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## Abraham Lincoln on Slavery and Freedom 1858–1860

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*Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) rose from humble origins to become a successful lawyer and politician in Illinois. As a member of the Whig party, he served in the Illinois legislature and in the U.S. House of Representatives during the 1830s and 1840s. In Congress, he opposed the war with Mexico, arguing that President Polk had sent American troops onto soil that “was not ours.” He declined to run for reelection to Congress in 1850, and resumed practicing the law; however, the 1854 passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened the Kansas and Nebraska territories to slavery on the basis of “popular sovereignty,” drew Lincoln back into politics. After affiliating himself with the new Republican party in 1856, he ran for the U.S. Senate for Illinois in 1858, losing the election (in the Illinois legislature) to Democrat Stephen Douglas but acquiring a national reputation. Two years later he faced Douglas again, this time for the presidency, and defeated the divided Democratic party (as well as the neutral “Constitutional Union” party). His victory without any electoral votes from the South triggered the secession crisis and Civil War. The excerpts below come from Lincoln’s speeches between 1858 and 1860, when Lincoln was running for the Senate and presidency. —D. Voelker*

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[1] *June 17, 1858 (Springfield, Illinois)*

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.” I believe that 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.

Have we no tendency to the latter condition? Let any one who doubts, carefully contemplate that now almost complete legal combination—piece of machinery, so to speak—compounded of the Nebraska doctrine [of popular sovereignty] and the Dred Scott decision.

[2] *July 10, 1858 (Chicago, Illinois)*

We are now a mighty nation: we are thirty, or about thirty, millions of people, and we own and inhabit about one-fifteenth part of the dry land of the whole earth. We run our memory back over the pages of history for about eighty-two years, and we discover that we were then a very small people in point of numbers, vastly inferior to what we are now, with a vastly less extent of country, with vastly less of everything we deem desirable among men. We look upon the change as exceedingly advantageous to us and to our posterity, and we fix upon something that happened away back, as in some way or other being connected with this rise of prosperity. We find a race of men living in that day whom we claim as our fathers and grandfathers; they were iron men; they fought for the principle that they were contending for, and we understood that by what they then did it has followed that the degree of prosperity that we now enjoy has come to us. We hold this annual celebration [of Independence Day] to remind ourselves of all the good done in this process of time,—of how it was done, and who did it, and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves,—we feel more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit. . . .

But after we have done all this we have not yet reached the whole. There is something else connected with it. We have besides these men—descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men; they are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French, and Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none: they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us; but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the men who wrote that Declaration; and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together; that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.

[3] *August 21, 1858 (Ottawa, Illinois)*

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 for ever 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 favour 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. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas, he is not my equal in many respects, certainly not in colour, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody, which his own hand earns, he is my equal, and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of any living man. . . .

Henry Clay, my beau ideal of a statesman, once said of a class of men who would repress all tendencies to liberty and ultimate emancipation, that they must, if they would do this, go back to the era of our independence, and muzzle the cannon that thunders its annual joyous return; that they must blow out the moral lights around us; they must penetrate the human soul, and eradicate there the love of liberty; and then, and not till then, could they perpetuate slavery in this country! To my thinking, Judge Douglas is, by his example and vast influence, doing that very thing in this community when he says that the negro has nothing in the Declaration of Independence. Henry Clay plainly understood the contrary. Judge Douglas is going back to the era of our Revolution, and, to the extent of his ability, muzzling the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. When he invites any people, willing to have slavery, to establish it, he is blowing out the moral lights around us. When he says he “cares not whether slavery is voted down or voted up,”—that it is a sacred right of self-government,—he is, in my judgment, penetrating the human soul and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty in this American people. And now I will only say, that when, by all these means and appliances, Judge Douglas shall succeed in bringing public sentiment to an exact accordance with his own views; when these vast assemblages shall echo back all these sentiments; when they shall come to repeat his views and avow his principles, and to say all that he says on these mighty questions,—then it

needs only the formality of a second Dred Scott decision, which he indorses in advance, to make slavery alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South.

[4] *September 16, 1859 (Columbus, Ohio)*

The Republican party, as I understand its principles and policy, believes that there is great danger of the institution of slavery being spread out and extended, until it is ultimately made alike lawful in all the States of this Union; so believing, to prevent that incidental and ultimate consummation is the original and chief purpose of the Republican organization.

[5] *February 27, 1860 (Cooper Institute, New York)*

Wrong as we think slavery is, we can yet afford to let it alone where it is, because that much is due to the necessity arising from its actual presence in the nation; but can we, while our votes will prevent it, allow it to spread into the national Territories, and to overrun us here in these free States?

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What did Lincoln mean with his famous assertion that “A house divided against itself cannot stand”? How might the advocates of slavery responded to this claim?
2. In what sense, according to Lincoln, was the Declaration of Independence an “electric cord”?
3. What did Lincoln hope that American politicians would do regarding slavery?
4. How did Lincoln seem to differ with Stephen Douglass on the question of race?

SOURCE: *Speeches and Letters by Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Merwin Roe (New York: Dutton, 1907), 69, 92-3, 135, 155.



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