

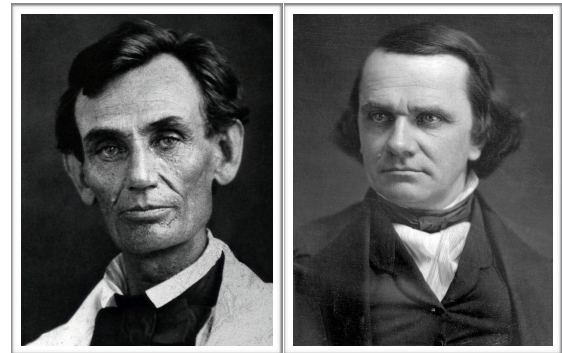
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Oct 27, 2015

Discussions of Lincoln-Douglas Debates

— Brief introduction, effect, and my own point of view

The Lincoln–Douglas Debates of 1858 (also known as The Great Debates of 1858) were a series of seven debates between Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate for the United States Senate from Illinois, and incumbent Senator Stephen Douglas, the Democratic Party candidate. At the time, U.S. senators were elected by state legislatures; thus



Abraham Lincoln

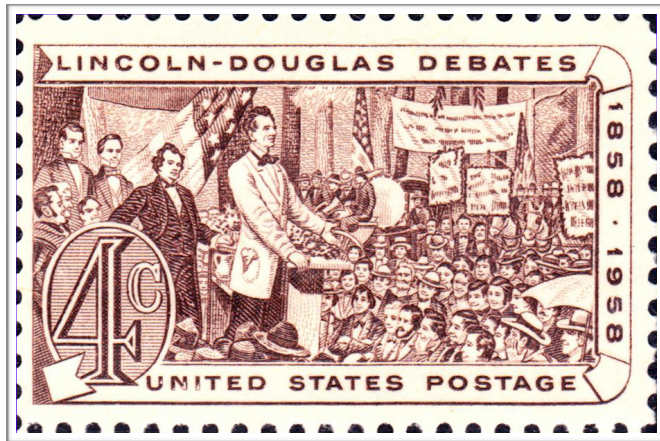
Stephen A. Douglas

Lincoln and Douglas were trying for their respective parties to win control of the Illinois legislature. The debates previewed the issues that Lincoln would face in the aftermath of his victory in the 1860 presidential election. Although Illinois, itself, was a free state, the main issue discussed in all seven debates was slavery in the United States.

In agreeing to the debates, Lincoln and Douglas decided to hold one debate in each of the nine congressional districts in Illinois. Because both had already spoken in two—Springfield and Chicago—within a day of each other, they decided that their "joint appearances" would be held only in the remaining seven districts.

The main theme of the Lincoln–Douglas debates was slavery, particularly the issue of slavery's expansion into the territories. It was Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act that repealed the Missouri Compromise's ban on slavery in the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, and replaced it with the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which meant that the people of a territory could decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. Lincoln said that popular sovereignty would nationalize and perpetuate slavery. Douglas argued that both Whigs and Democrats believed in popular sovereignty and that the Compromise of 1850 was an

example of this. Lincoln said that the national policy was to limit the spread of slavery, and mentioned the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which banned slavery from a large part of the modern-day Midwest, as an example of this policy. The Compromise of 1850 allowed the territories of Utah and New Mexico to decide for or against slavery, but it also allowed the



admission of California as a free state, reduced the size of the slave state of Texas by adjusting the boundary, and ended the slave trade (but not slavery itself) in the District of Columbia. In return, the South got a stronger fugitive slave law than the version mentioned in the Constitution. Whereas Douglas said that the Compromise of 1850

replaced the Missouri Compromise ban on slavery in the Louisiana Purchase territory north and west of the state of Missouri, Lincoln said that this was false, and that Popular Sovereignty and the Dred Scott decision were a departure from the policies of the past that would nationalize slavery.

There were partisan remarks, such as Douglas' accusations that members of the "Black Republican" party, such as Lincoln, were abolitionists. Douglas cited as proof Lincoln's House Divided Speech in which he said, "I believe this government cannot endure permanently half Slave and half Free."

What is often overlooked is that the debates were part of a larger campaign, that they were designed to achieve certain immediate political objectives, and that they reflected the characteristics of mid-nineteenth-century political rhetoric. Douglas, a member of Congress since 1843 and a nationally prominent spokesman for the Democratic party, was seeking reelection to a third term in the U.S. Senate, and Lincoln was running for Douglas's Senate seat as a Republican. Because of Douglas's political stature, the campaign attracted national attention. Its outcome, it was thought, would determine the ability of the Democratic party to maintain unity in the face of the divisive sectional and slavery issues, and some were convinced it would determine the viability of the Union itself. "The battle of the Union is to be fought in Illinois," a Washington paper declared.

On election day, the voters of Illinois chose members of the state legislature who in turn reelected Douglas to the Senate in January 1859. Although Lincoln lost, the Republicans

received more popular votes than the Democrats, signaling an important shift in the political character of the state. Moreover, Lincoln had gained a reputation throughout the North. He was invited to campaign for Republican candidates in other states and was now mentioned as a candidate for the presidency. In winning, Douglas further alienated the Buchanan administration and the South, was soon to be stripped of his power in the Senate, and contributed to the division of the Democratic party.

I hold the opinion that these debates were one of several turning point moments in American history prior to the Civil War. These dialogues brought forth the larger questions of the future of the country and served as a microcosm of the broader issues being discussed throughout the growing country.

The rise of the newly formed Republican Party also meant the end of the older Whig party, which had worked for many decades towards continued compromise, rather than dealing with the festering issues of slavery and state's rights. Compromise could not longer work the way it had in the past. Partisanship would tear the country apart if we did not deal with it.

Both in these debates and in other speeches (notably the "House Divided" speech) Lincoln began to make it clear that a country living with a dichotomous culture could not long endure. Douglas continued to represent an older way of thinking, carried forth earlier by men like Henry Clay, that the union could simply continue to reconcile differences without really dealing with the issues at hand.

I believe we can see some rough parallels in the election of Barack Obama (the new, younger outsider with thoughts of new approaches to our problems) against John McCain (the older establishment man with thoughts of continued tried and true methods). It is not a perfect analogy, but shows a similar changing-of-the-guard nature that the Lincoln-Douglas debates represent.