

Primary Source:

First Debate for the Illinois Senate between
Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, Ottawa,
Illinois, August 21, 1858

- I can explain the significance of major events in the debate over slavery from 1820 to 1858.
- I can explain the cause and effect of events leading up to the Civil War.
- I can summarize the main ideas of historic texts.
- I can create an argument supported by evidence from primary sources.

Building Context

Senator Stephen Douglas (Democrat-Illinois), the mastermind behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act and proponent of the “popular sovereignty” doctrine, was challenged for his seat in the Senate by Republican Abraham Lincoln. In this first debate between the two candidates, Lincoln and Douglas spoke for over three hours about slavery and the principles that held together the Union. Between 10-12,000 people attended the debate, as newspaper reporters anxiously sought to capture what the men said. In this way, Lincoln and Douglas’s debate gathered an audience beyond Illinois and was of interest to people across the country. Lincoln ultimately lost the Senate seat to Douglas but would run as the Republican candidate for president in 1860.

Source: <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/debate1.htm>

Douglas

“[The Founders] knew when they framed the Constitution that in a country as wide and broad as this... the people necessarily required different laws and institutions in different localities. They knew that the laws and regulations which would suit the granite hills of New Hampshire would be unsuited to the rice plantations of South Carolina, and they therefore provided that each State should retain its own Legislature and **sovereignty**, with the full and complete power to do as it pleased within its own limits, in all that was local and not national. One of the reserved rights of the States was the right to

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regulate the relations between master and servant, on the slavery question....

...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.

Mr. Lincoln, following the example and lead of all the little Abolition orators, who go around and lecture in the basements of schools and churches, reads from the Declaration of Independence, that all men were created equal, and then asks, how can you deprive a negro of that equality which God and the Declaration of Independence awards to him? He and they maintain that negro equality is guaranteed by the laws of God, and that it is asserted in the Declaration of Independence. If they think so, of course they have a right to say so, and so vote. I do not question Mr. Lincoln's conscientious belief that the negro was made his equal, and hence is his brother, but for my own part, I do not regard the negro as my equal, and positively deny that he is my brother or any kin to me whatever... He holds that the negro was born his equal and yours, and that he was endowed with equality by the Almighty, and that no human law can deprive him of these rights which were guaranteed to him by the Supreme ruler of the Universe. Now, I do not believe that the Almighty ever intended the negro to be the equal of the white man. If he did, he has been a long time demonstrating the fact. For thousands of years the negro has been a race upon the earth, and during all that time, in all latitudes and climates, wherever he has wandered or been taken, he has been inferior to the race which he has there met. He belongs to an inferior race, and must always occupy an inferior position. I do not hold that because the negro is our inferior that therefore he ought to be a slave. By no means can such a conclusion be drawn from what I have said. On the contrary, I hold that humanity and Christianity both require that the negro shall have and enjoy every right, every privilege, and

every **immunity** consistent with the safety of the society in which he lives. On that point, I presume, there can be no diversity of opinion. You and I are bound to extend to our inferior and dependent beings every right, every privilege, every facility and immunity consistent with the public good. The question then arises, what rights and privileges are consistent with the public good? This is a question which each State and each Territory must decide for itself...

Scaffolding Questions

1. In the first paragraph, what is Douglas's view of the Founders's vision for how laws should be made, particularly those regarding slavery?

2. What does Douglas mean when he says the government was formed on the "white basis?"

3. How does Douglas summarize Lincoln's argument regarding slavery in the beginning of the third paragraph?

4. What are Douglas's ideas regarding the Declaration of Independence and African Americans?

5. Did Douglas reject slavery?

Lincoln

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 color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. 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

... I leave it to you to say whether, in the history of our Government, this institution of slavery has not always failed to be a bond of union, and, on the contrary, been an apple of discord, and an element of division in the house. I ask you to consider whether, so long as the moral constitution of men's minds shall continue to be the same, after this generation and assemblage shall sink into the grave, and another race shall arise, with the same moral and intellectual development we have—whether, if that institution is standing in the same irritating position in which it now is, it will not continue an element of division? If so, then I have a right to say

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that, in regard to this question, the Union is a house divided against itself; and when the Judge reminds me that I have often said to him that the institution of slavery has existed for eighty years in some States, and yet it does not exist in some others, I agree to the fact, and I account for it by looking at the position in which our fathers originally placed it-restricting it from the new Territories where it had not gone, and legislating to cut off its source by the abrogation of the slave-trade thus putting the seal of legislation against its spread. The public mind did rest in the belief that it was in the course of ultimate extinction...

...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...

Scaffolding Questions

1. How did Lincoln's interpretation of the Declaration of Independence differ from Douglas's?

2. Why does Lincoln describe slavery as "an apple of discord"?

3. Did Lincoln believe the Constitution was a pro-slavery document?

4. What analogy did Lincoln use to compare Douglas's views on slavery?