

# Digital History

---

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

[Back to Hypertext History: Our Online American History Textbook](#)

## **The Impending Crisis**

### **The Lincoln-Douglas Debates**

**Period:** 1850s

The critical issues dividing the nation--slavery versus free labor, popular sovereignty, and the legal and political status of black Americans --were brought into sharp focus in a series of dramatic debates during the 1858 election campaign for U.S. senator from Illinois. The campaign pitted a little-known lawyer from Springfield named Abraham Lincoln against Senator Stephen A. Douglas, the front runner for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1860.

The public knew little about the man the Republicans selected to run against Douglas. Lincoln had been born on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin near Hodgenville, Kentucky, and he grew up on the wild Kentucky and Indiana frontier. At the age of 21, he moved to Illinois, where he worked as a clerk in a country store, volunteered to fight Indians in the Black Hawk War, became a local postmaster and a lawyer, and served four terms in the lower house of the Illinois General Assembly.

A Whig in politics, Lincoln was elected in 1846 to the U.S. House of Representatives, but his stand against the Mexican War had made him too unpopular to win reelection. After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, Lincoln reentered politics, and in 1858 the Republican Party nominated him to run against Douglas for the Senate.

Lincoln accepted the Republican nomination with the famous words: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half-free." He did not believe the Union would fall, but he did predict that it would cease to be divided. Lincoln proceeded to argue that Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision were part of a conspiracy to make slavery lawful "in all the States, old as well as new--North as well as South."

For four months Lincoln and Douglas crisscrossed Illinois, traveling nearly 10,000 miles and participating in seven face-to-face debates before crowds of up to 15,000.

Douglas's strategy in the debates was to picture Lincoln as a fanatical "Black

Republican" whose goal was to incite civil war, emancipate the slaves, and make blacks the social and political equals of whites.

Lincoln denied that he was a radical. He said that he supported the Fugitive Slave Law and opposed any interference with slavery in the states where it already existed.

During the course of the debates, Lincoln and Douglas presented two sharply contrasting views of the problem of slavery. Douglas argued that slavery was a dying institution that had reached its natural limits and could not thrive where climate and soil were inhospitable. He asserted that the problem of slavery could best be resolved if it were treated as essentially a local problem.

Lincoln, on the other hand, regarded slavery as a dynamic, expansionistic institution, hungry for new territory. He argued that if Northerners allowed slavery to spread unchecked, slaveowners would make slavery a national institution and would reduce all laborers, white as well as black, to a state of virtual slavery.

The sharpest difference between the two candidates involved the issue of black Americans' legal rights. Douglas was unable to conceive of blacks as anything but inferior to whites, and he was unalterably opposed to Negro citizenship. "I want citizenship for whites only," he declared. Lincoln said that he, too, was opposed to "bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races." But he insisted that black Americans were equal to Douglas and "every living man" in their right to life, liberty, and the fruits of their own labor.

The debates reached a climax on a damp, chilly August 27. At Freeport, Illinois, Lincoln asked Douglas to reconcile the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, which denied Congress the power to exclude slavery from a territory, with popular sovereignty. Could the residents of a territory "in any lawful way" exclude slavery prior to statehood?

Douglas replied by stating that the residents of a territory could exclude slavery by refusing to pass laws protecting slaveholders' property rights. "Slavery cannot exist a day or an hour anywhere," he declared, "unless it is supported by local police regulations."

Lincoln had maneuvered Douglas into a trap. Any way he answered, Douglas was certain to alienate Northern Free Soilers or proslavery Southerners. The Dred Scott decision had given slaveowners the right to take their slavery into any western territories. Now Douglas said that territorial settlers could exclude slavery, despite what the Court had ruled. Douglas won reelection, but his cautious statements antagonized Southerners and Northern Free Soilers alike.

In the fall election of 1858, the general public in Illinois did not have an opportunity to vote for either Lincoln or Douglas because the state legislature, and not individual voters, actually elected the Illinois senator. In the final balloting, the Republicans outpolled the Democrats. But the Democrats had gerrymandered the voting districts so skillfully that they kept control of the state legislature.

Although Lincoln failed to win a Senate seat, his battle with Stephen Douglas had catapulted him into the national spotlight and made him a serious presidential possibility in 1860. As Lincoln himself noted, his defeat was "a slip and not a fall."

# Lincoln-Douglas Debates Bubble Map

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

