

THE FINE PRINT

Episode 011

Decade of Debate: the Lincoln-Douglas Debates in Context – Script

[00:25] Peyton: On the afternoon of August 21, 1858, thousands of people gathered before a stage in the town of Ottawa, Illinois, at the confluence of the Illinois River and the Fox River. More than ten thousand spectators stood waiting for two men to take the stage. One was Stephen Douglas, a Democrat, the incumbent senator running for re-election. Known as the “Little Giant” due to his diminutive stature but outsized influence in politics, he had previously served as the House of Representative for Illinois’s 5th district, Secretary of State of Illinois, and sat on the Illinois Supreme Court. Douglas had helped to broker the Compromise of 1850, and one of the primary champions of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He was dedicated to the preservation of slavery and its expansion into the Western territories, which had ballooned after the United States acquired large swathes of territory at Mexico’s expense after the Mexican-American War.

[01:13] JP: The other was his challenger: Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, former Representative for Illinois’s 7th District and representative in the Illinois State Legislature. Lincoln was, in contrast, an outspoken critic of slavery and particularly its westward expansion. Each was their respective party’s candidate for senate. The first to speak that day was Douglas.

[01:36] Stephen Douglas: “Ladies and gentlemen: I appear before you to-day for the purpose of discussing the leading political topics which now agitate the public mind...y an arrangement between Mr. Lincoln and myself, we are present here to-day for the purpose of having a joint discussion, as the representatives of the two great political parties of the State and Union, upon the principles in issue between those parties and this vast concourse of people, shows the deep feeling which pervades the public mind in regard to the questions dividing us.”¹

02:12] JP: Their debate in Ottawa, and the seven that followed, would attract national attention, turning Abraham Lincoln into a household name. Although Lincoln lost the Senate race to Douglas, he would be elected as the 16th president of the United States just over two years later. Leading the United States through the Civil War that broke out in large part as a response to his election. The war, which would prove to be the deadliest conflict in American history. He would issue the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863,

“The Great Emancipator” however, would be struck down by an assassin’s bullet on April 14, 1865, five days after the surrender of General Robert E. Lee. Lincoln would become one of the most revered Presidents in American history, His likeness finds itself plastered on coins, banknotes, license plates, national memorials, and mountains today, but on August 21, 1858, Abraham Lincoln had yet to ascend to the national pantheon. He was simply a notable figure in Illinois politics.

Introduction / Section I

[03:14] JP: Welcome to The Fine Print, my name is JP Moore,

[03:17] Peyton: and my name is Peyton Brehm

[03:20] JP: In honor of our country’s semi-quincentennial, we are covering numerous topics from our country’s early history, from the Revolution into the Early Republic period. Today, we will be discussing the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates and examining how they reflected their tumultuous times. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas held seven debates across Illinois between August 21st and October 15th, travelling from town to

¹ Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, “The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 1st Debate,” Teaching American History, August 21, 1858, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-1st-debate/>; Soft background noise of crowd throughout the podcast primary source readings is from, <https://freesound.org/s/700468/> - Illinois State Fair crowd_ talk ambience by snapsound -- <https://freesound.org/s/700468/> -- License: Attribution 4.0.

town over rail. After Ottawa, the two would speak in the towns of Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton.

[03:56] Peyton: Lincoln and Douglas clashed over slavery and its westward expansion, particularly the policy of “popular sovereignty,” which had become federal law with the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, introduced to the Senate by Douglas himself.² Tensions surrounding slavery, particularly exacerbated by rapid westward expansion, had exploded. The violence in “Bleeding Kansas” was continuing to escalate, with the Marais des Cygnes Massacre, in which ten abolitionists were shot in cold blood, five fatally.³ Their debates, and the national attention that they garnered, would be enabled by new, modern technology: telegraph wires stretched across the country, allowing for the rapid transmission of information faster and further than ever before and measurably encouraging greater voter turnout.⁴ Speeches delivered on a wooden stage in a prairie town could be published and read in newspapers in New York, Charleston, or New Orleans within days. An extensive statewide rail network, which had expanded rapidly in the preceding decades, allowed Douglas and Lincoln to transit quickly across Illinois, crisscrossing the state from North to South and East to West in a matter of days, reaching tens of thousands of spectators. Every debate held between the pair would also be held along both a rail connection and, save for Jonesboro, an established telegraph line. Even before these new technologies rapidly compressed time and space in the early American West, an expansive postal service had first been crucial in serving as a direct and inexpensive economic link between plucky pioneers and a distant federal government in the East.⁵ All of this meant that the debates did not unfold in a vacuum. Rather, they spoke to the larger concerns of the nation during a time of turmoil over the issue of slavery and its expansion. To understand why these exchanges resonated so

² Stephen A. Douglas: A Featured Biography, United States Senate, Accessed April 19, 2026, https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured_Bio_Douglas_Stephen.htm.

³ For example, the Marais des Cygnes Massacre, in which ten abolitionists were shot in cold blood, five fatally. Bleeding Kansas: A Stain on Kansas History, Accessed April 19, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/bleedingks.htm>.

⁴ Tianyi Wang, “The Electric Telegraph, News Coverage, and Political Participation,” *The Journal of Economic History* 85, no. 1 (2025): 1–32

⁵ William H. Bergmann, “Delivering a Nation through the Mail: The Post Office in the Ohio Valley, 1789 - 1815,” *Ohio Valley History* (Cincinnati) 8, no. 3 (2008): 1–18.

powerfully, we need to step back and examine the forces behind territorial expansion and sectional tension that brought the nation to this moment.

Section II

[05:41] Peyton: The issue of slavery in America furthered the sectional lines that would cement themselves in the 1850s. Stephen Douglas, for his part, was a proponent and champion of the idea of “popular sovereignty”, the policy of citizens living in a territory voting whether to be admitted into the Union as a free or slave state. In his repeated defense of the doctrine, Douglas argued in favor of self-government in the states [Freeport]. He strongly believed in the constitutional sovereignty of the states and the right of their elected legislatures, a belief that extended to territories, to decide on the legality of the practice of slavery for themselves. More appealingly to Douglas, popular sovereignty was pragmatic and the best possible solution to preserve the “perpetuity of this Union” at a time when a triumph of uniformity in rhetoric, either pro or anti-slavery, would mean its demise [Freeport]. Although Douglas emphasized this point repeatedly, popular sovereignty was mostly viewed as unacceptable by both anti-slavery Northerners and Southern Democrats. Abolitionists feared it was a scheme to institutionalize slavery, while slaveholders feared its ambiguity and lack of specific protections threatened the practice’s survival. Douglas’s refusal to disavow the practice would contribute to his dismissal from his chairmanship on the U.S. Senate Committee on Territories.⁶

[06:53] Peyton: The annexation of the massive territory in the West that the United States gained from their victory over Mexico put a greater strain on sectional divides. With such a large landmass being annexed the issue arose of how that territory would be organized into future states. In 1850, following the gold rush boom of the 49’ers, California was petitioning for its acceptance as a free state into the Union. When the territory petitioned to become a state the issue regarding its boundaries drew the ire of pro-slavery factions in the Union. If the entirety of California was to be accepted as a

⁶ Daily National (San Francisco, CA), July 16, 1859 as cited in Robert W. Johannsen, “Stephen A. Douglas, ‘Harper’s Magazine,’ and Popular Sovereignty,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45, no. 4 (1959: 606–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1888713>.

free state it would go against the standing precedence of the Compromise of 1820. The compromise of 1820 set the longitude and latitude to determine whether territory would be admitted as a free or slave state. For 30 years the compromise was able to keep the peace between the growing hostility of pro and anti-slavery factions. However, the territory annexed from Mexico proved to fuel the ambition of Southern slave holders, building dreams of grandeur in their minds, to create a slaveholding empire stretching from sea-to-sea.

(07:52] Peyton: These competing aspirations collided most violently, and visibly, in the Kansas Territory during a period soon to be known as “Bleeding Kansas.” Douglas’s own Kansas-Nebraska Act had previously organized the area into a federal territory in 1854, and what immediately followed was a period of frontier violence as separate camps of settlers endeavored to establish a slave or a free state. The organization of the Nebraska Territory was part of a larger program for western organization that Douglas wanted to achieve. Included in the organization of Nebraska was a transcontinental railroad, telegraph development, and a free homestead policy to attract pioneers for frontier settlement and land improvement.⁷ Pro-slavery Missourians would cross the territorial border to influence elections, through fraud and intimidation, that would decide the future of slavery post-statehood, while antislavery settlers formed militias and engaged in violent skirmishes. Later years in the conflict would even see the dismantling of polling places and the organization of slavecatching patrols.⁸ The events in Kansas were then amplified by national news coverage as the Union began to desensitize itself to political violence.

Section III

[08:55] JP: Though it was events such as the Kansas Nebraska Act and the sectionalization of the country that brought about the political platforms of our interlocutors, it was the

⁷ Yonatan Eyal, “With His Eyes Open: Stephen A. Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Disaster of 1854.” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1998-) 91, no. 4 (1998: 175–217. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/stable/40193287>.

⁸ Kristen T. Oertel, “Bleeding Kansas: A Call to Arms,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Civil War*, ed. Lorien Foote and Earl J. Hess (Oxford University Press, 2021]

issue of slavery itself which made up the substance of Lincoln and Douglas's disagreements.

Modern popular belief would have you think that the two sides of this debate were black and white: on one side is Abraham Lincoln, the champion of liberty, and on the other: Stephen Douglas, defender of the wretched practice of slavery. But in reality, the two candidate's stances on the issue were much more complicated than that. So, as we try to use these debates to better understand the character of the nation at the time, we must first understand the two sides of the debate in the time in which they existed.

Lincoln represented the relatively new Republican party, a patchwork of the anti-slavery Whigs and Free-Soil democrats who all sought to halt the further spread of slavery. This position, of course, was not popular in the South, but other members of the political spectrum found issue with it as well. On one hand, moderates found themselves constantly questioning if the anti-slavery movement was a cover for the radical idea of the complete abolition of slavery, which many believed would threaten the cohesion of the Union. Ironically, on the other hand, you had those who believed that abolition was the only correct answer to the inhumane practice of slavery and thought that Lincoln and his party didn't go far enough in their fight against it.

To further complicate the matter, all of this talk of anti-slavery by Republicans was still undergirded by their engrained racist worldview. Beliefs about racial difference and natural hierarchies of race could not be easily shaken. Even Lincoln himself expressed these beliefs, and during the opening of his fourth debate with Douglas, articulated them in a way that is uncomfortable for the modern ear, but displays well the seemingly contradictory viewpoint of the time:

[10:43] 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, [applause]—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 for ever 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 am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race. I say upon this occasion I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position the negro should be denied everything. I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife. [Cheers and laughter.] My understanding is that I can just let her alone.⁹

[11:57] JP: If that small bit from Lincoln made you feel a little bit uncomfortable, you are beginning to fully understand the issue at hand here. In spite of the fact that Lincoln and other Republicans wanted African Americans to be able to pursue their natural rights to some extent, they still did not see the two races as equal in the struggle for supremacy that they imagined in their world.

Now, if there was one thing that Lincoln and Douglas did have in common, it was the South's dislike for their political platforms. Though more warm to popular sovereignty than anti-slavery, southerners were cautious of this idea because it was unclear when a future state would exercise its right to choose to adopt the pro-slavery or free soil position. While southerners preferred the ambiguous existence of slavery in a pre-state territory, Douglas argued against his party mates on this matter, and held the position that the issue must be decided on at a concrete time to avoid the existence of these ambiguous anything-goes territories.¹⁰ Furthermore, it is important to note that Douglas saw popular sovereignty not necessarily as a means to expand slavery but as a democratic solution to the preservation of a Union bursting at the seams. None of this is said to exonerate Douglas or make light of his blatant support of prolonging slavery, but rather to show the complicated landscape in which these debates took place.

[13:10] Peyton: Part of this landscape was a new, national media ecosystem. When, in 1844, Samuel F.B. Morse, in the first message of its kind, telegraphed to his assistant in Baltimore from Washington D.C., "What hath God wrought?" he expressly understood

⁹ Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 4th Debate, Part I," Teaching American History, September 18, 1858, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-4th-debate-part-i/>.

¹⁰ Johannsen, Robert W, "The Lincoln-Douglas Campaign of 1858: Background and Perspective," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1908-1984) 73, no. 4 (1980: 242-62, 247.

the extent to which such a technology could revolutionize the early American Republic. Morse would go on to warn his assistant to “be especially careful not to give a partisan character to any information you may transmit.”¹¹ First reaching Illinois in 1848, the telegraph brought state-level politics to a national audience. By the time of the debates between Lincoln and Douglas, newspapers could receive dispatches from Washington and vice versa within days, and local media shifted toward covering Congress, the presidency, and the growing sectional crisis. Sectional press was itself not a new phenomenon, but the telegraph had suddenly made everything more visible, and it became increasingly difficult to isolate oneself from politics.

Douglas’s status as a national figure by 1858 would attract extensive press coverage, while newspapers across the country, both Democratic- and Republican-leaning, eagerly awaited telegraphed transcripts and reactions to the forthcoming debates. Douglas’s contentious position within the Democratic Party, stemming from his stance on the issue of popular sovereignty, would become a particular weakness of his campaign and was subject to extensive criticism in Southern Democratic publications. In fact, some of these newspapers were far more openly critical of Douglas than the “Black Republican” Lincoln, one going so far as to call certain actions of his “heresy.”¹² In a letter published by the *Wilmington Journal*, Democratic Senator James S. Green of Missouri called the very idea of canvassing the state on the embattled Douglas’s behalf “preposterous.”¹³ Even before the two candidates would meet in Ottawa, it was clear that their contest was to be less of a local election than a national, widely-publicized referendum on the future of the Union.

[14:59] JP: And so, even before the debates begin, we find ourselves between two political positions which already begin to express the character of the nation at the time: a place with no satisfying answer to the question of slavery, and no perfect heroes of the cause. But political positions themselves only exist to explain the views of a mass group of

¹¹ Samuel F. B. Morse, “Letter to Alfred Vail,” personal communication, July 26, 1844.

¹² “The Heresies of Douglas,” *Wilmington Journal* (Wilmington, NC), October 29, 1858.

¹³ “Douglas’ Relations to the Democratic Party,” *Wilmington Journal* (Wilmington, N.C.), August 27, 1858.

people. So how is it then, that the actual substance of these debates inform us about the United States in 1858? Further exploration of Lincoln and Douglas's rhetoric during the debates can provide the information we are looking for in this question....

We are now back where we began, with the debate in Ottawa on August 21st. Douglas has just spoken first, and has used his time to paint Lincoln as an abolitionist radical, whose policies would bring instability to the state of Illinois and the Union as a whole.

[15:50] Douglas: In 1854, Mr. Abraham Lincoln and Mr. Trumbull entered into an arrangement, one with the other, and each with his respective friends, to dissolve the old Whig party on the one hand, and to dissolve the old Democratic party on the other, and to connect the members of both into an Abolition party under the name and disguise of a Republican party.¹⁴

[16:17] JP: Douglas then goes on to outline what he claims was the new abolitionist platform on which the new Republican party was formed by Lincoln and Lyman Trumbull, a fellow Illinois Senator and great supporter of Lincoln throughout his Senate race. Though these claims were later found to be erroneous, they did their damage in the moment. After Douglas had completed his hour long opening remarks, Lincoln's time to speak finally came. But instead of shifting focus to Douglas' views on popular sovereignty, and the ambiguity behind its processes, he spent his time defending against the allegations of radicalism levied by Douglas by assuring the crowd of his moderate anti-slavery stance. On theme with this tactic, Lincoln had this to say on the issue of slavery in his response:

[17:02] Lincoln: 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 me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution.¹⁵

[17:28] JP: Remarks such as these were tepid at best. Lincoln was still clearly playing the defensive at this point in the speech, trying to send a message of moderation in response

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¹⁵ "Lincoln-Douglas Debates, First Debate."

to Douglas's claims. But in the closing remarks of his time, Lincoln utilizes a metaphor to describe the immoral nature of Douglas' popular sovereignty, a powerful message that signals of Lincoln's rhetoric to come:

[17:50] Lincoln: Judge Douglas is going back to the era of our Revolution, and to the extent of his ability, muzzling the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. When he invites any people willing to have slavery, to establish it, he is blowing out the moral lights around us. [Cheers.] When he says he "cares not whether slavery is voted down or voted up,"—that it is a sacred right of self government—he is in my judgment penetrating the human soul and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty in this American people.¹⁶

[18:24] JP: Though this final metaphor produced significant applause from the crowd, it was still overshadowed by the many minutes Lincoln had spent defending himself against Douglas' claims and not criticizing Douglas' specific position of popular sovereignty.

To end the debate, Douglas takes the stage for one more 30 minute rejoinder, attempting to speak over heckling and cajoling from the crowd: Lincoln's poor performance didn't change the fact that Ottawa was more anti than pro-slavery. Nevertheless, Douglas continued to hold Lincoln's feet to the fire in regards to the Republican position.

[18:56] Douglas: I asked him to answer me and you whether he would vote to admit a State into the Union, with slavery or without it, as its own people might choose. He did not answer that question. He dodges that question also, under the cover that he was not on the Committee at the time, that he was not present when the platform was made. I want to know if he should happen to be in the Senate when a State applied for admission, with a constitution acceptable to her own people, he would vote to admit that State, if slavery was one of its institutions. He avoids the answer.¹⁷

[19:39] JP: Lincoln then interrupts Douglas in the middle of his oration, and not for the first time. The transcriber's account paints a picture of Lincoln losing his composure in these moments. It reads: "MR. LINCOLN—interrupting the third time excitedly, No, Judge—[Mr. Lincoln again disappeared suddenly aided by a pull from behind.]"¹⁸

¹⁶ "Lincoln-Douglas Debates, First Debate."

¹⁷ "Lincoln-Douglas Debates, First Debate."

¹⁸ "Lincoln-Douglas Debates, First Debate."

[20:01] JP: The debate transcripts, both pro-Republican and Pro-Democrat, paint this moment as an embarrassment for Lincoln as he is pulled off stage in the middle of interrupting Douglas's remarks. Ultimately, he leaves the debate in Ottawa having gained very little, and it is often considered among historians to be his weakest performance.

The next three debates, in Freeport, Jonesboro, and Charleston produced much of the same from the two candidates: each setting snares for each other, trying to convince the crowd of their own moderation and their opponent's radical beliefs that would unravel the Union. However, it is in Galesburg, at Knox College where the rhetoric of the debates begins to shift course. Eminent Lincoln historian David Zarefsky, in his rhetorical analysis of the debates, notes that this is the first debate in which Lincoln's arguments against slavery, and Douglas's retorts take on a much more principled character.¹⁹ In past debates, Lincoln often had fought against the idea of popular sovereignty and slavery by foreseeing its role in the dissolution of the Union, and pointing out the ways in which it could conflict with the Dredd Scott decision. But in his response to Douglas's challenges at Knox college, Lincoln honed in on a different, more abstract approach that had previously only been lightly referenced, one which pointed to the moral quality of Douglas's popular sovereignty and appealed to citizens' beliefs about the nation's exceptional founding.

For example, during his opening statement at Knox college, Douglas challenged Lincoln's past stances on the founding fathers' beliefs about slavery.

[21:32] Douglas: I tell you that this Chicago doctrine of Lincoln's—declaring that the negro and the white man are made equal by the Declaration of Independence and by Divine Providence—is a monstrous heresy. The signers of the Declaration of Independence never dreamed of the negro when they were writing that document. They referred to white men, to men of European birth and European descent, when they declared the equality of all men. I see a gentleman there in the crowd shaking his head. Let me remind him that when Thomas Jefferson

¹⁹ David Zarefsky, "Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press], 1990, 62.

wrote that document, he was the owner, and so continued until his death, of a large number of slaves.²⁰

[22:15] JP: Lincoln responded to this claim during his remarks saying:

[22:22] Lincoln: I only have to remark upon this part of the Judge's speech... that I believe the entire records of the world, from the date of the Declaration of Independence up to within three years ago, may be searched in vain for one single affirmation, from one single man, that the negro was not included in the Declaration of Independence; I think I may defy Judge Douglas to show that he ever said so, that Washington ever said so, that any President ever said so, that any member of Congress ever said so, or that any living man upon the whole earth ever said so, until the necessities of the present policy of the Democratic party, in regard to slavery, had to invent that affirmation.²¹

Here Lincoln and Douglas depart from their usual debate about the effects of popular sovereignty on the Union and instead discuss the more abstract idea of whether the Founding Fathers actually intended for the United States to be a place for anybody but whites. Later, Lincoln directly attacks Douglas's position on slavery, specifically his disregard for its inherent immorality and the nation's desire to cease the immoral practice.

[23:27] Lincoln: I suppose that the real difference between Judge Douglas and his friends, and the Republicans on the contrary, is, that the Judge is not in favor of making any difference between slavery and liberty—that he is in favor of eradicating, of pressing out of view, the questions of preference in this country for free or slave institutions; and consequently every sentiment he utters discards the idea that there is any wrong in slavery.²²

[23:53] JP: Near the end of his speech, Lincoln even directly linked the question of slavery to the endangerment of national greatness:

[24:01] Lincoln: I think it is an exceedingly interesting and important question for this people to consider, whether we shall engage in the policy of acquiring additional territory, discarding altogether from our consideration, while obtaining new territory, the question how it may affect us in regard to this the only endangering element to our liberties and national greatness.²³

²⁰ Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 5th Debate," Teaching American History, October 7, 1858, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-5th-debate/>.

²¹ Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 5th Debate."

²² Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 5th Debate."

²³ Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 5th Debate."

[24:22] JP: In a 2009 journal article, “Lincoln and the Ethics of Emancipation: Universalism, Nationalism, Exceptionalism,” historian Dorothy Ross explores Lincoln’s use of a nationalistic argument against slavery that appeals to the nation’s exceptionalist vision of itself. That is, an idealistic vision of America as a harbinger of rights, freedom and equality to the world. Lincoln’s arguments against slavery harnessed this vision which he saw as incompatible with the practice of slavery. Ross contends that this argument played a significant role in the development of anti-slavery sentiment in the years leading up to emancipation, just as the nationalist beliefs of America’s status as a white nation aided in the prolonging of pro-slavery beliefs from the Early Republic and into Reconstruction.²⁴ Therefore, we can see some of this nationalist exceptionalism and principled language begin to make a greater appearance in these last few debates. Namely, we see this through Lincoln’s discussion of the founding fathers, challenging of Douglas’s beliefs on slavery, and talk of slavery’s threat to the nation’s greatness

[25:24] JP: In the sixth and seventh debates at Quincy and Alton, Lincoln continued his more principled attack against Douglas which had begun at Knox College. At Quincy, he spent several minutes laying out the exact principles of his anti-slavery platform.

[25:38] Lincoln: 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 as 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.²⁵

[26:16] JP: In response, Douglas continued to deny the fact that slavery was a question of morality, only state governance:

²⁴ Dorothy Ross, “Lincoln and the Ethics of Emancipation: Universalism, Nationalism, Exceptionalism,” *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 2 (2009: 379–99, 399.

²⁵ Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, “The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 6th Debate, Part I,” Teaching American History, October 13, 1858, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-6th-debate-part-i/>

[26:24] Douglas: He 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.²⁶

[27:02] JP: Again, at Alton, these issues of principle arose. Harkening back to moments of unity between the two parties that had preserved the Union, Douglas made his own national case for his platform:

[27:16] Douglas: My friends, there never was a time when it was as important for the Democratic party, for all national men, to rally and stand together as it is to—day...It was so in 1850, when Abolitionism had even so far divided this country, North and South, as to endanger the peace of the Union; Whigs and Democrats united in establishing the Compromise measures of that year, and restoring tranquillity and good feeling. These measures passed on the joint action of the two parties. They rested on the great principle that the people of each State and each Territory should be left perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions to suit themselves.²⁷

[28:02] JP: And in his final hour and a half of the past seven debates, Lincoln maintained his emphasis on slavery's moral wrong, and in doing so produced one of the more dramatic moments of the entire debate circuit.

[28:14] Lincoln: It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, "You work and toil and earn bread, and I'll eat it." No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his

²⁶Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 6th Debate, Part II," Teaching American History, October 13, 1858, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-6th-debate-part-ii/>

²⁷ Full version of quote, My friends, there never was a time when it was as important for the Democratic party, for all national men, to rally and stand together as it is to—day...It was so in 1850, when Abolitionism had even so far divided this country, North and South, as to endanger the peace of the Union; Whigs and Democrats united in establishing the Compromise measures of that year, and restoring tranquillity and good feeling. These measures passed on the joint action of the two parties. They rested on the great principle that the people of each State and each Territory should be left perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions to suit themselves"; Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 7th Debate, Part I," Teaching American History, October 15, 1858, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-7th-debate-part-i/>

own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.²⁸

[29:01] JP: With one final dramatic flourish, Lincoln connected the nation's founding myth of revolution in the face of tyranny, and the contemporary struggle against slavery. By doing this, he unquestionably connected the immorality of the practice with the duty of Americans to once again fight against tyranny of a different kind.

And with these remarks, the two interlocutors summed up the principles which they espoused, and in many ways, the complex issue that the nation faced at the time. On one hand, Lincoln's position spoke to the immoral nature of slavery, one which we now know to be obvious beyond a doubt. Lincoln drew the line between himself and his opponent in the latter debates by focusing on this moral stance - one which the nation struggled to come to terms with. On the other side of the stage, Douglas, the champion of popular sovereignty, appealed to questions of law, and the sovereignty of states. Why should the states be controlled by the federal government to such an extent? Would this not dissolve all that it meant to be American? These were questions which were not settled on those seven stages in Illinois, and certainly could not be settled by the nation before the eruption of the Civil War.

[30:07] Peyton: Despite Lincoln's stronger performance in the latter stages of the campaign, his complex ideology was frequently misinterpreted over the course of his debates with Douglas. The now extensive infrastructure of telegraph lines and railroads, which enabled such a vast audience, would, one might expect, lend itself to an equitable distribution of information across the country. Instead, the same networks that had once fostered a sense of uniform communication and national pride had become a tool for advancing sectional interests. Just as Democratic papers had resolved to reconsider their support of Douglas following his increasingly untenable support of popular sovereignty in the so-called "Kansas question," Lincoln had found himself almost entirely excluded from the same conversations about the future of the Union. Multiple Southern

²⁸ Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: 7th Debate, Part II," Teaching American History, October 15, 1858, accessed April 27, 2026,

papers, themselves strongly Democratic, routinely simplified the telegraphed transcripts of the debates and repurposed them to reinforce existing political positions; by 1858, the national political climate had little room for moderate positions. As a result, Lincoln's more careful distinctions were largely omitted in Southern print. At Freeport, Lincoln began his opening remarks by responding to a series of questions first posed by Douglas in the debate at Ottawa. He affirmed his own desire to "know that there would never be another slave state admitted into the Union" without falling too deeply into the dangerous political realm of abolitionism:

[31:23] LINCOLN: "...but I must add, that if slavery shall be kept out of the territories during the territorial existence of any one given territory, and then the people shall, having a fair chance and a clear field, when they come to adopt the constitution, do such an extraordinary thing as to adopt a slave constitution, uninfluenced by the actual presence of the institution among them, I see no alternative, if we own the country, but to admit them into the Union."²⁹

[31:53] Peyton: However, you would not find this same belief on the front page of a Southern newspaper. Instead, editorial frameworks portrayed him as an immediate threat to the institution of slavery and a sworn enemy of Southern interests. One September 25th issue of Raleigh's *North Carolina Standard* stated that Lincoln was utterly devoted to the "abolitionist crusade."³⁰

The same process operated for Douglas. Republican-affiliated papers were just as quick to cast him aside as his own party's publications, and certain ones portrayed him as politically inconsistent. In their July 15 issue, The Daily American paper of Manchester, New Hampshire wrote: "In [Douglas's] earlier movements last December, many of us thought that he had taken the incipient steps toward substantial republicanism... Western men all the while distrusted his purpose and integrity... Hence, we regard Mr. Douglas as a dangerous politician..." Notably, the same column defames his support for popular sovereignty as his belief "...that the majority have the right to tyrannize as much as they

²⁹ "Lincoln-Douglas Debates, First Debate."

³⁰ "The Contest in Illinois," *Semi-Weekly Standard* (Raleigh, N.C.), September 25, 1858.

choose.”³¹ In either case, neither a reader in Raleigh nor Manchester would find a direct quote from either candidate.

The crowd’s reactions during the debates were also equally misrepresented. We observed earlier how missteps in Lincoln’s first debate performance resulted in a disappointing performance; even Lincoln himself shared this sentiment,[] writing in a personal correspondence dated August 22: “...the fire flew some, and I am glad to know I am yet alive.”³² However, depending on the newspaper that covered the aftermath of the debate at Ottawa, you would find conflicting narratives. One account of the debate, published on September 3 in the *Fremont Journal of Fremont, Ohio*, reported that Lincoln’s stellar performance resulted in a parade of his supporters through the city. Led by a musical procession and carrying the victorious Lincoln on their shoulders, the jovial crowd escorted him to the mayor’s residence. Meanwhile, the *Chicago Times* had reported on August 22 that Lincoln was so humiliated by Douglas that he suddenly fell ill; “alternately burning with fever, and then suddenly chilled with shame, his respiratory organs had become obstructed, his limbs got cold, and he was unable to walk.” It was only then that a small group of his local supporters endeavored to carry Lincoln away from the debate grounds in shame. The *Chicago Press and Tribune* would later level startling allegations at Douglas, accusing him of “importing” reporters and tasking them with drafting transcripts of the debates that purposefully distorted Lincoln’s words.³³

Regardless of this extensive reporting, publishing comprehensive exchanges between the two candidates was almost unheard of. Clearly, the priority for newspaper editors and columnists across the country, at least for these more sectional papers, was brevity. Printing paper was certainly not cheap, nor was the usage of the telegraph, and maintaining a stable journalistic presence depended on concision and speed. Defining who was a ‘friend’ and who was an ‘enemy’ of their political base was a secondary motive. Even insulated, local publications spoke of a “united South” and remained

³¹ “Douglas and the Illinois Election,” *The Daily American* (Manchester, N.H.), July 15, 1858.

³² Abraham Lincoln to Joseph O. Cunningham, August 22

³³ *Chicago Press and Tribune*, September 20 1858

deeply critical of those who would act against its interests. While the telegraph brought the nation closer together, it also accelerated the Union's descent into a climate of deep division.

Conclusion

[34:37] Peyton: The debates between these two men truly served as a microcosm for their times. Questions surrounding slavery, and its westward expansion, dominated national politics. While each side of the debate was never fully united or consistent, they both understood the gravity: the Union was at stake. Though Douglas defeated Lincoln in the 1858 Senate elections, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas would face off with each other one more time: the 1860 presidential election. Lincoln would emerge victorious, though with only about 40% of the popular vote. Douglas came behind him in the popular vote with about 22%, but only received 12 electoral votes.³⁴ It was a highly contentious election, and South Carolina seceded from the Union shortly after the votes were counted, and was quickly joined by more slave states, unwilling to remain in a Union under Lincoln's leadership. In the midst of the campaign, Douglas privately realized that he could not win the election. At a speech in St. Louis, he addressed the crowd:

[35:41] Douglas: I am not here tonight to ask for your votes for the presidency, I am here to make an appeal to you on behalf of the Union and the peace of the country.³⁵

[35:53] JP: Douglas, while committed to slavery, was, like Lincoln, committed to union first and foremost. After his electoral defeat, Douglas returned to the senate, desperate to help hold together the now-disintegrating union. He joined a group of senators in proposing a series of constitutional amendments to satisfy the seceding states by guaranteeing slavery and restoring the Missouri Compromise. Such an eleventh-hour compromise to save the Union never materialized. On February 23, 1861, days before Lincoln's

³⁴ "1860" The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, Accessed April 19, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/1860>.

³⁵ Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America* (2008), 247

inauguration, Lincoln and Douglas met face-to-face for the first time since their famous debates two and a half years earlier. Douglas said to Lincoln:

[36:34] Douglas: "In God's name, act the patriot and save our children a country to live in."³⁶

[36:39] Peyton: At Lincoln's inauguration, Douglas sat near Lincoln in the front row as Lincoln's Vice President, Hannibal Hamlin, took his oath of office. Lincoln ascended to the stage and removed his hat before speaking, but paused, unsure of where to place it. Douglas stood up.

[36:53] Douglas: "Permit me, sir."³⁷

[37:57] JP: Douglas graciously took Lincoln's hat, returned to his seat, and placed it in his lap. Lincoln then addressed, for the first time, the fracturing nation, and concluded with some of his most famous words:

[37:12] Lincoln: "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect and defend' it. I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."³⁸
[applause and cheering]

[38:14] Peyton: His speech was met with thunderous applause. Rhetoric alone, however, would not save the Union. As Lincoln navigated the monumental task of preparing for the outbreak of full-scale civil war, Douglas once again embarked on a speaking tour, travelling across the country by rail. This time, he spoke in support of the Union's cause,

³⁶ Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit*, 263

³⁷ Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit*, 265-66

³⁸ Abraham Lincoln, *First Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln*, 1861

galvanizing crowds to rally behind the federal government. Speaking in Chicago on May 1st, he pronounced to a crowd:

[38:38] Douglas: “There are only two sides to the question. Every man must be for the United States or against it. There can be no neutrals in this war, only patriots—or traitors.”³⁹

[38:49] Peyton: At this point, he was suffering from severe rheumatism that had denied him the use of his arms. Douglas had suffered from rheumatism before, and he had recovered from bouts such as this one previously. However, this time was different. His health continued to deteriorate, and he was confined to his bed. It became clear that he had contracted typhoid. After spending a little over a month bedridden, Stephen Douglas passed away on June 3, 1861. As he lay dying, Union and Confederate troops clashed for the first time on land at the Battle of Philippi.⁴⁰ The question of slavery that Lincoln and Douglas had sparred over across Illinois almost three years earlier had torn the Union apart. Though their views on the peculiar institution differed, they both rallied to defend the Union, whatever the cost. Lincoln, however, was left without his old rival to face the grim years ahead.

³⁹ Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit*, 270

⁴⁰ Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit*, 271-72