

Politicians defined the terms of the sectional crisis in speech after speech, grappling with the underlying question of what to do about slavery. Three of the most important answers to that question were presented by Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Jefferson Davis. Hearing and reading their speeches helped Americans to decide what they believed and, ultimately, to choose sides. Beneath the rhetoric and bluster of the politicians, the genuine, day-to-day character of freedom in American life was at stake. The experiences of fugitive slave Margaret Garner and antislavery activist and author Lydia Maria Child illustrate that sectional polarization over slavery and race reached far beyond the realm of electoral politics.

DOCUMENT 14-1

The Kansas–Nebraska Act

The Kansas–Nebraska Act ruptured old political coalitions. For decades, the Whig and Democratic parties had been national parties, with leaders and voters in both free states and slave states. Kansas–Nebraska drove a sectional wedge into each party. The act alienated many Northern Whigs and Democrats. Addressing an audience in Peoria, Illinois, in October 1854, Abraham Lincoln passionately denounced the Kansas–Nebraska Act. In his speech, excerpted here, Lincoln explained the grave danger posed by the act.

Abraham Lincoln

Speech in Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854

Preceding the Presidential election of 1852, each of the great political parties, democrats and whigs, met in convention, and adopted resolutions endorsing the compromise of '50; as a "finality," a final settlement . . . of all slavery agitation. . . . During this long period of time Nebraska had remained, substantially an uninhabited country, but now emigration to, and settlement within it began to

take place. It is about one third as large as the present United States, and its importance so long overlooked, begins to come into view. . . . On January 4th, 1854, Judge [Stephen A.] Douglas introduces a new bill to give Nebraska territorial government. . . . [A]bout a month after the introduction of the bill, on the judge's own motion, it is so amended as to declare the Missouri Compromise inoperative and void; and, substantially, that the People who go and settle there may establish slavery, or exclude it, as they may see fit. In this shape the bill passed both branches of congress, and became a law.

This is the *repeal* of the Missouri Compromise. . . . I think, and shall try to show, that it is wrong; wrong in its direct effect, letting slavery into Kansas and Nebraska—and wrong in its prospective principle, allowing it to spread to every other part of the wide world, where men can be found inclined to take it.

This *declared* indifference, but as I must think, covert *real* zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty—criticising the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but *self-interest*.

Before proceeding, let me say I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses north and south. Doubtless there are individuals, on both sides, who would not hold slaves under any circumstances; and others who would gladly introduce slavery anew, if it were out of existence. We know that some southern men do free their slaves, go north, and become tip-top abolitionists; while some northern ones go south, and become most cruel slave-masters.

When southern people tell us they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery, than we; I acknowledge the fact. When it is said that the institution exists; and that it is very difficult to get rid of it, in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself. If all earthly power were given to me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia,—to their own native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me, that whatever of high hope, (as I think there is) there may be in this, in the long run, its sudden execution is impossible. If they were all landed there in a day, they would all perish in the next ten days; and there are not surplus shipping and surplus money enough in the world to carry them there in many times ten days. What then? Free them all, and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain that this betters their condition? I think I would not hold one in slavery, at any rate; yet the point is not clear enough for me to denounce people upon. What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit

of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded. We can not, then, make them equals. It does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted; but for their tardiness in this, I will not undertake to judge our brethren of the south.

When they remind us of their constitutional rights, I acknowledge them, not grudgingly, but fully, and fairly; and I would give them any legislation for the reclaiming of their fugitives, which should not, in its stringency, be more likely to carry a free man into slavery, than our ordinary criminal laws are to hang an innocent one.

But all this, to my judgment, furnishes no more excuse for permitting slavery to go into our own free territory, than it would for reviving the African slave trade by law. The law which forbids the bringing of slaves from Africa; and that which has so long forbid the taking them to Nebraska, can hardly be distinguished on any moral principle; and the repeal of the former could find quite as plausible excuses as that of the latter. . . .

Some men, mostly whigs, who condemn the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, nevertheless hesitate to go for its restoration, lest they be thrown in company with the abolitionist. Will they allow me as an old whig to tell them good humoredly, that I think this is very silly? Stand with anybody that stands RIGHT. Stand with him while he is right and PART with him when he goes wrong. Stand WITH the abolitionist in restoring the Missouri Compromise; and stand AGAINST him when he attempts to repeal the fugitive slave law. In the latter case you stand with the southern disunionist. What of that? you are still right. In both cases you are right. In both cases you oppose the dangerous extremes. In both you stand on middle ground and hold the ship level and steady. In both you are national and nothing less than national. This is good old whig ground. To desert such ground, because of any company, is to be less than a whig—less than a man—less than an American.

I particularly object to the NEW position which the avowed principle of this Nebraska law gives to slavery in the body politic. I object to it because it assumes that there CAN be MORAL RIGHT in the enslaving of one man by another. I object to it as a dangerous dalliance for a free people—a sad evidence that, feeling prosperity we forget right—that liberty, as a principle, we have ceased to revere. I object to it because the fathers of the republic eschewed, and rejected it. The argument of “Necessity” was the only argument they ever admitted in favor of slavery; and so far, and so far only as it carried them, did they ever go. They found the institution existing among us, which they could not help; and they cast blame upon the British King for having permitted its introduction. BEFORE the constitution, they prohibited its introduction into the north-western Territory—the only country we owned, then free from it. AT the framing and adoption of the constitution, they forbore to so much as mention the word “slave” or “slavery” in the whole instrument. . . . Thus, the thing is hid away, in the constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen [cyst] or a cancer. . . . Less than this our fathers COULD not do; and MORE they WOULD not do. Necessity drove them so far, and farther, they would not go. But this is not all. The earliest Congress, under the constitution, took the same view of slavery. They hedged and hemmed it in to the narrowest limits of necessity. . . .

Thus we see, the plain unmistakable spirit of that age, towards slavery, was hostility to the PRINCIPLE, and toleration, ONLY BY NECESSITY.

But NOW it is to be transformed into a “sacred right.” Nebraska brings it forth, places it on the high road to extension and perpetuity; and, with a pat on its back, says to it, “Go, and God speed you.” . . . Little by little, but steadily as man’s march to the grave, we have been giving up the OLD for the NEW faith. Near eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave OTHERS is a “sacred right of self-government.” These principles can not stand together. They are as opposite as God and mammon [greed]; and whoever holds to the one, must despise the other. . . .

Let no one be deceived. The spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska, are utter antagonisms; and the former is being rapidly displaced by the latter. Fellow countrymen—Americans south, as well as north, shall we make no effort to arrest this? . . . In our greedy chase to make profit of the negro, let us beware, lest we “cancel and tear to pieces” even the white man’s charter of freedom.

Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of “moral right,” back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of “necessity.” Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let north and south—let all Americans—let all lovers of liberty everywhere—join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving.

QUESTIONS FOR READING AND DISCUSSION

1. In what way did the Kansas-Nebraska Act repeal the Missouri Compromise? Why did Lincoln consider the act the result of “covert *real* zeal for the spread of slavery”?
2. To what extent did Lincoln oppose slavery? Did he believe slaveholders should emancipate their slaves, and if so, what did he believe should happen to them? Would abolitionists have found his arguments convincing? What about slaveholders?
3. What did Lincoln mean by declaring, “I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people”? What strategies did he use to promote national unity?
4. Why did Lincoln believe “our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust”? How did he use the historical legacy of the founders to support his arguments?

DOCUMENT 14-2

The Antislavery Constitution

The political debate between North and South pivoted on the question of what the Constitution permitted—or required—the federal government to do about slavery. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison publicly burned the Constitution in 1854 because, he said, by permitting slavery it was “a covenant with death, an agreement with hell.” Frederick