

Interpretation

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Discussion

The Speech That Changed the World

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Of all Lincoln's speeches, whether greater or lesser, the only one that can be said truly to have changed the course of history was delivered to the Republican State Convention in Springfield, Illinois, June 16, 1858.

The utterances that have come down to us, graven in bronze and in stone, like the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, are profound meditations on human experience. In the midst of the horrors of destruction and death, and amid the turmoil of the passions of war, they are designed to reconcile us to our fate by discerning the hand of God in events that might otherwise seem merely chaotic. Although these speeches arise out of particular events at particular times, they draw back the curtain of eternity and allow us, as time-bound mortals, to glimpse a divine purpose within a sorrow-filled present, and tell us how our lives, however brief, can nonetheless serve a deathless end.

The House Divided speech, however, was—perhaps more than any political address of the time—a causal agent in bringing about the terrible events over which Lincoln was destined to preside. Its theme is expressed in the biblical admonition that “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” In it Lincoln declared that he believed that

this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*.

He said that he did not expect the Union to be dissolved, or the house to fall, but he did expect it to become all one thing or all another. Slavery might become lawful in all the states, North as well as South, or slavery might be so placed that

the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction.

A point of decision had been reached, however, one path or the other would have to be followed, because no middle ground existed any longer. That was Lincoln's message. The reason it *was* Lincoln's message was that Stephen A. Douglas, and his doctrine of popular sovereignty, seemed to offer that very middle ground whose existence Lincoln denied, a middle ground that influential Republicans were finding increasingly attractive. The House Divided

speech was intended to destroy any credibility that it might have had in their minds.

The South knew very little about the Lincoln who became President-elect in 1860. What it did know, however, was that his policy aimed uncompromisingly at the “ultimate extinction” of slavery. No protestation on his part that he had no intention whatever to interfere with slavery in the slave states could counteract the impression left by the call for “ultimate extinction” in the House Divided speech. From the point of view of the South, there was little reassurance in Lincoln’s “non-intervention” policy. Suppose that the slave states were to be surrounded by an ever-more-powerful cordon of free states. Suppose a burgeoning slave population, many of whom could not be employed—or sold—outside the existing limits of slavery. Suppose, in short, that slavery was to be strangled where it was, without external intervention. Or suppose, still further, that the addition of free states would eventually give them a three-fourths majority. This would enable them to pass a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery without the consent of a single slave state. None of Lincoln’s promises never to interfere with slavery in the slave states themselves met these objections. And the South knew that it would never in future possess the same power relative to the North that it did in 1861. From that perspective, it was now or never for Southern independence, if slavery was to be preserved.

Why did Lincoln pose the alternatives of slavery and freedom so uncompromisingly? Throughout the winter and spring of 1856–57, the focus of national attention was upon the struggle on the plains of Kansas. A rump convention of delegates—elected without free-state voters participating—meeting in Lecompton, Kansas, had framed an essentially proslavery constitution and with it had applied for admission to the Union.¹ President Buchanan chose to endorse the action of this convention, with a view to the quick admission of Kansas as a state, and with it an end to all federal responsibility for its “domestic institutions.” There ensued a battle royal, with the free soil forces in the Congress championed by none other than the redoubtable Stephen A. Douglas.

For Douglas, with his incomparable energy and skill, to direct a struggle to prevent Kansas from becoming a slave state represented an almost incredible reversal of political roles. It was Douglas, a mere three years before, in the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, who was principally responsible for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise restriction of slavery in all the remaining Louisiana Territory. In place of the exclusion of slavery, the Kansas-Nebraska Act had declared that it was

the true intent and meaning of this act not to legislate slavery into any Territory or State, nor to exclude it therefrom, but to leave the people perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the Constitution of the United States

This was the famous doctrine of “popular sovereignty.” From the circumstances of its introduction—repealing a longstanding exclusion of slavery—it appeared as a wholly proslavery measure. The manifesto denouncing it became in effect the originating statement of the Republican Party, which was for some time known as the Anti-Nebraska party. Here are some excerpts from the Appeal of the Independent Democrats, January 19, 1854.

At the present session [of Congress] a new Nebraska bill has been reported by the Senate Committee on Territories which, should it unhappily receive the sanction of Congress, will open all the unorganized Territories of the Union to the ingress of slavery.

We arraign this bill as a gross violation of a sacred pledge; as a criminal betrayal of precious rights; as part and parcel of an atrocious plot to exclude from a vast unoccupied region immigrants from the Old World and free laborers from our own States, and convert it into a dreary region of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves.

One can hardly imagine rhetoric more inflammatory, and the arch-criminal who was its chief object was Stephen A. Douglas. Yet by the spring of 1858 Douglas came to be looked upon as the champion of the free soil movement by many who had subscribed to the Appeal. Here is David Potter’s account of how the struggle over Lecompton transformed political loyalties.²

In many respects, this was 1854 all over again. Once again a newly elected president, with all the influence a new president commands, had been induced, because of his southern sympathies, to support a bill that was highly objectionable to the northern members of his own party. Once again, a party revolt followed, leading once again to a pitched political battle, famous in the annals of party warfare

Along with these similarities, there were two important differences. First, Stephen A. Douglas, previously the Senate floor leader for the administration, was now the floor leader for the opposition. The same tireless energy and the same matchless readiness and resourcefulness in debate which had carried Kansas-Nebraska to victory were now devoted to the defeat of Lecompton. Whereas Buchanan could not face the revolt of southerners if he opposed Lecompton, Douglas could not face the hostile response of Illinois and of the North generally if he supported it. Hence Congress presented a new spectacle. Day after day, Douglas voted on the same side with Chase and Wade and the men who had treated him in 1854 as if he were the Antichrist. Stranger bedfellows no one had ever seen, but for a season it was seriously believed that Douglas might become a Republican. Some of the eastern leaders, especially, took up the idea of supporting him and bringing him into the party. Henry Wilson believed Douglas would join the Republicans, and praised him as being “of more weight to our cause than any other ten men in the country.” Horace Greeley, for all his professions of idealism, now declared: “The Republican standard is too high; we want something more practical.” His idea of practicality was to throw Republican support behind Douglas in Washington, and

his *Tribune* began to praise Douglas extravagantly. To the end of his life, he believed that it would have been sound Republican strategy to support Douglas. In Massachusetts, Nathaniel P. Banks urged Illinois Republicans to “sustain” Douglas. In Washington, as early as December 14, Douglas talked with Anson Burlingame and Schuyler Colfax about forming a great new party to oppose southern disunionists.

From Antichrist to Savior in three years! The “season [when] it was seriously believed that Douglas might become a Republican” may, however, have been the gravest of all the crises of the Union. Let us be clear about one thing: if the Illinois Republicans had “sustained” Douglas, Lincoln’s political career would have come abruptly to an end. Had the Republican standard been lowered as Greeley desired, the contest between Lincoln and Douglas in 1858 would not have taken place.³ The Declaration of Independence, in any true meaning of its terms as the “sheet anchor of American republicanism,” would have been abandoned. There would have been no Gettysburg Address, or anything like it, to memorialize the Founding in the minds of American citizens. Lincoln’s argument that the rights of white men could not be secure as long as the rights of black men were not recognized would have been lost. The essence of “pop sov” is revealed in this passage from the joint debate at Alton:

We in Illinois . . . tried slavery, kept it up for twelve years, and finding that it was not profitable we abolished it for that reason.

Clearly, whenever and wherever slavery was found profitable, there were no moral inhibitions against it, from Douglas’s point of view. As he never tired of saying, he didn’t care whether slavery was voted up or down, he cared only for the sacred right of the people to make that decision. Why the right of the people should have been sacred, if the results of the exercise of that right were indifferent, Douglas never undertook to say.

As a “practical” matter, “pop sov” may have been sufficient for opposing slavery in Kansas, but that by no means represented the whole of the slavery extension threat. It should be remembered that Douglas was a fanatical advocate of “manifest destiny,” with no scruples whatever about subjugating foreign lands inhabited by “inferior races.” It must be remembered how Texas had been added to the United States. Americans had migrated to Mexico, staged a successful revolution against the government that had invited them, and became independent. Subsequently Texas was annexed—as a slave state—to the United States.⁴ Then Texas’s boundary dispute with Mexico became the quarrel of the United States, with the end result being the annexation of California and the rest of the American southwest, an addition of approximately 40 per cent to the land area of the United States. There was nothing remaining of Mexico—or of the rest of Latin America—that might not have been acquired by similar means.⁵ Certainly Mexican peonage might have been combined with American

slavery to produce the necessary instruments for racial domination. It should also be recalled that California became a free state largely because Chinese labor was found cheaper and more efficient than slave labor. But the conditions under which the “coolies” labored were in many respects hard to distinguish from slavery. It must also be recalled that the Ostend manifesto—signed by James Buchanan among others—calling for the acquisition of Cuba, either by purchase or by force, was issued in the same year as the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Cuba, with its large black population, would certainly have become a slave state (long before Fidel Castro!) as well no doubt as a supplier of slaves to the older states and newer territories.

No one who knows anything of Douglas’s political ambition and political resourcefulness can doubt that any merger of his political following with the Republicans would have ended with the Republicans being the tail of the dog. Seward’s “Irrepressible Conflict” speech was the most radical antislavery speech by a Republican leader until Lincoln’s House Divided speech. Lowering the Republican standard to accommodate Douglas would have lowered Seward’s place along with Lincoln’s in the leadership of the party. How could the Republicans have closed ranks behind Douglas in 1858 without doing the same in the greater contest of 1860? Douglas and Lincoln became rivals for the presidency in 1860 only because of their contest in Illinois in 1858. Had that contest not taken place, Lincoln’s path to the presidency would have been closed, and Douglas’s made smooth.

Had Douglas not been opposed by Lincoln in 1858, it is difficult to forecast exactly what the party alignment would have been in 1860. One thing may be taken as certain, however: returned to the Senate, and with his free soil opposition effectively neutralized, Douglas would, with a view to 1860, have turned to rebuilding his support in the South. Just as he had persuaded Horace Greeley that “pop sov” was good enough to make Kansas a free state, so he would have persuaded Greeley’s opposite numbers in the South that “pop sov” was good enough to add Cuba and the rest of Latin America to the Union as slave states. The Republicans would discover—only too late—that Douglas had given a renewed vitality to the expansion of slavery. He would in fact have given a vitality to slavery expansion that no other political leader of the time could have done. For Lincoln, Douglas was always the most dangerous of his political opponents, as evidenced by his ability to deceive many of the eastern leaders of the Republican Party.

When Lincoln sat down to compose the House Divided speech he faced a triple crisis: one of his own political career; one of the Republican Party; and one of the nation, as either free or slave. He set out therefore, first of all, to destroy Douglas’s credentials as a free soil leader. Less obviously, but not less importantly, he set out to destroy his credentials to become again a leader of the proslavery forces in the country. If the proslavery South had been more intelligent than it actually was, it would have realized that Douglas could do more

for them than any “positive good” disciple of John C. Calhoun. Not in contesting the plains of Kansas but in filibustering south of the border lay the future of slavery. The genius of the House Divided speech, and Lincoln’s subsequent tactics in the joint debates, destroyed Douglas’s stature in the South even more effectively than in the North.

It is sometimes overlooked that throughout the campaign of 1858 Douglas, unlike Lincoln, was battling on two fronts. The political warfare waged by the Buchanan administration against Douglas was intense. All federal officeholders—and especially postmasters—owing allegiance to Douglas were fired and replaced by administration supporters. Buchanan’s point man was his Attorney General, Jeremiah Black, one of the sharpest debaters of the day.⁶ What was remarkable about the administration attack on Douglas was its essential agreement with Lincoln’s attack.

Lincoln’s attack, as every student of the joint debates knows, has peculiar reference to the famous second question addressed to Douglas at Freeport:

Can the people of a United States Territory, in any lawful way, against the wish of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from its limits prior to the formation of a State Constitution?

Don Fehrenbacher has shown, contrary to much popular mythology, that this was not a sudden stroke of political wizardry, throwing Douglas off his guard.⁷ On the contrary, it was a question that, in one form or another, Douglas had answered many times before. Lincoln’s genius was rather in relentlessly pressing the matter, and in hammering home the inner inconsistency of Douglas’s answers. Douglas had accepted the premise that the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dred Scott* represented the true intent and meaning of the Constitution, and that therefore any citizen of a slave state might go into any United States Territory and there lawfully hold his slave as property. But, said Douglas, his ability to enjoy this species of property depended upon local legislation, which his fellow citizens of the territory were free to grant or to withhold. According to Douglas, the right of the slaveholder in the Territory recognized by the Supreme Court was merely “abstract.” Its concrete enjoyment depended upon the “popular sovereignty” of the settlers in the territory. In this way, he said, the people of a territory might in fact exclude slavery from their midst.

It was the success of this reply that had persuaded Republicans like Greeley that Douglas was their man. These same Republicans cared little, or rather approved of the fact, that Douglas was in effect “nullifying” *Dred Scott*. The South, however, had seen *Dred Scott* as the certification of their victory in the entire national debate over the constitutional status of slavery in the territories. In Douglas’s casuistry they saw themselves cheated of the fruits of that victory.

What Lincoln did was to make certain that this casuistry did not prevail. He pointed out, in the debates, that Taney had said, and Douglas had agreed, that

the right to hold slaves as property in the territories was “expressly affirmed” in the Constitution. If this was so, then that right stood upon the same constitutional foundation as the right to reclaim fugitive slaves, as “expressly affirmed” in Article IV of the Constitution. But the right to reclaim fugitives was also a merely abstract or barren right unless implemented by congressional legislation, as it had been in both 1793 and 1850. No one, Lincoln said, could take an oath to support the Constitution—as every Congressman did—and yet withhold his vote from legislation implementing an expressly affirmed constitutional right. Douglas’s argument against a congressional slave code for the territories, whenever the territorial government withheld legislation securing the slaveholders property, could apply as well to any fugitive slave law. “Popular sovereignty” as a means of nullifying an “expressly affirmed” constitutional right placed Douglas on the side of the abolitionists!

This evisceration of “popular sovereignty” by Lincoln in the course of the joint debates had its ultimate fruition in the Democratic National Convention that met in Charleston in April of 1860. When the majority in that convention, firmly committed to Douglas, refused to adopt a resolution in favor of a slave code for the territories, the seven states of the Deep South withdrew. These same seven states would secede from the Union before Lincoln’s inauguration the following year. But it was secession from the Democratic Convention that was politically decisive. As Don Fehrenbacher has written, everyone knew that a South that would not accept Stephen A. Douglas as leader of the Democratic Party would never accept Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States. Yet the South was foolish in what it did. It actually looked at Douglas through the lenses Lincoln had kindly provided them in the debates that followed the House Divided speech. Had they been wise they would have abandoned their demand for a slave code for territories like Kansas or Nebraska, where geography and a militant free soil movement made it unlikely that slavery could take root. They would have realized that if slavery was extended to Cuba, or elsewhere south of the border (as in the case of Texas) they would not have needed a federal slave code. They might then have elected a president who might have done everything both necessary and possible to guarantee the survival and success of slavery. Indeed, for all we know, slavery might be flourishing amongst us even now. That it does not, we have the House Divided speech to thank.

NOTES

1. The various shifts and changes in the forms of the Lecompton Constitution in the various stages in the struggle need not engage us here. Nor will we enter into the details of the English Bill, which resulted in the final rejection of Lecompton by the voters in Kansas Territory, on August 2, 1858. When Lincoln delivered the House Divided speech in June, the result of the August plebiscite was a foregone conclusion.

2. *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861*, completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 320, 321.

3. In December 28, 1857, Lincoln wrote to Lyman Trumbull: “What does the New York Tribune mean by its constant eulogising, and admiring, and magnifying of Douglas? . . . Have they concluded that the republican cause, generally, can best be promoted by sacrificing us here in Illinois? If so we would like to know it soon; it will save us a great deal of labor to surrender at once.

“As yet I have heard of no republican here going over to Douglas; but if the Tribune continues to din his praises into the ears of its five or ten thousand republican readers in Illinois, it is more than can be hoped that all will stand firm. . . .”

The statewide vote of the Republicans in November of 1858 was “about 125,000 for the Republicans, 121,000 for the Douglas Democrats, and 5,000 for the Buchanan Democrats” (Potter, p. 354). It can be seen that five or ten thousand readers of Greeley’s Tribune in Illinois could have exerted powerful leverage on the Republicans margin of victory or defeat.

4. When Texas was annexed, it was provided that, in future, it might be divided—with the consent of Congress—into as many as five states. That is to say, Texas might have added ten, rather than two, slave-state senators (and electoral votes).

5. Lincoln’s apprehensions on the eve of the war were no different from what they had been on the eve of the 1858 campaign. On December 18, 1860, in the midst of the “Great Secession Winter,” he threw the weight of his influence against the Crittenden compromise—to extend the Missouri line to the Pacific.

“I am sorry any republican inclines to dally with Pop. Sov. of any sort. It acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty, and surrenders all we have contended for. Once fastened on us as settled policy, filibustering for all South of us, and making slave states of it, follows in spite of us, with an early Supreme Court decision, holding our free state constitutions to be unconstitutional. . . .”

6. *In the Name of the People: Speeches and Writings of Lincoln and Douglas in the Ohio Campaign of 1859*, edited with an Introduction by Harry V. Jaffa and Robert Johannsen (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1959), reprints “Observations on Senator Douglas’s Views in Popular Sovereignty” from the Washington Constitution, September 10, 1859. Although published anonymously, it soon was known that the author was black. This is a good sample of what was said against Douglas from the Buchanan administration side of the political battlefield throughout the 1858 campaign.

7. *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850’s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), chap. 6, “The Famous ‘Freeport Question.’”