Second Debate at Freeport, Illinois

By: Stephen Douglas
Date: August 27, 1858

Explanation of the Source: On August 27, 1858, Stephen Douglas was defending himself and his Senate seat from an up-in-coming Republican candidate by the name of Abraham Lincoln. Stephen Douglas wanted to show Lincoln as the extreme choice in this race for the Senate.

“The next question propounded to me by Mr. Lincoln is, can the people of a Territory in any lawful way, against the wishes of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State Constitution? I answer emphatically, as Mr. Lincoln has heard me answer a hundred times from every stump in Illinois, that in my opinion the people of a Territory can, by lawful means, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State Constitution. Mr. Lincoln knew that I had answered that question over and over again. He heard me argue the Nebraska bill on that principle all over the State in 1854, in 1855, and in 1856, and he has no excuse for pretending to be in doubt as to my position on that question. It matters not what way the Supreme Court may hereafter decide as to the abstract question whether slavery may or may not go into a Territory under the Constitution, the people have the lawful means to introduce it or exclude it as they please, for the reason that slavery cannot exist a day or an hour anywhere, unless it is supported by local police regulations.... Those police regulations can only be established by the local legislature, and if the people are opposed to slavery they will elect representatives to that body who will by unfriendly legislation effectually prevent the introduction of it into their midst. If, on the contrary, they are for it, their legislation will favor its extension. Hence, no matter what the decision of the Supreme Court may be on that abstract question, still the right of the people to make a slave Territory or a free Territory is perfect and complete under the Nebraska bill. I hope Mr. Lincoln deems my answer satisfactory on that point.”

Speech at Peoria

By: Abraham Lincoln
Date: October 16, 1854:

Explanation of the Source: The Kansas-Nebraska Act was at the heart of many debates between Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. The speech below is a response to a question that Stephen Douglas asked Lincoln over the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

“This is the repeal of the Missouri Compromise (Referring to the Kansas-Nebraska Act)... 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 cannot 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
good men among ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty, criticizing the
Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self-interest…

The doctrine of self-government is right, --absolutely and eternally right,-- but it has no just application
as here attempted. Or perhaps I should rather say that whether it has such application depends upon whether a
negro is not or is a man. If he is not a man, in that case he who is a man may as a matter of self-government do
just what he pleases with him. But if the negro is a man, is it not to that extent a total destruction of self-
government to say that he too shall not govern himself? When the white man governs himself, that is self-
government; but when he governs himself and also governs another man, that is more than self-government--
that is despotism. If the negro is a man, why then my ancient faith teaches me that “all men are created equal,”
and that there

Stephen Douglas frequently, with bitter irony and sarcasm, paraphrases our argument by saying: “The
white people of Nebraska are good enough to govern themselves, but they are not good enough to govern a few
miserable negroes!”

Well! I doubt not that the people of Nebraska are and will continue to be as good as the average of
people elsewhere. I do not say the contrary. What I do say is that no man is good enough to govern another man
without that other’s consent. I say this is the leading principle, the sheet-anchor of American republicanism. Our
Declaration of Independence says:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their
Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to
secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, DERIVING THEIR JUST POWERS FROM THE
CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED.”

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 flirtation 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 Northwestern 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. In the provision for the recovery of
fugitives, the slave is spoken of as a “PERSON HELD TO SERVICE OR LABOR.” In that prohibiting the
abolition of the African slave-trade for twenty years, that trade is spoken of as “the migration or importatio
of such persons as any of the States NOW EXISTING shall think proper to admit,” etc.

... Fellow-countrymen, Americans South, as well as North, shall we make no effort to arrest this? Already
the liberal party throughout the world express the apprehension “that the one retrograde institution in America is
undermining the principles of progress, and fatally violating the noblest political system the world ever saw.”
This is not the taunt of enemies, but the warning of friends. Is it quite safe to disregard it--to despise it? Is there
no danger to liberty itself in discarding the earliest practice and first precept of our ancient faith? In our greedy
chase to make profit of the negro, let us beware lest we “cancel and tear in 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 readopt 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. We shall have so saved it that the succeeding millions of free,
happy people, the world over, shall rise up and call us blessed to the latest generations.”
Nebraska Territory”

By: Stephen Douglas
Date: January 30, 1854

Explanation of the Source: While debating Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas explains the principles of Popular Sovereignty (Self-Government) in the Compromise of 1850.

“Upon the other point--that pertaining to the question of slavery in the Territories--it was the intention of the committee to be equally explicit. We took the principles established by the Compromise of 1850 as our guide, and intended to make each and every provision of the bill accord with those principles. Those measures established and rest upon the great principle of self-government--that the people should be allowed to decide the questions of their domestic institutions for themselves, subject only to such limitations and restrictions as are imposed by the Constitution of the United States, instead of having them determined by an arbitrary or geographical line…

The leading feature of the Compromise of 1850 was congressional non-intervention as to slavery in the Territories; that the people of the Territories, and of all the States, were to be allowed to do as they pleased upon the subject of slavery, subject only to the provisions of the Constitution of the United States.

That, sir, was the leading feature of the compromise measures of 1850. Those measures therefore, abandoned the idea of a geographical line as the boundary between free States and slave States; abandoned it because compelled to do it from an inability to maintain it; and in lieu of that substituted a great principle of self-government, which would allow the people to do as they thought proper. Now, the question is, when that new compromise, resting upon that great fundamental principle of freedom, was established, was it not an abandonment of the old one--the geographical line? Was it not a supersede of the old one within the very language of the substitute for the bill which is now under consideration?

Mr. President, I repeat, that so far as the question of slavery is concerned, there is nothing in the bill under consideration which does not carry out the principle of the compromise measures of 1850, by leaving the people to do as they please, subject only to the provisions of the Constitution of the United States. If that principle is wrong, the bill is wrong. If that principle is right, the bill is right. It is unnecessary to quibble about phraseology or words; it is not the mere words, the mere phraseology that our constituents wish to judge by. They wish to know the legal effect of our legislation.

The legal effect of this bill, if it be passed as reported by the Committee on Territories, is neither to legislate slavery into these Territories nor out of them, but to leave the people do as they please, under the provisions and subject to the limitations of the Constitution of the United States. Why should not this principle prevail? Why should any man, North or South, object to it? I will especially address the argument to my own section of country, and ask why should any northern man object to this principle? If you will review the history of the slavery question in the United States, you will see that all the great results in behalf of free institutions which have been worked out, have been accomplished by the operation of this principle, and by it alone.

When these States were colonies of Great Britain, every one of them was a slave-holding province. When the Constitution of the United States was formed, twelve out of the thirteen were slave-holding States. Since that time six of those States have become free. How has this been affected? Was it by virtue of abolition agitation in Congress? Was it in obedience to the dictates of the Federal Government? Not at all; but they have become Free States under the silent but sure and irresistible working of that great principle of self-government which teaches every people to do that which the interests of themselves and their posterity morally and peculiarly may require.

Under the operation of this principle New Hampshire became free, while South Carolina continued to hold slaves; Connecticut abolished slavery, while Georgia held on to it; Rhode Island abandoned the institution,
while Maryland preserved it; New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania abolished slavery, while Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky retained it. Did they do it at your bidding? Did they do it at the dictation of the Federal Government? Did they do it in obedience to any of your Wilmot provisos or ordinances of ’87? Not at all; they did it by virtue of their right as freemen under the Constitution of the United States, to establish and abolish such institutions as they thought their own good required.

Let me ask you where have you succeeded in excluding slavery by an act of Congress from one inch of the American soil? You may tell me that you did it in the Northwest Territory, by the ordinance of 1787. I will show you by the history of the country that you did not accomplish any such thing. You prohibited slavery there by law, but you did not exclude it in fact. Illinois was a part of the Northwest Territory. With the exception of a few French and white settlements, it was a vast wilderness, filled with hostile savages, when the ordinance of 1787 was adopted. Yet, sir, when Illinois was organized into a territorial government it established and protected slavery, and maintained it in spite of your ordinance, and in defiance of its express prohibition…

I do not like, I never did like, the system of legislation on our part, by which a geographical line, in violation of the laws of nature, and climate, and soil, and the laws of God, should be run to establish institutions for a people; yet, out of a regard for the peace and quiet of the country, out of respect for past pledges, and out of a desire to adhere faithfully to all compromises, I sustained the Missouri compromise so long as it was in force, and advocated its extension to the Pacific. Now, when that has been abandoned, when it has been superseded, when a great principle of self-government has been substituted for it, I choose to cling to that principle, and abide in good faith, not only by the letter, but by the spirit of the last compromise.”