

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S PERSONAL OPINION OF DOUGLAS

Just one hundred and one years ago this month Abraham Lincoln made what might be said to be his first formal attack on the political philosophy of Stephen A. Douglas. The occasion was a series of two speeches made before the Springfield Scott Club. While we are well acquainted with Lincoln's reaction to the theories of government expounded by Douglas, it is more difficult to discover just what was Lincoln's personal opinion of him as a man.

Possibly Lincoln's earliest reaction towards Douglas would find expression when the Little Giant was defeated for Congress by Lincoln's law partner, John T. Stuart in 1839. Lincoln was not only Stuart's partner in law, but evidently in politics as well. In a circular sent out on June 24, 1839 by Lincoln and others, when it appeared a recount might be demanded by Douglas, it was agreed that the poll books should be searched for any minors, unnaturalized foreigners or voters residing in the state for less than six months who voted for Douglas. We doubt that Mr. Lincoln held his partner's opponent in very high esteem during those early days of intense political rivalry.

When Lincoln went to Congress in 1847 he was commissioned by Robert Smith of Alton to collect from Douglas, already there, a bill due Smith. Lincoln replied, "I met him (Douglas) afterwards, but disliking to dun him at the first meeting with him, I let it pass, for the time." One week later on Dec. 10 he did write that he had interviewed Douglas about a claim against him and that Douglas said he would pay it in a few days.

At the Democratic Convention in Baltimore in June 1852 Douglas seemed to be second only in popularity with the delegates to the nominee, Franklin Pierce. The fact that Pierce was a Vermonter apparently was partly responsible for Douglas, also a native Vermonter, being unavailable for the Vice Presidency. Some statements made by Douglas at Richmond, Va. in the campaign that followed encouraged Lincoln to answer him in the speech at Springfield noted above. In the course of his remarks Lincoln recalled the early days "when Douglas was not so much greater than the rest of us as he now is," and concluded that his Richmond speech "though marked with the same species of 'shirks and quirks' as the old ones, was not marked with any great ability."

However, it was the leadership of Douglas in the repeal of the Mississippi Compromise that caused Lincoln to reveal sincere resentment against the political policies of the Little Giant. Even today it is difficult for one to have a very kindly feeling for those who we believe are apparently destroying the fundamentals of the American system.

Of course the verbal clash which occurred during the senatorial campaign of 1858 is our best opportunity to observe the personal attitude of each debator towards the other. The fact that Douglas resented Lincoln's presence at the meetings which were scheduled for the Democrats preliminary to the debates, led Lincoln to write his friend, J. T. Eccles that he had probably seen the published letter in which Douglas stated, "That my (Lincoln's) presence, on the days or evenings of his meetings would be considered an intrusion." The papers supporting Douglas claimed that Lincoln was violating ethical procedure by following Douglas. Of course, this would not promote the best of feelings between the two men.

The debates, however, were quite free from personalities although Lincoln on one occasion did state, "I do not want to quarrel with him, I do not want to call him

a liar, but when I come to square up to him I don't know what else to call him." Henry C. Whitney feared that Douglas would abuse Lincoln unless he showed some fight as Whitney wrote in his note of August 2, 1858: "He is going to try and intimidate you: You have got to treat him severely and the sooner you commence, the better, the easier."

After the debates, Lincoln's personal attitude towards Douglas' view of Popular Sovereignty is set forth in a letter written to Samuel Galloway in July 1859 which states, "Douglas (who is the most dangerous enemy of liberty, because the most insidious one) would have little support in the North, and by consequence no capital to trade on in the South if it were not for our friends thus magnify him and his humbug."

If we could rely upon Herndon we might be able to glean from his writings some clue as to how Lincoln actually felt towards Douglas personally, but the comments of Lincoln's law partner on any subject are almost worthless. Here are samples of Herndon's characterization of Douglas penned for Theodore Parker in 1857: "Douglas is—well, what shall I say?—an unscrupulous dog. He is a hybrid; Nature says to him Perish and Rot!" Herndon also refers to the Little Giants as "a scoundrel" and the "genius of discord incarnate" and climaxes his harangue in these words: "I have no confidence in him morally, mentally, politically, or otherwise." However, when Herndon's formerly highly rated three volume work was being prepared for the press in 1886 he wrote to his collaborator, Jesse M. Weik, that "He (Douglas) was naturally a great man, a good lawyer, a gentleman and a patriot." These contrasting views are typical of the Herndonian position on almost any subject.

The last outstanding speech of Douglas in the United States Senate was made on Jan. 3, 1861. His only personal reference to Abraham Lincoln was a complaint about the publishing of the debates between them in which he commented: "This publication is unfair towards me for the reason that Mr. Lincoln personally revised and corrected his own speeches without giving me an opportunity to correct the numerous errors in mine." It is not likely that Lincoln would feel too kindly towards Douglas for implying that the now President Elect had taken an undue advantage of an opponent.

In the conclusion of his address Douglas pressing for a new national compromise stated, "Extermination, subjugation, or separation, one of the three must be the result of war between the northern and southern States . . . I repeat, then, my solemn conviction, that war means disunion—final, irrevocable, eternal separation." E. B. Washburn, nine times elected to Congress from Illinois, said in a letter to Lincoln referring to this address: "Douglas' speech yesterday was utterly infamous and damnable, the crowning atrocity of his life."

The last letter Douglas is known to have written to Lincoln was on April 29, 1861, postmarked Springfield and introducing his brother-in-law who he hopes may be of service to the government. He concludes his letter with this sentiment: "I hope for entire unanimity in the support of the government and the union."

While it is true that Douglas threw his support to the Union when the war began and held Lincoln's hat while the First Inaugural was being delivered, there does not appear to be available in writing any statement of Lincoln's that would support the opinion of one biographer: "Between Lincoln and Douglas, there was present an attachment; a warm, lasting friendship."