*Excerpts from the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*

*Taken from:* <http://www.stolaf.edu/people/fitz/COURSES/debates.htm>

*Introduction by Professor Fitzgerald: In the fall of 1858, the two leading candidates for U.S. Senate for Illinois held a series of public debates. The incumbent Senator, Steven A. Douglas, was much the better known candidate, being a prominent national leader of his Democratic party. He was the author of the most divisive legislation in the nation's history, the Kansas-Nebraska Act which opened the western territories to slavery if the citizens of that territory wanted it. His opponent, former Congressman Abraham Lincoln, was much less prominent, but as a Republican was strongly opposed to the extension of slavery into the western territories.*

*Lincoln started his campaign for the Senate with a statement of what he thought was the crucial issue in his most dramatic statement, the House Divided Speech in Chicago in June 1858.*

LINCOLN (quoting the Bible): "'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe 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. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief 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."

*As for the famous debates themselves, Lincoln's actual racial views as expressed in the debate at Charleston, Illinois, might surprise many readers.*

LINCOLN: "I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races--that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."

*Lincoln said much the same thing on other occasions, as in the debate at Ottawa.*

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 black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which, in my judgement, will probably forever 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 favor 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 of 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 intellectual and moral endowments; but in the right to eat the bread without the leave of any body else which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man."

*Douglas responded to these assertions by Lincoln (specifically the first quote) by claiming Lincoln was inconsistent in his racial views*

DOUGLAS: ". . .that is good doctrine, but Mr. Lincoln is afraid to advocate it in the [north Illinois antislavery] latitude of Chicago, where he hopes to get his votes. It is good doctrine in the anti-abolition [southern Illinois] counties for him. . . .Let me ask him why he cannot the same in the North as in the South--the same in every county, if he has a conviction that they are just? He would not be a Republican, if his principles would apply alike to every part of the country. The party to which he belongs is bounded and limited by geographical lines. With their principles they cannot even cross the Mississippi river on your ferry boats. They cannot cross over the Ohio into Kentucky. Lincoln himself cannot visit the land of his fathers, the scenes of his childhood, the graves of his ancestors, and carry his Abolition principles, as he declared them at Chicago, with him."

*Lincoln did try to avoid the topic of racial equality and instead emphasize his views on the core issue of slavery and its expansion.*

LINCOLN:

"We have in this nation this element of domestic slavery. It is a matters of absolute certainty that it is a disturbing element. It is the opinion of all the great men who have expressed an opinion upon it, that it is a dangerous element. We keep up a controversy in regards to it. That controversy necessarily springs from difference of opinion, and if we can learn exactly--can reduce to the lowest elements--what that difference of opinion is, we perhaps shall be better prepared for discussing the different systems of policy that we would propose in regard to that disturbing element. I suggest that the difference of opinion, reduced to its lowest terms, is no other than the difference between the men who think slavery a wrong and those who do not think it wrong. The Republican party think it wrong--we think it is a moral, a social and a political wrong. We think it a wrong not confining itself merely to the persons or the States where it exists, but that it is a wrong in its tendency, to say the least, that extends itself to the existence of the whole nation. Because we think it wrong, we propose a course of policy that shall deal with it as a wrong. We deal with it as with any other wrong, in so far as we can prevent its growing any larger, and so deal with it that in the run of time there may be some promise of an end to it. We have a due regard to the actual presence of it amongst us and the difficulties of getting rid of it in any satisfactory way, and all the Constitutional obligations thrown about it. I suppose that in reference both to its actual, existence in the nation, and to our Constitutional obligations, we have no right at all to disturb it in the States where it exists, and we profess that we have no more inclination to disturb it than we have the right to do it. We go further than that; we don't propose to disturb it where, in one instance, we think the Constitution would permit us. We think the Constitution would permit us to disturb it in the District of Columbia. Still we do not propose to do that, unless it should be in terms which I don't suppose the nation is very likely soon to agree to--the terms of making the emancipation gradual and compensating the unwilling owners. . . .

"I will say now that there is a sentiment in the country contrary to me--a sentiment which holds that slavery is not wrong, and therefore it goes for the policy that does not propose dealing with it as a wrong. That policy is the Democratic policy, and that sentiment is the Democratic sentiment. If there be a doubt in the mind of any one of this vast audience that this is really the central idea of the Democratic party, in relation to this subject, I ask him to bear with me while I state a few things tending, as I think, to prove that proposition. In the first place, the leading man -- I think I may do my friend Judge Douglas the honor of calling him such -- advocating the present Democratic policy, never himself says it is wrong. He has the high distinction, so far as I know, of never having said slavery is either right or wrong. Almost everybody else says one or the other, but the judge never does."

"If there be a man in the Democratic party who thinks it is wrong, and yet clings to that party, I suggest to him in the first place that his leader don’t talk as he does, for he never says that it is wrong. In the second place, I suggest to him that if he will examine the policy proposed to be carried forward, he will find that he carefully excludes the idea that there is any thing wrong in it. If you will examine the arguments that are made on it, you will find that every one carefully excludes the idea that there is any thing wrong in slavery. Perhaps that Democrat who says he is as much opposed to slavery as I am, will tell me that I am wrong about this. I wish him to examine his own course in regard to this matter a moment, and then see if his opinion will not be changed a little. You say it is wrong; but don't you constantly object to any body else saying so? Do you not constantly argue that this is not the right place to oppose it? You say it must not be opposed in the free States, because slavery is not here; it must not be opposed in the slave States, because it is there; it must not be opposed in politics, because that will make a fuss; it must not be opposed in the pulpit, because it is not religion. Then where is the place to oppose it? [The Democrats seem to think that] there is no suitable place to oppose it. . . .

So I say again, that in regard to the arguments that are made, when Judge Douglas says he 'don’t care whether slavery is voted up or voted down,' whether he means that as an individual expression of sentiment, or only as a sort of statement of his views on national policy, it is alike true to say that he can thus argue logically if he don't see any thing wrong in it; but he cannot say so logically if he admits it is wrong. He cannot say that he would as soon see a wrong voted up as voted down. When Judge Douglas says that whoever or whatever community wants slaves, they have a right to have them, he is perfectly logical if there is nothing wrong with the institution; but if you admit that it is wrong, he cannot logically say that anybody has a right to do wrong. When he says that slave property and horse and hog property are, alike, to be allowed to go into the Territories, upon the principles of equality, he is reasoning truly, if there is no difference between them as property; but if the one is property, held rightfully, and the other is wrong, then there is no equality between the right and wrong; so that, turn it in any way you can, in all the arguments sustaining the Democratic policy, and in that policy itself, there is a careful studied exclusion of the idea that there is anything wrong in slavery.

Let us understand this. I am not, just here, trying to prove that we are right and they are wrong. I have been stating where we and they stand, and trying to show what is the real difference between us; and I now say that whenever we can get the question distinctly stated of whether slavery is right or wrong-can get all these men who believe that slavery is in some of these respects wrong, to stand and act with us in treating it as a wrong-then, and not till then, I think we will, in some way, come to an end of this slavery agitation."

*Douglas on the contrary tried to emphasize the race issue, using Lincoln's earlier comments to prove that he was a racial liberal.*

DOUGLAS: "Up at Chicago, in the open he reviewed my reception speech, and under my argument attacking his favorite doctrine of Negro equality I had shown that it was a falsification of the Independence to pretend that that instrument applied and included Negroes in the clause declaring that all men were created equal. What was Lincoln's reply? I will read from his Chicago speech and the one which he did not quote, and dare not quote, in this [southern] part of the State. He [Lincoln] said:

**'I should like to know, if taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle, and making exceptions to it, where will it stop? If one man says it does not mean a Negro, why may not- another man say it does not mean another man? If that declaration is not the truth, let us get this statute book in which we find it and tear it out.'**

There you find that Mr. Lincoln told the Abolitionists of Chicago that if the Declaration of Independence did not declare that the Negro was created by the Almighty the equal of the white man, that you ought to take that instrument and tear out the clause which says that all men were created equal. But let me call your attention to another part of the same speech. You know that in his Charleston speech, an extract from which he has read, he declared that the Negro belongs to an inferior race; is physically inferior to the white man, and should always be kept in an inferior position. I will now read to you what he said at Chicago on that point. In concluding his speech at that place, he [Lincoln] remarked:

**'My friends, I have detained you about as long as I desire to do, and I have only to say let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man--this race and that race, and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position, discarding our standard that we have left us. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal.'**

Thus you see, that when addressing the Chicago Abolitionists he declared that all distinctions of race must be discarded and blotted out, because the Negro stood on an equal footing with the white man; that if one man said the Declaration of Independence did not mean a Negro when it declared all men created equal, that another man would say that it did not mean another man; and hence we ought to discard all difference between the negro race and all other races. . . .He knew that I alluded to his negro-equality docrines when I spoke of the enormity of his principles, yet he did not find it convenient to answer on that point. . . ."

*Douglas also stressed the divisive, dangerous, character of anti-slavery agitation for the Union.*

"This Republican organization appeals to the North against the South; it appeals to northern passion, northern prejudice, and northern ambition, against southern people, southern States, and southern institutions, and its only hope of success is by that appeal. . . . . Mr. Lincoln thinks that it is his duty is to preach a crusade in the free States against slavery, because it is a crime, as he believes, and ought to be extinguished; and because the people of the slave States will never abolish it. How is he going to abolish it? Down in the southern part of the State he takes the ground openly that he will not interfere with slavery where it exists, and says that he is not now and never was in favor of interfering with slavery where it exists in the States. Well, if he is not in favor of that, how does he expect to bring slavery in a course of ultimate extinction? How can he extinguish it in Kentucky, in Virginia, in all the slave States by his policy, if he will not pursue a policy which will interfere with it in the States where it exists? In his speech at Springfield before the Abolition or Republican Convention, he declared his hostility to any more slave States in this language:

**'Under the operation of that policy the agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe 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 until it shall become alike lawful in all the States-old as well as new, north as well as south.'**

Mr. Lincoln there told his Abolition friends that this Government could not endure permanently, divided into free and slave States as our fathers made it, and that it must become all free or all slave, otherwise, that the Government could not exist. How then does Lincoln propose to save the Union, unless by compelling all the States to become free, so that the house shall not be divided against itself? He intends making them all free; he will preserve the Union in that way, and yet, he is not going to interfere with slavery any where it now exists. How is he going to bring it about? Why, he will agitate, he will induce the North to agitate until the South shall be worried out, and forced to abolish slavery. Let us examine the policy by which that is to be done. He first tells you that he would prohibit slavery every where in the Territories. He would thus confine slavery within its present limits. When he thus gets it confined, and surrounded, so that it cannot spread, the natural laws of increase will go on until the Negroes will be so plenty that they cannot live on the soil. He will hem them in until starvation seizes them, and by starving them to death, he will put slavery in the course of ultimate extinction. If he is not going to interfere with slavery in the States, but intends to interfere and prohibit it in the Territories, and thus smother slavery out, it naturally follows, that he can extinguish it only by extinguishing the Negro race, for his policy would drive them to starvation. This is the humane and Christian remedy that be proposes for the great crime of slavery.*(This is a reference to the Republican belief that by restricting the spread of slavery, the nation could put slavery on the road to ultimate extinction. The starvation notion was not part of their idea, but Douglas is arguing here that it would be the likely result).*

He [Lincoln] tells you that I will not argue the question whether slavery is right or wrong. I tell you why I will not do it. I hold that under the Constitution of the United States, each State of this Union has a right to do as it pleases on the subject of slavery. In Illinois we have exercised that sovereign right by prohibiting slavery within our own limits. I approve of that line of policy. We have performed our whole duty in Illinois. We have gone as far as we have a right to go under the Constitution of our common country. It is none of our business whether slavery exists in Missouri or not. Missouri is a sovereign State of this Union, and has the same right to decide the slavery question for herself that Illinois has to decide it for herself. Hence I do not choose to occupy the time allotted to me in discussing a question that we have no right to act upon. I thought that you desired to hear us upon those questions coming within our Constitutional power or action. Lincoln will not discuss these. What one question has he discussed that comes within the power or calls for the action or interference of an United States Senator? He is going to discuss the rightfulness of slavery when Congress cannot act upon it either way. He wishes to discuss the merits of the Dred Scott decision when, under the Constitution, a Senator has no right to interfere with the decision of judicial tribunals. He wants your exclusive attention to two questions that he has no power to act upon; to two questions that he could not vote upon if he was in Congress, to two questions that are not practical, in order to conceal your attention from other questions which he might be required to vote upon should he ever become a member of Congress. He tells you that he does not like the Dred Scott decision [*opening all the territories to slavery*]. Suppose he does not, how is he going to help himself? He says that he will reverse it. How will he reverse it? I know of but one mode of reversing judicial decisions, and that is by appealing from the inferior to the superior court. But I have never yet learned how or where an appeal could be taken from the Supreme Court of the United States! The Dred Scott decision was pronounced by the highest tribunal on earth. From that decision there is no appeal this side of Heaven. Yet, Mr. Lincoln says he is going to reverse that decision. By what tribunal will he reverse it? Will he appeal to a mob? Does he intend to appeal to violence, to Lynch law? Will he stir up strife and rebellion in the land and overthrow the court by violence? He does not deign to tell you how he will reverse the Dred Scott decision, but keeps appealing each day from the Supreme Court of the United States to political meetings in the country.

I will stand by that great principle of state’s rights, no matter who may desert it. I intend to stand by it for the purpose of preserving peace between the North and the South, the free and the slave States. If each State will only agree to mind its own business, and let its neighbors alone, there will be peace forever between us. We in Illinois tried slavery when a Territory, and found it was not good for us in this climate, and with our surroundings, and hence we abolished it. We then adopted a free State Constitution, as we had a right to do. In this State we have declared that a Negro shall not be a citizen, and we have also declared that he shall not be a slave. We had a right to adopt that policy. Missouri has just as good a right to adopt the other policy. I am now speaking of rights under the Constitution, and not of moral or religious rights. I do not discuss the morals of the people of Missouri, but let them settle that matter for themselves. I hold that the people of the slaveholding States are civilized men as well as ourselves; that they bear consciences as well as we, and that they are accountable to God and their posterity, and not to us. It is for them to decide, therefore, the moral and religious right of the slavery question for themselves within their own limits. I assert that they had as much right under the Constitution to adopt the system of policy which they have as we had to adopt ours. So it is with every other State in this Union. Let each State stand firmly by that great Constitutional right, let each State mind its own business and let its neighbors alone, and there will be no trouble on this question. If we will stand by that principle, then Mr. Lincoln will find that this Republic can exist forever divided into free and slave States, as our fathers made it and the people of each State have decided.

Stand by that great principle [of states' rights and Popular Sovereignty], and we can go on as we have done, increasing in wealth, in population, in power, and in all the elements of greatness, until we shall be the admiration and terror of the world. We can go on and enlarge as our population increase, require more room, until we make this continent one ocean-bound republic. Under that principle the United States can perform that great mission, that destiny, which Providence has marked out for us. Under that principle we can receive with entire safety that stream of intelligence which is constantly flowing from the Old World to the New [*that is, immigrants*], filling up our prairies, clearing our wildernesses and building cities, towns, railroads and general internal improvements, and thus make this the asylum of all the oppressed of the whole earth. We have this great mission to perform, and it can only be performed by adhering faithfully to that principle of self-government on which our institutions were all established. I repeat that the principle is the right of each State, -each Territory, to decide this slavery question for itself, to have slavery or not, as it chooses, and it does not become Mr. Lincoln, or anybody else, to tell the people of Kentucky that they have no consciences, that they are living in a state of iniquity, and that they are cherishing an institution to their bosoms in violation of the law of God. Better for him to adopt the doctrine of "judge not lest ye shall be judged." Let him perform his own duty at home, and he will have a better fate in the future. I think there are objects of charity enough in the free States to excite the sympathies and open the pockets of all the benevolence we have amongst us, without going abroad in search of Negroes, of whose condition we know nothing. We have enough objects of charity at home, and it is our duty to take care of our own poor, and our own suffering, before we go abroad to intermeddle with other people's business.

LINCOLN: "I wish to return to Judge Douglas my profound thanks for his public annunciation here today, to be put on record, that his system of policy in regard to the institution of slavery contemplates that it shall last forever. We are getting a little nearer the true issue of this controversy, and I am profoundly grateful for this one sentence. Judge Douglas asks you, "why cannot the institution of slavery, or rather, why cannot the nation, part slave and part free, continue as our father made it forever?" In the first place, I insist that our fathers did not make this nation half slave and half free, or part slave and part free. I insist that they found the institution of slavery existing here. They did not make it so, but they left it so because they knew of no way to get rid of it at that time. When Judge Douglas undertakes to say that, as a matter of choice, the fathers of the Government made this nation part slave and part free, he assumes what is historically falsehood. More than that: when the [Founding F]athers of the Government cut off the source of slavery by the abolition of the slave-trade, and adopted a system of restricting it from the new Territories where is had not existed, I maintain that they placed it where they understood, and all sensible men understood, it was in the course of ultimate extinction; and when judge Douglas asks me why it cannot continue as our fathers made it, I ask him why he and his friends could not let it remain as our fathers made it?

It is precisely all I ask of him in relation to the institution of slavery, that it shall be placed upon the basis that our fathers placed it upon. Mr. Brooks, of South Carolina, once said, and truly said, that when this Government was established, no one expected the institution of slavery to last until this day; and that the men who formed this Government were wiser and better than the men of these days; but the men of these days had experience which the fathers had not, and that experience had taught them the invention of the cotton-gin, and this had made the perpetuation of the institution of slavery a necessity in this country. Judge Douglas could not let it stand upon the basis which our fathers placed it, but removed it, and put it upon the cotton-gin basis. It is a question, therefore, for him and his friends to answer-why they could not let it remain where the fathers of the Government originally placed it.

I hope nobody has understood me as trying to sustain the doctrine that we have a right to quarrel with Kentucky, or Virginia, or any of the slave States, about the institution of slavery-thus giving the judge an opportunity to make himself eloquent and valiant against us in fighting for their rights. I expressly declared in my opening speech, that I had neither the inclination to exercise, nor the belief in the existence of the right to interfere with the States of Kentucky or Virginia in doing as they pleased with slavery or any other existing institution. Then what becomes of all his eloquence in behalf of the rights of States, which are assailed by no living man?

. . .When I sometimes, in relation to the organization of new societies in new countries, where the soil is clean and clear, insisted that we should keep that principle in view, Judge Douglas will have it that I want a Negro wife. He never can be brought to understand that there is any middle ground on this subject. I have lived until my fiftieth year, and have never had a Negro woman either for a slave or a wife, and I think I can live fifty centuries, for that matter, without having had one for either."

*That fall, Lincoln outpolled Douglas in the popular vote, but Douglas's followers were strong enough in the Illinois legislature to reelect him to the U.S. Senate. Two years later, in 1860, these same men would be the two leading candidates for president, with Lincoln winning.*

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