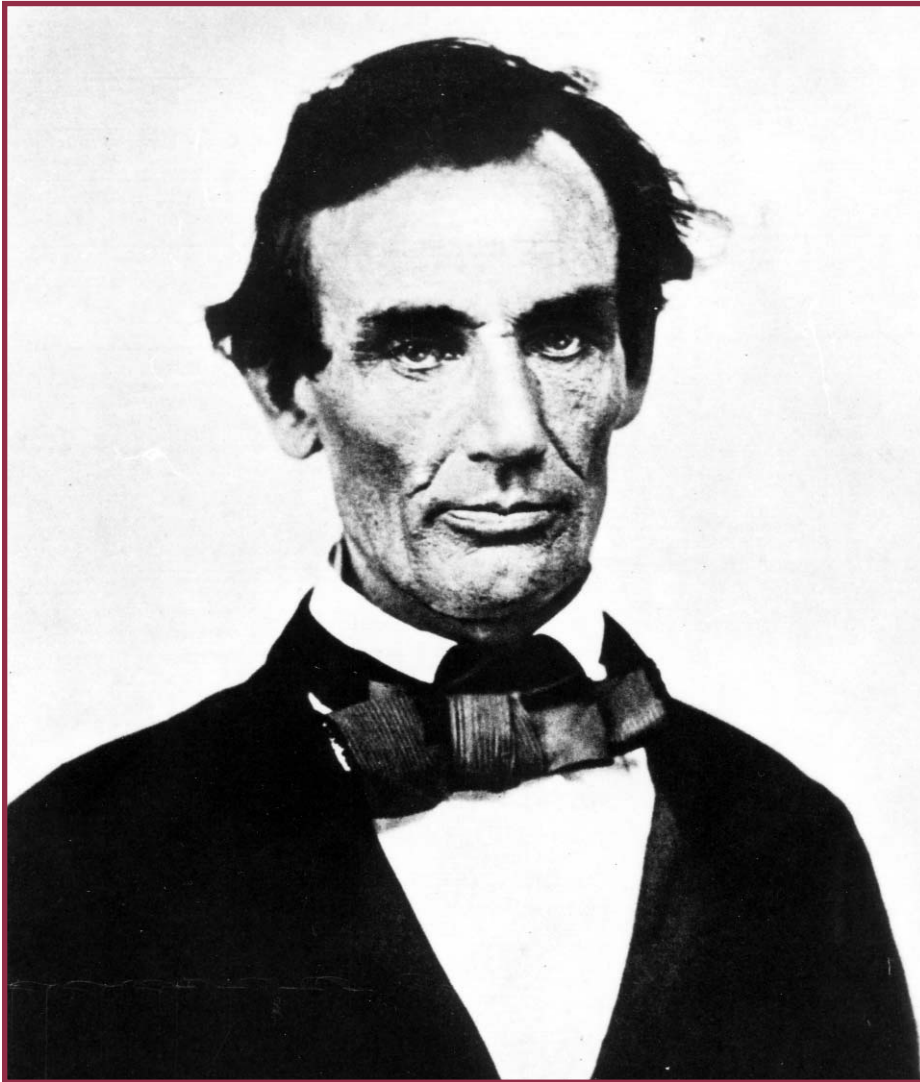
region thus became known as “Bleeding Kansas.” In the end, proslavery supporters were able to take control and set up a capital at Lecompton, where they produced a

rather than voting on the constitution as a whole. A provision elsewhere in the document provided for the protection of slavery in either case.⁷ Disgusted by this maneuver, the anti-slavery voters boycotted the polls. The constitution passed easily “with slavery” and went to the United States Congress for acceptance. Douglas, now asked to vote to ratify the constitution that was the end result of his plan, was enraged by this corruption of his ideals and reversed himself, leading a successful effort to vote it down.

Against this political backdrop, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates began in Springfield, Illinois, on the twenty-first of August 1858. Douglas, the Little Giant, came to Springfield for the first of seven debates with the “first and only choice” of the Republican party.⁸ That man, of course, was Abraham Lincoln. The format of the debates was such that Douglas would speak for an hour, then Lincoln for an hour and a half, and then Douglas for half an hour. Each subsequent contest would have them exchange speaking order.

The eyes of the nation were upon the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. In the words of the *New York Times*, Illinois is from this time forward, until the senatorial question shall be decided, “the most interesting political battleground in the Union.”⁹ The country wanted to know how the issues, each represented by a worthy man, would be set forth, weighed, and decided. Despite this attention, however, the two men did not deal exclusively with the weighty matters concerning Washington and New York. Much time was spent on more mundane subjects—arguments on the characters of the candidates themselves rather than their respective ideologies. Douglas, for example, accused Lincoln of conspiring with Republican leaders to take

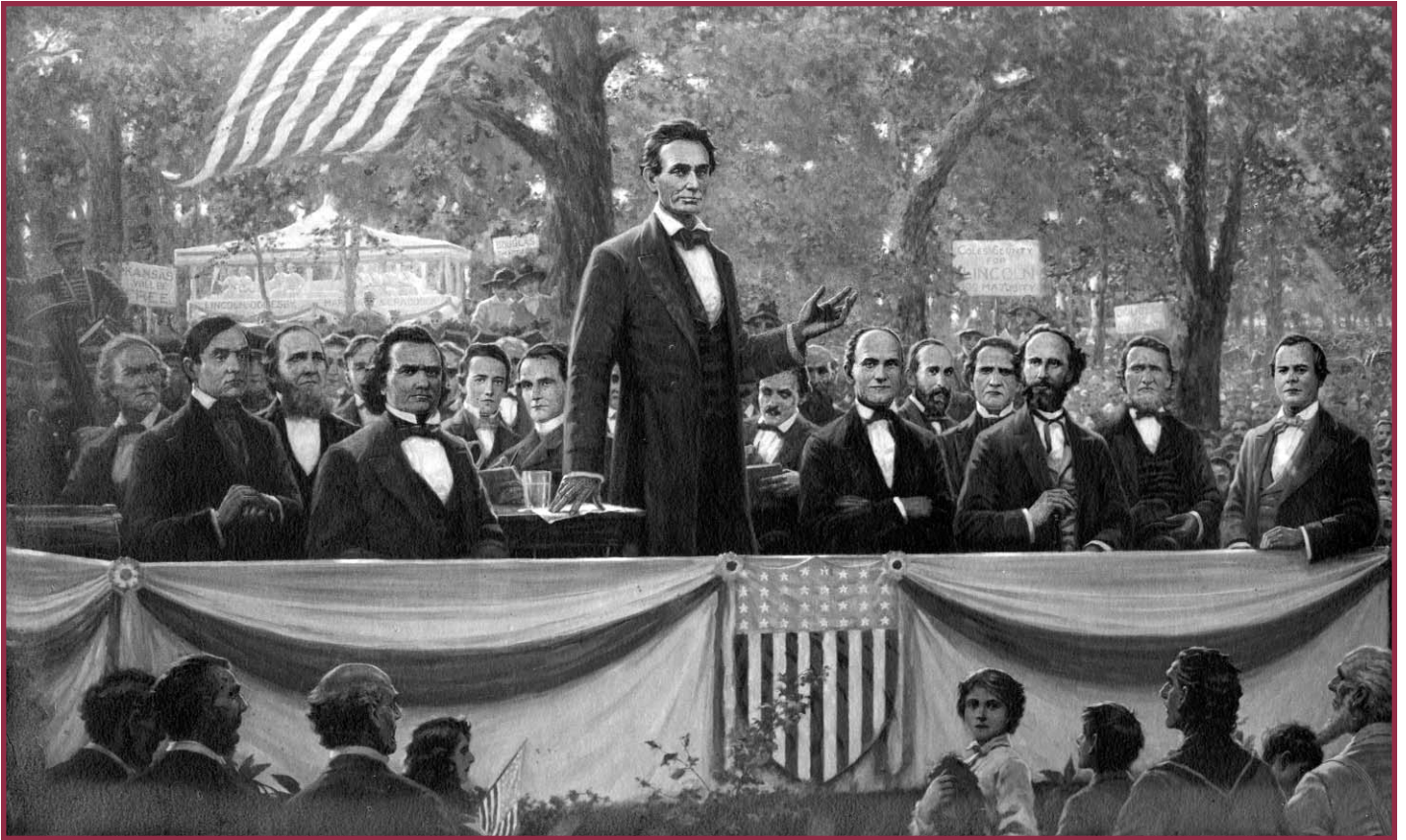
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Photographer Calvin Jackson took this image of Lincoln in Pittsfield, Illinois, on October 1, 1858, during the period of the Lincoln-Douglas debate cycle.

The retaliation was led by the fanatic abolitionist John Brown. He and his followers hacked five proslavery men to pieces with broadswords at Potawatomie Creek in 1856. The

state constitution. Contrary to the idea of popular sovereignty, the cunning Lecompton men allowed residents to vote only on whether the constitution would be with or without slavery,



Robert Marshall Root's artistic conception of the Lincoln-Douglas debate at Charleston, Illinois

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over Douglas's seat in the Senate, and Lincoln and Douglas both accused each other of leveling improbable conspiracy charges at third parties.¹⁰

The heart and soul of the debates, though, is that portion that deals with the issue of slavery. Lincoln was, of course, running on the Republican platform, which stated the party's quite liberal goals. One of Douglas's first thrusts was to read that antislavery platform, which he did to cheering from the Republicans in the crowd. Having finished he stated: "Now, gentlemen, your Black Republicans have cheered every one of those propositions, . . . and yet I venture to say that you cannot get Mr. Lincoln to come out and say that he is now in favor of each one of them."¹¹ Douglas was cor-

rect. Lincoln would not endorse every one of the tenants of the Republican party.

It might surprise modern readers to find the Great Emancipator saying, as he did in the first debate, "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, and I have no inclination to do so. I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races."¹² However, only several breaths later, Lincoln said: "But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his [the black man's] own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.*"¹³ This last statement is somewhat more in charac-

ter for Lincoln. The reason for the inconsistency is that Lincoln was tied to a double standard. If he professed to be wholeheartedly dedicated to the principle of universal abolition, he would alienate a large part of the populace, and he would be defeated for election. On the other hand, if he should disavow any association with the Republican ideals, his party would cast him out. Either he should be made powerless by not being elected, or he might be elected and given no power. Thus, his speech was crafted so that any listener could hear what he wanted.

Douglas also included in his opening speech an attack on Lincoln's famous House Divided speech. Douglas knew that the phrase was being repeated across the country, and

he wanted to use its “all or nothing” stance to damage Lincoln’s credibility. The portion that Douglas read from Lincoln’s earlier speech is as follows: “In my opinion it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this Government *cannot endure permanently half Slave and half Free*. I do not expect 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 till it shall become alike lawful in all the States*—old as well as new, North as well as South.”¹⁴

Douglas calls Lincoln’s remarks “revolutionary and destructive of the existence of this Government.”¹⁵ Lincoln responded later, asking whether Douglas disagreed with the house-divided proverb (a Biblical quotation). The difficulty in this subject for Lincoln is his obligation to sound like a moderate, since his speech was somewhat inflammatory. The difficulty in this subject for Douglas is that he could not directly contradict Lincoln without contradicting the Bible, which would be fatal. Douglas’s approach to this issue was to accuse Lincoln of abandoning the principles on which

the country was founded. Douglas said: “Mr. Lincoln, in the extract from which I have read, says that this Government cannot endure permanently in the same condition in which it was made by its framers—divided into free and slave States.”¹⁶ Douglas then accused him of attempting to force the laws of all the states into conformance. Lincoln denied the charges, saying, “It never occurred to me that I was doing anything or favoring anything to reduce to a dead uniformity all the local institutions of the various States.”¹⁷ He deflected the charge with humor, saying that one would be as likely to force Northerners to grow sugar cane, or prairie farmers to log where there are no forests just because that is the livelihood of those living in Maine.¹⁸

Despite Lincoln’s attempt to win over the voters, however, Douglas held him off for reelection. Both men displayed intelligence, humor, and a willingness to grapple with both important and lesser political issues. Lincoln had tried to downplay his moral principles and those of his party in relationship to the issue of slavery because to do otherwise would have been impolitic. Nonetheless, the people of Illinois saw in Lincoln’s House Divided speech the grim specter of a greater rift to come. The situation in Kansas seemed to indicate that the Southerners would indeed fight to protect and nurture their peculiar insti-

tution, and Illinoisans of the day did not love the slave so much as to jump at the chance to die for him. They heard the Republican idea of the complete abolition of slavery, even as Lincoln denied that was his aim. Although Lincoln tried to keep abolition off center stage, it was a tremendously powerful idea; its presence caused many of the voters to shun him. Just as Douglas desired to be seen as the spokesman for popular sovereignty, Lincoln was identified as the man most willing to be associated with abolition.

Interestingly enough, when war did come—when South Carolina did secede, it was out of fear of what Lincoln might do.¹⁹ In 1860, Lincoln and Douglas were pitted against each other once again, this time for the presidency. South Carolina vowed to secede if the “abolitionist” Lincoln was elected. He was, and it did, and several other states followed shortly thereafter. All of this came to pass despite Lincoln’s claims that he did not favor the outright abolition of all slavery, only the arrest of its spread.

Two years after the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, things had changed. In the first contest of popular sovereignty against the possibility of abolition, Douglas won. However, in their second trial, Lincoln was elected. Once he was elected president, the southern states’ perception of him as an aboli-

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APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

Please enroll me as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Association in the category indicated:

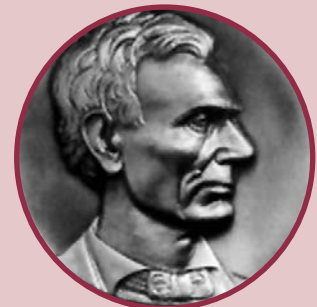
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tionist meant popular sovereignty was doomed and compromise was dead. Reform and revolution were inevitable. There was little or no hope that either side could be expected to engage in any give and take other than that of bullets.

Looking back on these events, Lincoln wrote in a letter to Albert G. Hodges, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."²⁰ While this may be an unnecessarily humble expression of his remarkable achievements up to that date, it is also true to a surprising degree. Lincoln set out to be a politician, and he is surely among our best, but he did not set out to abolish slavery. It was not against his personal beliefs to do so, but it was not his aim initially. He was so intimately connected with this view in the public perception, that even his public disavowal of this intention did not change people's opinion. Perhaps it was that the idea itself had such undeniable power. The strong moral force of abolitionism was so great that

despite all Lincoln said to the contrary, a few ties between him and the ideas bound him to them inextricably in the public mind. Douglas died during the war and Lincoln was assassinated shortly after its conclusion. In this way, the two men truly embodied the conflict between their principles: with the end of the struggle between their ideas, Lincoln and Douglas ended as well.

¹David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon, 1995), 133.

²Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860* (New York: Harper, 1960), 249.

³Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858: Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), 504.

⁴*Ibid.*, 506.

⁵Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 666.

⁶*American Experience*, "Partisan Politics," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/>

[amex/lincolns/politics/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/lincolns/politics/index.html), Feb. 5, 2002.

⁷Thomas A. Bailey et al., *The American Pageant*, 11th ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1998), 423.

⁸Johannsen, 640.

⁹Donald, 214.

¹⁰Lincoln, 548, 572, 594.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 498.

¹²*Ibid.*, 512.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 502.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 502-3.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 503.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 515.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 515-16.

¹⁹Phillip B. Kunhardt, Jr., et al., *Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 133.

²⁰Donald, 15.

*Daniel Willis is a student at University High School in Normal, Illinois, and is this year's essay winner of the Abraham Lincoln Association's award at the Illinois History Expo.

More on Willis and the award can be found on page 4.

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