

Two Viewpoints on Slavery (1858)

Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas

By mid-19th century, the fight over slavery had heated up. Proslavery and antislavery forces were pitted against each other in fierce debate and, sometimes, in bloody combat. Opposing stands on slavery had split the Democratic party. Those Democrats in favor of abolition and those who simply opposed the extension of slavery into new territories came together in 1854 to form a new party—the Republican party.

One of the men who gained an important place in the new party was Abraham Lincoln. In 1858, the Illinois State Republican Convention nominated him to run against Stephen A. Douglas for the U.S. Senate seat. (Douglas, a Democrat, was the incumbent.) In excerpt A, Lincoln on June 17 clearly stated his views on the future of the United States. The “policy” Lincoln referred to in this speech is the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. It allowed the people of those two territories to decide for themselves if they wanted to establish free or slave states.

In the summer of 1858, Lincoln and Douglas met in a series of debates. In one of them, Lincoln asked Douglas if he supported popular sovereignty or the Dred Scott decision. *Popular sovereignty* meant the right of people to decide for themselves if slavery should be established in their territory. Douglas personally supported the idea. However, the Democratic party supported the Dred Scott decision. In this 1857 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court had stated that enslaved persons were property. The right of their masters to retain them as property was protected by law in both the states and the territories. The so-called “Freeport Doctrine” (excerpt B) was Douglas’s response to Lincoln’s question. The debate took place at Freeport, Illinois, on August 27, 1858. The police regulations that Douglas talks about are state slave codes, laws that restricted the rights of African Americans.

Douglas won reelection to the Senate. But Lincoln gained a national reputation because the debate had made his ideas

generally known. Douglas’s answer supporting popular sovereignty came back to haunt him when the two met as opposing candidates in the presidential election of 1860. Southern Democrats distrusted him and supported a third party candidate. In the end, Lincoln won the presidency.

A. “House Divided” Speech, June 17, 1858

Abraham Lincoln

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Convention: If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending [going], we could better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed [declared] object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented [increased]. 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 [stop] the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is the course of ultimate extinction [dying out], 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. . . .

B. “Freeport Doctrine,” August 27, 1858

Stephen A. Douglas

. . . Can the people of a Territory in any lawful way, against the wishes of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State constitution? I answer emphatically, . . . that in my opinion the people of a Territory can, by lawful means, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State constitution. Mr. Lincoln knew that I had answered that question over and over again. He heard me argue the Nebraska

Bill on that principle all over the State in 1854, in 1855, and in 1856. . . . It matters not what way the Supreme Court may hereafter decide as to the abstract question whether slavery may or may not go into a Territory under the Constitution, the people have the lawful means to introduce it or exclude it as they please, for the reason that slavery cannot exist a day or an hour anywhere, unless it is supported by local police regulations. Those police regulations can only be established by the local legislature; and if the people are opposed to slavery, they will elect representatives to that body who will by unfriendly legislation effectually prevent the introduction of it into their midst. If, on the contrary, they are for it, their legislation will favor its extension. Hence, no matter what the decision of the Supreme Court may be on that abstract question, still the right of the people to make a slave Territory or a free Territory is perfect and complete under the Nebraska Bill. . . .

Review Questions

1. How did the issue of slavery affect the Democratic party?
2. Define the term *popular sovereignty*.
3. According to his speech, what two outcomes did Abraham Lincoln predict would happen regarding slavery in the United States?
4. According to his speech, how did Stephen A. Douglas suggest that popular sovereignty be accomplished in spite of the Dred Scott decision?
5. (a) On what key points did Lincoln and Douglas differ? (b) If you had been living at the time, with which man would you have been in most agreement? Explain your answer.
6. How did the Lincoln-Douglas debates impact the 1860 presidential elections?
7. Do you think that the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 showed that the slavery controversy could no longer be resolved in a peaceful way? Why or why not?
8. How did the concept of “democracy” fuel the fire that led to the Civil War?