

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

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The Lincoln-Douglas Debates stand as one of the most significant events in American History. When the debates first got underway, *The New York Tribune* reported that “perhaps no local contest in this country ever excited so general or so profound an interest as that now waging in Illinois.”¹ Since that time, however, the significance of the debates has extended well beyond the boundaries of the Prairie State. They have now achieved a nearly mythical status, and have become one of the ultimate examples of our political process, recalled with particular interest and relish during election campaigns. But, Lincoln scholars Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson have observed that the debates represent “far more than mere iconic status” and, in fact, stand as “a watershed in the development of American institutions... timeless in their relevance to issues constantly recurring in democratic societies.”² Lincoln Historian Allen C. Guelzo has also reminded us that hardball politics were at the center of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates because neither candidate shied away from grubbing for votes and pandering to those who attended these contests. Both Lincoln and Douglas used harsh rhetoric and old-fashioned mudslinging to characterize each other during these debates. In addition, members of the audience did not hesitate to shout out unflattering remarks and frequently groaned and guffawed when they disagreed with a particular point one of the speakers was making. Public oratory was popular with many Americans then, and particularly passionate enthusiasm expressed from people in the crowd at such events was not unusual.

Background

The debates took place in the seven Illinois towns of Ottawa, Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton; between August 21 and October 15 in 1858. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Arnold Douglas, the “Little Giant,” were respectively the Republican Party and Democratic Party candidates for the United States Senate from Illinois that year. The primary issue the two men were addressing was slavery with a particular emphasis on the question of whether or not slavery should be extended in the nation’s western territories. Lincoln was not an abolitionist, but, he despised slavery and

¹ Robert W. Johannsen, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 3.

² Rodney O. Davis & Douglas L. Wilson, eds. *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, (Urbana, IL: Knox College Lincoln Studies Center/ The University of Illinois Press, 2008), ix.

he envisioned a time in the future when slavery would disappear and he believed it should be forbidden from being established in any new state that joined the Union. United States Senators were elected at that time by State Legislatures, but this did not stop each candidate from taking the slavery issue directly to the people. By the late 1850s, Douglas's political reputation and stature were so great the Illinois Senatorial Campaign attracted national attention. Spectators came from nearly every corner of Illinois to hear the speakers, and major newspapers across the country intensely covered the debates. The rules agreed to before the debates let one candidate speak for 60 minutes, the second speaker received 90 minutes, and the original speaker was allowed a 30-minute rejoinder. Douglas, the incumbent, went first, so he initiated remarks at four of the contests.

The nation's political leaders had attempted for decades to deal with the issue of human bondage by means of various compromises, but between the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and the debates, differences between Northerners and Southerners over slavery reached the boiling point. The controversy was exacerbated in 1857 by the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision. The high court ruled that Scott was not a citizen and went on to say that Congress had no power to exclude slavery from the territories. The *Dred Scott* decision convinced Americans throughout the land that the institution of slavery would likely be perpetuated in the nation. The court's decision angered many northern citizens and came as a real setback to antislavery advocates, vehemently committed abolitionists, and free blacks.

Stephen Douglas had been primarily responsible for the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He had a vision of a transcontinental railroad being built across the west with its hub in Chicago. He knew that Southerners had designs on constructing a similar ribbon of steel westward that would follow a southern route to the Pacific Ocean. If the railroad was anchored in Chicago, however, Douglas realized that the territories beyond Missouri and Iowa would first need to be organized and settled. He suggested that two territories, Kansas and Nebraska, be created, and he also proposed the principle of "popular sovereignty" to address the slavery issue. The popular sovereignty principle had already been established in New Mexico and Utah territories as part of the Compromise of 1850. According to this concept, the people who resided in those territories would have the right to decide if slavery would be allowed to exist there. However, this would require repealing the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that prohibited the "peculiar institution" north of the 36° and 30' parallel.

Douglas had hoped the Kansas-Nebraska bill would be seen as an acceptable compromise between proslavery and antislavery constituencies, but it actually had the opposite effect. Throughout New England and across Northern and Midwestern states, Free-Soilers, numerous Northern Whigs, displeased Northern Democrats, along with several members of the Know-Nothing Party reacted with anger when the legislation was signed by President Pierce in 1854. Douglas had miscalculated badly and soon became aware of the fact that he might pay a harsh price politically. Many of his former supporters accused him of appeasing Southern Democrats in order to gain their support

for the presidency in the future. Almost immediately, proslavery supporters, many of them from Missouri, poured into Kansas and simultaneously anti-slavery settlers started arriving from Northern states. Before long, the two groups started to confront each other violently. The territory came to be called “Bleeding Kansas,” so named by influential New York newspaper editor Horace Greeley. Roving bands of thugs committed arson, theft, and murder; retaliation and revenge in a guerilla war setting prevailed. When Northern citizens back east read about the mayhem in Kansas, the stories helped to increase sympathy for Free-Soilers trying to establish their homes in Kansas. Even mildly antislavery Northerners were outraged. The Republican Party was established and grew rapidly in the midst of the controversies that swept across the nation after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

By 1856, this new and energized Republican Party was up and running, confident that its various coalitions were confident that it was gaining more and more support each month from voters. By the time Lincoln and Douglas stepped onto the stage at the first debate in Ottawa, thousands of Illinoisans were eager to attend these contests in communities close to where they lived. The men and women who listened to the two men were fully aware that the killing in Kansas was still going on, and they believed that the slavery issue had to be addressed and hopefully resolved by the country’s leading politicians. Every other political issue was ignored by the candidates during the debates. There was not a single word spoken about tariffs, banking policy, sectional disagreements over expenditures for internal improvements, or any other important public policy issue faced by the federal government.

Two additional events stirred the passions of Americans over slavery by the summer of 1858. One had to do with a horrific physical assault in the nation’s capital and the other involved political chicanery regarding efforts to write a state constitution in Kansas. The first of these occurred in May of 1856 when South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks walked across the floor of the U.S. Senate and with his cane beat Charles Sumner into unconsciousness. Senator Sumner was a well-known antislavery orator. The chamber was nearly empty but onlookers recalled that Sumner was pinned beneath his narrow desk, unable to stand up and defend himself. The Massachusetts senator had, according to Brooks, insulted his cousin, Andrew Butler of South Carolina during a recent speech Sumner had delivered. Sumner was unable to return to the senate floor for years, and his unoccupied seat became a constant reminder of his martyrdom. The brutality of the Brooks-Sumner Affair was something that lingered in the minds of many citizens thereafter as a symbol of the Republic’s divisions between North and South.

The second event was a scheme hatched in Lecompton, Kansas and it eventually had the effect of splitting the National Democratic Party even further apart. In 1857, in the small town of Lecompton, a proslavery delegation drew up a constitution that anti-slavery Kansans could in no way support. In fact, Free-Soil loyalists there intentionally ignored the document, and “reacted by boycotting the ‘legal’ government and setting up one of their own, known to history as the Topeka Movement.”³ Nonetheless, a

³ Henry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959), 438.

referendum was held, and after being approved, the constitution was sent to Washington D.C. where controversy in the nation's capital exploded over the rigged constitution. The Lecompton Constitution was never ratified by Congress and, therefore, Kansas did not enter the Union as a proslavery state. To his credit, Douglas did not support the Lecompton Constitution and this stance pitted him against President Buchanan and slaveholding southerners who wanted it passed. By taking this stand, Douglas's favor in the South dwindled away, but he did regain some political support in the north.

Ottawa August 21, 1858

Anyone who attended the first debate in Ottawa had to endure oppressive Illinois August heat. Douglas began with a withering attack on the Republican Platform of 1854, Lincoln's "House Divided" speech,⁴ and the Springfield lawyer's opposition to the *Dred Scott* decision. Douglas asserted that the founding fathers had created a nation half slave and half free, so why, he asked, couldn't the country remain that way now? Lincoln countered that the three legislative branches of the federal government were in the hands of men who would "scheme" to make slavery a national institution. He said that Douglas in the legislative branch, President Buchanan as the nation's chief executive officer, and Justice Taney on the Supreme Court were part of a conspiracy. The "Little Giant" claimed that such a charge was absurd and to say otherwise was a lie. Lincoln managed to effectively engage the public mind about slavery in order to discover what the true "public sentiment" was regarding the slavery issue. "In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything—with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed," he said.⁵ Douglas unequivocally expressed his view, as he did frequently at all the debates, that blacks belonged to an inferior race. This opinion echoed the long-standing notion among descendants of white Europeans that all other people in the world were racially inferior. Lincoln explained that he hated slavery and also believed that African Americans should enjoy "natural rights" like all human beings. But, Lincoln then went on to say that he did not think this meant blacks should have political and social equality. Historians agree that at Ottawa Douglas successfully put Lincoln on the defensive throughout the afternoon and skillfully portrayed his opponent as someone trying to "Abolitionize" the Whig and Democratic parties. After the first debate, Lincoln supporters urged him to go on the offensive and not spend so much time fending off questions from Douglas.

Freeport August 27, 1858

⁴ After Lincoln was nominated by the Republican Party for the U.S. Senate, he delivered a speech on June 16th in Springfield in which he declared that "a house divided against itself cannot endure permanently half-slave and half-free." See <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm>

⁵ Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 309-10.

The two debaters delivered remarks on a cloudy and cool day in Freeport. Lincoln spoke first and started by responding to some of the questions Douglas had raised at Ottawa. Although the same agreed-to time frame was used at the second debate, the moment almost always recalled, nearly to the exclusion of others that day, occurred when Lincoln asked a question that put the incumbent candidate on the defensive. Lincoln was aware of the fact that Freeport rested in the heart of strong Republican country. Two years earlier, the congressional district had overwhelmingly voted for Republicans at election time. When Douglas stood to speak, “he was pelted on his shoulder by a melon tossed from someone in the crowd.”⁶ Shortly after Lincoln began to speak, he asked Douglas how he could reconcile his popular sovereignty position with the *Dred Scott* decision that ruled slaveholders had the right to introduce slavery into the territories. If Douglas answered that he supported the *Dred Scott* decision, he would have Southern support, but if he argued for popular sovereignty, Southerners would never forgive him. Douglas had been asked the question before but now he had to respond in the limelight in front of the press. His reply that day was thereafter called the “Freeport Doctrine.” The people who settled a territory will be the ones, Douglas said who will determine whether or not slavery could exist. In addition, legal authority coupled with police enforcement would ultimately settle the issue. Douglas’s position was nothing but a calculated effort to satisfy all parties, but it failed. His answer destroyed his support in the South. Douglas’s support for popular sovereignty convinced the majority of slaveholders that he was not their champion. Towards the end of this second debate, scholars agree that Douglas again put Lincoln back on the defensive. Douglas claimed Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech would bring about the breakup of the union. The “Little Giant” frequently resorted to ugly race baiting at Freeport; do “Black Republicans think that a negro ought to be on a social equality with your wives and daughters,” he asked.⁷ Unfortunately for Lincoln, he failed to leverage the support he enjoyed from the numerous people who came out to hear him from this Republican stronghold. Although he attacked the “Freeport Doctrine” at future debates, Lincoln did not do so at the second debate itself and, therefore, he probably lost what would have been a real advantage.

Jonesboro September 15, 1858

Illinois stretches nearly 400 miles from its northern border to its southern tip on the Ohio River. The counties in Southern Illinois were mostly settled by people who formerly lived in states south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Southern Illinois had a distinctive culture: an economic structure, political outlook, religious practices, styles of dress, and racial attitudes that were quite different from the people who settled western, north-central, and northern Illinois. Most Northern Illinois pioneers hailed from New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Ohio, and they were characterized by their southern neighbors as “Yankees.” Many of Illinois’ northern settlers looked with disdain at the more shabbily dressed and less educated residents of Southern Illinois. The

⁶Davis & Wilson, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

Prairie State, very early on, became fractured across its middle counties from the Indiana state line on the east to its western border along the Mississippi River. Consequently, when Lincoln came to Jonesboro for the third debate, he was in hostile territory. Just as it was at the first debate, the weather during the Jonesboro contest was oppressively hot. The attendance at the third debate was small and “there was none of the rowdiness which had punctuated the Freeport debate.”⁸ This was undeniably “Little Giant” country even though many people there were suspicious of Douglas’ conduct as a politician over the course of his career. However, the overwhelming majority of these people assumed he agreed with them in regard to the inferior status of blacks. Douglas led off by reminding the audience that the Democratic Party was a national party unlike Lincoln’s sectional party. He told those gathered that they should always remember that in the ultimate scheme of things, Lincoln truly favored racial equality. He continued to repeat his support for the idea that the slavery issue should be decided by the citizens of each state. Lincoln finally came out more forcefully in Jonesboro. He denounced Douglas for calling him a radical, and he blamed Douglas for the various problems that had unfolded due to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lincoln delivered an outright assault on the “Freeport Doctrine,” but Douglas used his rebuttal time to counter Lincoln’s attack with an unapologetic defense of what he had said at Freeport. The third debate was not “a glorious encounter for either debater,” but from the beginning, Douglas, unlike Lincoln, seemed lackadaisical and not very energized.⁹

Charleston September 18, 1858

The fourth debate in Charleston, located in Coles County was neutral ground for both candidates. In the 1856 presidential election, Coles County went for Democrat James Buchanan because the Whig vote split between Know-Nothing candidate Millard Fillmore and the Republican Party’s John C. Frémont. Lincoln had relatives in the county, and he had practiced law in Charleston. The crowd in Charleston was quite large. Lincoln began with a short but forcefully stated reminder that he did not support complete equality for blacks. He then launched into a long discourse about the Toombs Bill of 1856. Two years earlier, United States Senator Robert Toombs of Georgia put forth a bill that proposed a Constitutional Convention in Kansas that antislavery advocates thought was fair, but the bill did not specify if the constitution would need to be ratified by Kansas voters. In 1858, Illinois senator Lyman Trumbull, a Republican, attacked Douglas for removing language in the Toombs Bill that would require the constitution to be ratified by the residents of Kansas. Lincoln spent the majority of his time at Charleston repeating Trumbull’s accusations about Douglas’s effort to thwart the Toombs Bill. Lincoln’s point was that this proved that Douglas, in fact, really didn’t believe in popular sovereignty. Douglas continued to rehash concepts he has previously presented in earlier speeches. Lincoln, on the other hand, broadened concepts and laid out

⁸ Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 173.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

new and different proposals in Charleston. This revealed an emerging pattern of Lincoln's to develop various ideas and arguments at these debates, whereas Douglas strove to be consistent with what he had said previously. Lincoln would enlarge an idea and plant provocative questions into the minds of many attendees that were sometimes troubling for listeners to consider. If one person or group could be held in bondage, Lincoln asked, aren't we all vulnerable to being made a slave someplace someday? Douglas denied Lincoln's accusations about the Toombs Bill, reemphasized the notion that Lincoln's party was not a national party, and told the crowd that blacks, like Frederick Douglass, were on the campaign trail in Northern Illinois supporting Republicans. Debates four through seven all occurred in the central part of the state in what had been the Old Whig region of Illinois. It was voters from this area who would decide the election. The middle debate in Southeastern Illinois seems to have been a stalemate.

Galesburg October 7, 1858

The fifth debate on the Knox College campus in Galesburg took place on a cold and windy fall day. The *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune* described the weather as "arctic frost [with] a sour northwest wind" but that did not keep attendance down, for the debate drew in more people than any of the other six contests.¹⁰ A special passenger train came down from Chicago, swelling the size of the crowd. Before the men squared off, hundreds of people rode around town on floats, bands played upbeat tunes while marching up and down the streets, and enterprising locals sold goods and food to visitors. This kind of pre-debate frivolity and entrepreneurism occurred before most of the debates. The majority of researchers who have studied this contest describe it as the place where Lincoln picked up steam and found his legs. Lincoln was not on the defensive in Galesburg. The confidence he displayed seems in part explained by Lincoln's awareness that the town was disliked, even vilified by proslavery forces. The *Chicago Times* called the community "the center of abolitionism in the state."¹¹ Historian Verna Cooley claims that the town "stands out as probably the principle underground railroad station in Illinois."¹² The town's founder, George Washington Gale, "was once indicted" for hiding fugitive slaves.¹³ Despite Galesburg's antislavery reputation, however, with such a large number of people in attendance, Douglas also enjoyed a huge following. In Galesburg, Lincoln spoke for the first time at length and forthrightly about the immorality of slavery. "I confess myself," he said, "as belonging to that class in the country that contemplates

¹⁰ Harold Holzer, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: The First Complete Unexpurgated Text* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 324.

¹¹ Edwin E. Sparks, ed., *The Lincoln Douglas Debates of 1858* (Illinois Historical Collections IL, Springfield, 1908), 376-86.

¹² Verna Cooley, "Illinois and the Underground Railroad to Canada," *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* 23 (1917): 82.

¹³ Owen W. Muelder, *The Underground Railroad in Western Illinois* (Jefferson, N.C: Mc Farland & Co., 2008), 18.

slavery as a moral, social, and political evil.”¹⁴ He paraphrased Henry Clay when he accused Douglas of “blowing out the moral lights around us.”¹⁵ Douglas chided Lincoln for talking about the slavery issue differently in Northern Illinois than he did in Southern Illinois. Lincoln’s retort to this charge was that he wasn’t trying to alter his views because anyone could simply read the numerous newspaper accounts of each debate in order to learn what he had said throughout the state. Douglas continued to give examples of why slavery could be decided quite differently by people in the various states of the union. “Illinois has decided that question for herself... Kentucky holds a different doctrine. New York holds one different from either and Maine one different from all... Each state must do as it pleases.”¹⁶ Douglas, as always, contended that the Declaration of Independence only applied to the white population. Lincoln biographer Benjamin Thomas argues that there is no denying that, for Lincoln, Galesburg was a turning point because, at that contest, he emphasized the moral issue. The October 13, 1858 issue of the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* reported that Lincoln “was the tall man eloquent... graceful, bold, and commanding.”¹⁷ Douglas, on the other hand, suffered from hoarseness at the fifth debate. Knox College trustee Samuel G. Wright wrote in his diary that Douglas “was hard to listen to [for his speech] was disjointed as if he could not be heard.”¹⁸

Quincy October 13, 1858

The town of Quincy was immediately across the Mississippi River from the slave state of Missouri. The railroad reached the town in 1856, and the community was an important stop for the many steamboats and barges that moved up and down the river. The weather at the sixth debate was good, and thousands of people turned out to hear the candidates in this traditionally strong haven of the Democratic Party in Illinois. The start of the debate was delayed shortly before the candidates took the stage because part of the platform collapsed, but, fortunately, no one was seriously hurt. Both men directly addressed the fundamental question that had been posed throughout the debates; was slavery right or wrong? Lincoln said he could not do anything about slavery where it already existed, but because he believed it was wrong, it should not be allowed in the territories. Douglas asserted that how he felt about slavery didn’t make any difference. He argued that for him to impose his beliefs on anyone else was not the issue. The decision about slavery, he said, should be made solely by local and state governments. Douglas opposed giving the federal government more power, supported states’ rights, and believed his stance ultimately protected the principle of individual liberty. Lincoln, as he had emphasized with real conviction in Galesburg, said it was immoral for anyone to

¹⁴ Davis & Wilson, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 193.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁷ Owen W. Muelder, “His Countenance Glowed with Animation,” *Illinois Heritage* 11 (Jan.-Feb. 2008): 14.

¹⁸ Samuel G. Wright, journal, 1839-65, Samuel G. Wright Collection, Knox College Archives, Galesburg, IL.

own another person. As to slavery's future, Lincoln remarked that "We [Republicans] deal with it as with any other wrong, insofar as we can prevent its growing any larger, and so deal with it that in the run of time, there may be some promise of an end to it."¹⁹ The Quincy debate turned more personal than other debates, for the contestants traded very sharp barbs with each other that day. Both men devoted a great deal of time dismissing charges made over the course of the first five contests. Douglas, who was known to overindulge his drinking habit, was conspicuously tight and his delivery was slow and drawn out. Lincoln on the other hand "came forward, slashing and cutting at Douglas."²⁰ Lincoln attacked, as he had before, the *Dred Scott* decision, while Douglas confidently defended the high court's ruling. Towards the end of his remarks, Lincoln said "when Judge Douglas says that whoever, or whatever community, wants slaves, they have a right to have them, he is perfectly logical, if there is nothing wrong in the institution. But if you admit that it is wrong, he cannot logically say that anybody has a right to do wrong."²¹ Douglas said "I hold that the people of slaveholding states are civilized men as well as ourselves; that they have consciences as well as we, and that they are accountable to God and their posterity, and not to us... Let each state mind its own business, and let its neighbors alone, and there will be no trouble on the question."²² Douglas received a warm reception in Quincy, but he frittered away valuable time casting aspersions and "insisting that the morality of slavery was a question entirely separate from the political process about slavery."²³ Lincoln extended his thanks to Douglas "for finally acknowledging that he anticipated that slavery would last forever."²⁴

Alton October 15, 1858

In 1837, antislavery newspaperman Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered by a proslavery mob in Alton. His killing was a watershed for the antislavery movement because thereafter he became a martyr of the abolitionist crusade. Lincoln and Douglas were fully aware of what had transpired in Alton 21 years earlier. The seventh contest took place on a beautiful day but, other than the Jonesboro debate, it attracted the smallest audience. This debate brought forth nothing very new because both candidates emphasized what they felt were the strongest points they had previously expounded. Douglas reiterated what he had said before about Lincoln's opposition to the Mexican War that proved his opponent was unpatriotic. He suggested that Lincoln's extremist views would disturb the peace in the country. Douglas also tried to describe popular sovereignty with "a more northern flavor than previously...his goal was to capture Whig votes and destroy the effectiveness of Lincoln's moral appeal."²⁵ He also attempted to separate himself from President Buchanan. Lincoln hammered home his contention that

¹⁹ Davis & Wilson, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 222.

²⁰ Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas*, 243.

²¹ Davis & Wilson, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 224.

²² *Ibid.*, 241.

²³ Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas*, 250.

²⁴ Davis & Wilson, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 213.

²⁵ David. Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 65.

the Declaration of Independence was meant to apply to all men, not just some men. He eloquently asserted that slavery was undeniably wrong for the issue, he said, was about “the eternal struggle between these two principles, right and wrong.”²⁶ Lincoln argued that the founding fathers clearly foresaw a time when slavery would disappear in the future. He adamantly insisted that he was in no way a radical extremist and accused Douglas of intentionally misrepresenting him as being one. Additionally, Lincoln condemned the Freeport Doctrine because it would seem “to allow territorial legislators” to defy “a right guaranteed by the *Dred Scott* decision.”²⁷ Both men must have been tired by the time they spoke in Alton. Douglas seemed more worn-down, and his voice was nearly shattered, but by contrast, Lincoln, according to one observer looked “as fresh as if he had just entered the campaign.”²⁸ As usual, both men were frequently interrupted by individuals in attendance, but Lincoln managed to evoke laughter from the crowd numerous times. A Cincinnati newspaper account of the last debate stated that the relatively small turnout at Alton suggested that “the novelty had worn off...the public curiosity” had been satisfied.²⁹ But an account of the last debate that appeared in a *New York Post* story October 20, 1858 maintained that the Alton debate was “in many respects...the greatest discussion of the issues put forth by the candidates over the course of the seven contests”.³⁰

Conclusion

By 1858, northern states and southern states had become profoundly different from each other. The southern way of life was overwhelmingly based on a slave-labor economy while northern states were composed of small farmers, an emerging class of entrepreneurs, new businesses, and a growing industrial base. When Lincoln and Douglas conducted their famous debates, the division between these two Americas made it unlikely their deep-rooted differences could be resolved. Both candidates brought very real strengths to the speaking platforms for they were both skilled debaters who possessed the ability to sway an audience. They knew how to entertain a crowd and use humor, irony, and dramatic techniques. Lincoln scholar Michael Burlingame points out that Douglas had the advantage of being much better known, and he effectively used “verbal dexterity” that he combined with “overweening self-assurance.”³¹ Lincoln possessed a “self-effacing modesty” and a “keen sense of humor that made him likeable;” he also enjoyed a “reputation for integrity.”³² The Democrats won 40 seats in the State House to the Republicans’ 35. The Democrats held 14 seats in the State Senate, and the Republicans held onto 11. Douglas was reelected by the Legislature 54-46. But Douglas’s

²⁶ Davis & Wilson, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 285.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁸ Holzer, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 322.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

³⁰ Davis & Wilson, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 253.

³¹ Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 486-87.

³² *Ibid.*, 487.

victory was a hollow one because Southern Democrats were no longer in his corner, and he was soon stripped of his chairmanship of the Committee on Territories. His popular sovereignty advocacy had seen its time “come and go.”³³ Lincoln, on the other hand, by simply holding his own with Douglas, could claim a kind of victory. He had, more importantly, not only dealt with the slavery question effectively but had “lifted the discussion far above that narrow issue when he attacked the morality of the slave system.”³⁴ He had laid out what the purpose was of a true democracy. Prior to the debates, Lincoln as not very well-known throughout the nation, but after the election, his name and reputation had gained national recognition. Two years later, he was the Republican Party’s nominee for President, but had it not been for the debates “no amount of political wire-pulling could have brought about his selection.”³⁵ The seven contests between the Illinois senatorial candidates in 1858 set the stage for the presidential contest in 1860.

³³ *Ibid.*, 557.

³⁴ Paul M. Angle, *Created Equal?: The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), xxix.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xlv.