

LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATES OF 1858

- The historic series of seven debates took place in seven different Congressional districts of Illinois during the campaign for the U.S. Senate.
- Stephen Douglas was the incumbent, a Democrat elected in 1847.
 - During his term in the Senate, Douglas served as chair of the Senate Committee on Territories, by virtue of which office organized the Compromise of 1850 which called for the citizens of each new state to determine whether they would be free or slave states.
 - He authored and promoted the Kansas-Nebraska Act that effectively negated the Missouri Compromise which sought to balance the number of free and slave states and outlawed the expansion of slavery into the Kansas-Nebraska Territory.
 - The Kansas-Nebraska Act led to an outbreak of violence in Kansas so great that it came to be called “Bleeding Kansas.”
 - Douglas was a champion of popular sovereignty.
- Lincoln was, at the time, a relative unknown though he had served one term in the US House of Representatives from 1847 to 1849.
 - Lincoln declared that the nation could not survive half slave and half free.
 - Lincoln believed that the Declaration of Independence applied to all people.
 - Lincoln accused Douglas of supporting the expansion of slavery throughout the nation.
- The debate format
 - The first candidate (Douglas on four occasions, Lincoln on three) to speak would do so for one hour.
 - His opponent then spoke for one and one half hours.
 - Finally, the first candidate delivered a half hour rebuttal.
- The substance of the debates
 - While Douglas argued that all parties believed in what he called popular sovereignty, Lincoln argued that national policy – beginning with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which banned slavery from most of the Midwest – had traditionally sought to limit the spread of the institution of slavery.
 - Douglas argued that the Compromise of 1850 supplanted the Missouri Compromise’s ban on slavery in the territories, Lincoln countered that the agreement permitting the New Mexico and Utah territories to determine the slavery issue on their own actually applied only to issues specified in the Compromise of 1850.
 - Douglas blasted Lincoln as an abolitionist on the strength of his “House Divided” speech.

- When Douglas charged Lincoln with opposing the Dred Scott decision for depriving African Americans of the rights of citizenship, Lincoln suggested another decision in the same vein as Dred Scott would allow the reintroduction of slavery in the North.
- When Douglas accused Lincoln of desiring to bring down state laws excluding free African Americans from immigration into those states, Lincoln posited that even slaves have an equal right to freedom. (He stopped short of arguing for full social equality.)
- Lincoln offered no plan for emancipation and supported colonization as a means of dealing with the slaves at that time in America.
- Lincoln maneuvered Douglas into asserting that a state could effectively outlaw slavery by failing to enact legislation necessary to protect the institution. (This so-called “Freeport Doctrine” drove a wedge between Northern and Southern Democrats that would allow victory for a Republican candidate in the 1860 Presidential race.)
- Douglas maneuvered Lincoln into asserting that the Declaration of Independence guaranteed political – but not social – equality.
- The facts behind the rhetoric
 - Lincoln held positions far less radical than those of the abolitionists.
 - Douglas had successfully circumvented attempts to use voter fraud to get Kansas admitted as a slave state.
- In conjunction with the journalistic coverage of the original debates, Lincoln’s publication of edited transcripts of all seven debates received such popularity that both led to his nomination for the Presidency in 1860.
- For transcripts of the seven debates, click on <http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debates.htm>