



STEPHEN DOUGLAS

and the Politics of Slavery

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PRIMARY SOURCE

The Lincoln/Douglas Debates

One of the most famous events of Stephen Douglas's life was his series of debates with Abraham Lincoln during their run for the Senate in 1858. The controversial Dred Scott decision of 1856 was a hot topic. In that case, the Supreme Court ruled that blacks were not citizens and could not benefit from the rights of citizenship. In their first debate, held on August 21, 1858, each candidate revealed his opinions on the matter of race.

ACTIVITY

After reading the excerpt from their debate, write a paragraph explaining how Lincoln's and Douglas's views about blacks were alike, and how they were different. Discuss as a class.

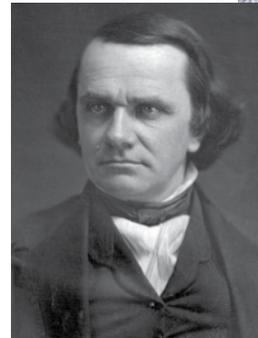
Douglas: ...I am opposed to negro citizenship in any and every form. I believe this Government was made on the white basis. I believe it was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity for ever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men, men of European birth and descent, instead

of conferring it upon negroes, Indians, and other inferior races.

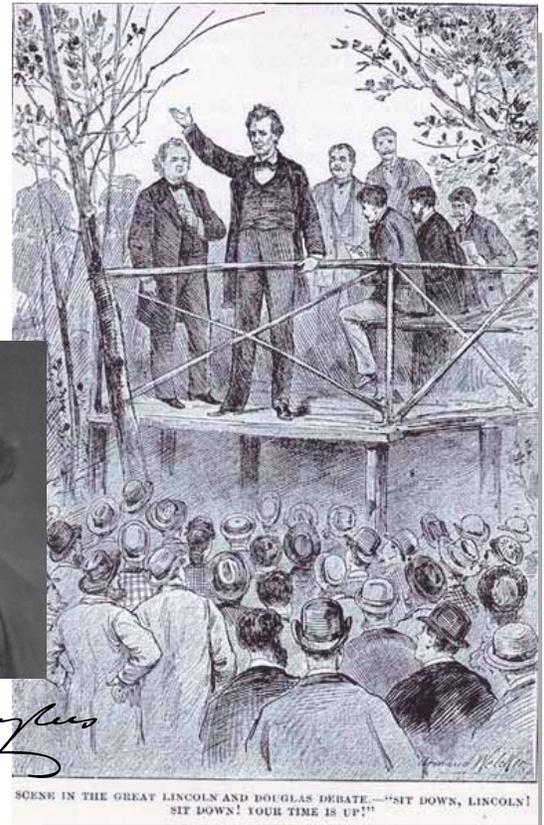
Lincoln's reply shows that his own ideas on race were still developing.

Lincoln: 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 the black races... 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 ... But in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.

Editorial cartoon from the period, illustrating a pro-Douglas bias of the Debates. Photo and cartoon Public domain.



Stephen A. Douglas



SCENE IN THE GREAT LINCOLN AND DOUGLAS DEBATE.—"SIT DOWN, LINCOLN! SIT DOWN! YOUR TIME IS UP!"

COMPREHENSION/ CRITICAL THINKING

1. Why were Americans so concerned about the ratio of free states to slave states in the years leading up to the Civil War?
2. What was the Fugitive Slave Law and why was it enacted?
3. Why had the Democratic Party split into two factions by the 1860 election?
4. What was Lincoln's position on slavery at the beginning of the Civil War?
5. How did the Kansas-Nebraska Act set off a border war between Missouri and Kansas?

VOCABULARY

Place the letter of the vocabulary word on the line next to its definition. Write a sentence using each word.

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|------------------------|-----------|---|
| A. Concessions | _____ 1. | A war fought between U.S. citizens divided by Northern and Southern interests |
| B. Republican Party | _____ 2. | The political party that split for the elections of 1860 |
| C. Secede | _____ 3. | Stirring of great argument or debate |
| D. Democratic Party | _____ 4. | A settlement in which opposing sides give up demands or make concessions |
| E. Civil War | _____ 5. | Actions or items given in compromise |
| F. Obligated | _____ 6. | Process by which government representatives make decisions |
| G. Rival | _____ 7. | The ability of a territory to vote on whether it would be slave or free |
| H. Protest | _____ 8. | The political party that opposed the spread of slavery |
| I. Abolish | _____ 9. | A challenger, foe, or competitor |
| J. Popular sovereignty | _____ 10. | To break away or separate from |
| K. Compromise | _____ 11. | To speak out or demonstrate against |
| L. Politics | _____ 12. | Responsible for doing something |
| M. Controversial | _____ 13. | To ban or get rid of |

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Research each of the following items to discover its relationship to the growing dispute over slavery that eventually led to the Civil War.

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|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| ■ The Missouri Compromise | ■ The Kansas-Nebraska Act |
| ■ The Wilmot Proviso | ■ Bleeding Kansas |
| ■ The Compromise of 1850 | ■ The Dred Scott Case |
| ■ The Fugitive Slave Law | ■ The Lincoln/Douglas Debates |
| ■ "Uncle Tom's Cabin" | ■ John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry |

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