

LINCOLN LORE

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SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATES

OTTAWA, AUGUST 21, 1858

Two great debates stand out in the history of American literature, the Webster-Hayne discussion of 1830 and the Lincoln-Douglas contest of 1858. While lacking the literary merit and formal presentation of the earlier argument, the Lincoln-Douglas series, judged from the wide public interest it created, and the ultimate political movements which it foreshadowed, should be set apart as the most important verbal battle which has ever been waged on the American continent.

It would seem that the seventy-fifth anniversary of the delivery of this significant series of arguments should not pass unnoticed. The separate encounters are in themselves so important in Abraham Lincoln's development that each separate meeting of the contestants will be discussed in this and subsequent issues of Lincoln Lore. There were seven Illinois cities which entertained the debaters in 1858: August 21, Ottawa; August 27, Freeport; September 15, Jonesboro; September 18, Charleston; October 7, Galesburg; October 13, Quincy; October 15, Alton.

The Setting at Ottawa

Saturday, August 21, 1858, was a cloudless day except for the clouds of dust which rose in great columns from every road leading to Ottawa.

The platform for the speakers was erected in front of the court house. All available space within the public square where the court house stood was occupied and all of the avenues leading to it were congested. People literally swarmed upon the platform itself, and even the roof was occupied, where those who had gained a foothold tore off pieces of the temporary shelter so that they might view the debaters. Before the speakers and guests could be ushered upon the platform one section of it gave way under the weight of those who were clinging to the structure. The number of people present on this occasion has been estimated all the way from 12,000 to 20,000. The contest was of more than local interest, however, and every important newspaper in the country carried an account of it. One Chicago paper found it necessary to print three editions before the demands of the people could be satisfied.

While in Ottawa Lincoln was entertained at the home of Major Joseph O. Glover and Douglas was received at the Geiger House. Both men were given colorful ovations upon reaching the city and also when ascending the speakers' platform. Douglas spoke first, Lincoln followed, and Douglas concluded with his rejoinder.

While the points at issue between the two parties was the general ground of discussion, "Should slavery be ex-

tended in the United States and territories?" might be suggested as the major question which was discussed throughout the series of arguments, although no formal statement of a specific theme for debate was submitted. Douglas supported the affirmative and Lincoln the negative side of the question mentioned above. It will be observed that this proposition called for a full consideration of the principle of popular sovereignty. The limited space available in Lincoln Lore will limit the data presented to abbreviated outlines of the arguments.

Speech of Douglas

Introduction

Lincoln and Douglas, representatives of two great parties (paragraph 1).

Principles of Old Line Whigs and Democrats (2, 3, 4).

Lincoln and Trumbull combined to destroy these parties and form an abolition or Republican party (5).

Argument

A. The Republican Resolution.

The Springfield resolutions of the "Black Republican Party" (6-9).

Seven specific questions put to Lincoln about the resolutions (10-11).

B. Personal References.

His own personal career compared to Lincoln's (12).

His own political career compared to Lincoln's, emphasizing Lincoln's attitude in the Mexican War (13).

The political history of Trumbull and his association with Lincoln discussed (14-16).

C. The "House Divided" Question.

Quoted part of Lincoln's speech containing phrase "a house divided against itself cannot stand" (17-18).

Affirmed government could exist half slave and half free (19).

Declared uniformity of state laws and institutions neither possible nor desirable (20).

D. Racial Equality.

Upheld Dred Scott decision and opposed negro citizenship in any and every form (21).

Claimed God never intended negro to be equal to white man (22-23).

Negroes should have privileges consistent with public good (24).

E. Popular Sovereignty.

Each and every state must decide for itself what to do with the free negro (25).

Each state and territory has the right to do as it pleases in all things local and domestic (26).

Mr. Lincoln and his party trying to dissolve the Union (27).

Speech of Lincoln

Rebuttal

Denied charge of associating with Trumbull to obtain political office (1).

Denied having anything to do with the resolutions Douglas read from the Republican convention (2).

Denied any bargaining with Trumbull to sell out old political parties and read part of speech made at Peoria on the Missouri Compromise to prove it (3-11).

Claimed above quotations answered the question put to him by Douglas on the Fugitive Slave Law (12-13).

Denied belief in perfect social and political equality with negro but argued the negro's equal right with any man to eat bread earned by his own toil (14).

Denied personal charge of being a grocery keeper (15).

Denied Douglas's Mexican War accusation (16).

Replied to Douglas's argument on the "divided house" and charged Douglas and contemporaries with planning for the "perpetuity and nationalism of slavery" (17-20).

Argument

A. Popular Sovereignty.

Defined popular sovereignty as applied to the slavery question (21).

Against reducing to a dead uniformity all local institutions of various states (22).

The Nebraska Bill and "original principles" of the founders (23).

B. The Pro-Slavery Conspiracy.

Claimed a tendency or conspiracy by slavery advocates to make slavery perpetual and universal (24-25).

Reviewed Douglas's Chicago charge that he (Lincoln) would set the states at war with one another (26-27).

Further development of the conspiracy to make slavery perpetual and universal (28-50).

The course Judge Douglas is pursuing to make slavery national is the advocacy and support of another Dred Scott decision (51-55).

The attitude of Douglas would repress all tendencies to liberty and ultimate emancipation (56).

The second Dred Scott decision would make slavery alike lawful in all the states old as well as new, North as well as South (57-58).

Mr. Douglas's Rejoinder

Discussed Lincoln's relation to the Republican platform and his refusal to answer question put to him about platform (1-13).

Replied to Lincoln's charge of conspiracy and referred to Missouri Compromise and Nebraska Bill (14-21).

Claimed Lincoln was reluctant to avow his principles (22).

Lincoln's doctrine would ultimately bring about dissolution of Union (23).