

Think About It: Was Lincoln an Abolitionist?

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The acquisition of new Western territories, the political crises of the 1850s, the presidential election of 1860, and the secession of the Southern states caused sectional tension over slavery to explode. At the center of the turmoil was Republican President Abraham Lincoln, who faced the unenviable task of holding together a Union that no longer seemed to want unity.

This tutorial explains Lincoln's public position on slavery as a young Illinois politician, a Whig Congressman, and a Republican Congressman and presidential candidate in the late 1850s:

1. Lincoln in His Early Years

Abraham Lincoln was born in a one-room log cabin in Kentucky in 1809. Kentucky was a slave state populated by small farmers and independent producers, not large slaveholders. His family later moved to Indiana and, when he was 21, moved again to Illinois. Both states had been organized under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which prohibited slavery. Lincoln spent his childhood and entire adult life, with the exception of his time in Washington DC, living in the border regions between slave and free states.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Abraham Lincoln

Prominent antislavery politician in the 1850s and Republican presidential candidate in the election of 1860; his victory led to the secession of the Confederate States of America from the Union and the eventual outbreak of the Civil War; author of the Emancipation Proclamation.



DID YOU KNOW

Lincoln's parents were strict Calvinists who opposed slavery, but his father's uncle owned 43 enslaved people, and his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, belonged to one of the leading slaveholding families in Kentucky. Lincoln's most direct encounter with slavery came between 1828 and 1831 when he helped transport surplus farm produce from Illinois to New Orleans by way of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. On his journeys, it can be assumed that Lincoln encountered enslaved people working the large cotton and sugar plantations along the Mississippi River. In New Orleans, he experienced a diverse and vibrant city of 50,000 people, including

17,000 enslaved people and 12,000 free Black people.

These experiences, and later excursions through slaveholding states, had a strong impact on the young Lincoln and helped shape his views on slavery. In a letter to his friend Joshua Speed in 1855, he wrote the following:

Abraham Lincoln, Letter to Joshua Speed

"In 1841 you and I had together a tedious low-water trip, on a Steamboat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were, on board, ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio or any other slave-border. It is hardly fair for you to assume, that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable. You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union."



DID YOU KNOW

As president, Lincoln would state "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think, and feel."

As a member of the Illinois state legislature in the 1830s and later, as a Whig member of the House of Representatives from 1847 to 1849, Lincoln developed a moderate antislavery stance that combined free labor ideology with moral opposition to the institution:

- He believed that slavery was unjust because it deprived Black Americans of the opportunity for self-improvement and degraded the dignity (and wages) of White workers. Moreover, he believed that sectional tensions over slavery limited the nation's economic potential by distracting the government from economic development and investment in internal improvements.
- He supported measures to prevent slavery's spread into Western territories (including the Wilmot Proviso) and to limit slavery in the District of Columbia. But he did not believe that the federal government had the constitutional authority to interfere with slavery or slaveowners' property rights in areas where it already existed.



THINK ABOUT IT

When Lincoln writes in his letter to Joshua Speed, "You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do crucify their feelings," does he include himself in that body?

2. Lincoln on the Kansas–Nebraska Act

Lincoln's arguments against slavery began to crystallize in 1854, following the passage of the **Kansas–Nebraska Act**.



TERM TO KNOW

Kansas–Nebraska Act

Created the territories of Kansas and Nebraska; applied the principle of popular sovereignty to both

territories, which meant that the settlers of these territories would decide whether to adopt slavery. The act's implications for the Westward expansion of slavery alarmed Lincoln. In 1854, he spoke out against the act and its champion in Congress, Stephen A. Douglas. His speeches made Lincoln a nationally recognized politician with a reputation for stirring oratory.

In a speech in Peoria, Illinois in 1854, Lincoln stated his moral, political and legal arguments against slavery and popular sovereignty. Read the two excerpts from this speech:

Abraham Lincoln, Excerpt From Speech in Peoria, Illinois (1854)

"Equal justice to the South, it is said, requires us to consent to the extending of slavery to new countries. That is to say, inasmuch as you do not object to my taking my hog to Nebraska, therefore I must not object to you taking your slave. Now, I admit this is perfectly logical if there is no difference between hogs and negroes. But while you thus require me to deny the humanity of the negro, I wish to ask whether you of the South yourselves have ever been willing to do as much? . . . there are in the United States and territories, including the District of Columbia, 433,643 free blacks. At \$500 per head, they are worth over two hundred million of dollars. How comes this vast amount of property to be running about without owners? We do not see free horses or free cattle running at large. How is this? All these free blacks are the descendants of slaves or have been slaves themselves, and they would be slaves now, but for SOMETHING which has operated on their white owners, inducing them, at vast pecuniary sacrifices, to liberate them."



THINK ABOUT IT

Who and what is Lincoln referring to when he says "you thus require me to deny the humanity of the negro"?

"But one great argument in the support of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, is still to come. That argument is "the sacred right of self-government." . . . 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 just application depends upon whether a negro is *not* or is a man. If he is *not* a man, why in that case, he who is a man may, as a matter of self-government, do just as 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, 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"



THINK ABOUT IT

How does Lincoln feel about popular sovereignty, or "the sacred right of self-government," in relation to the slavery question?



BRAINSTORM

What do you think Lincoln had in mind when he said there is "SOMETHING which has operated on their white owners"? Could it be more than one thing?

By 1854, Lincoln clearly envisioned and desired a future without slavery. However, he differed from

abolitionists and militants like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass in that he opposed civic, social, and political equality for African Americans. “My own feelings will not admit of this,” he stated, “and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not.”



DID YOU KNOW

As a member of the Illinois state legislature, Lincoln voted to uphold restrictions that barred Black men from voting in the state.

Like many of his contemporaries, Lincoln disliked slavery but did not know how to end it or what to do with enslaved people once they were freed. He confessed as much in his speech when he said, “If all earthly power were given to me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia,” a reference to the political efforts that began with the American Colonization Society in 1816 to resettle freed enslaved people in Africa.

Lincoln ultimately settled on a plan that combined voluntary, gradual emancipation and federal compensation of slaveowners for their lost property as the best way to end slavery. He would promote his plan well into the first years of the Civil War. In the meantime, he helped organize a new Republican party around the principle of the non-extension of slavery.

3. The Lincoln–Douglas Debates

In 1856, Lincoln abandoned the Whigs and threw his support to the Republican Party, which pledged itself to prevent the spread of slavery into the Western territories. Distressed by the violence in Kansas, and the Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott*, Lincoln ran for the U.S. Senate against Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas in 1858.

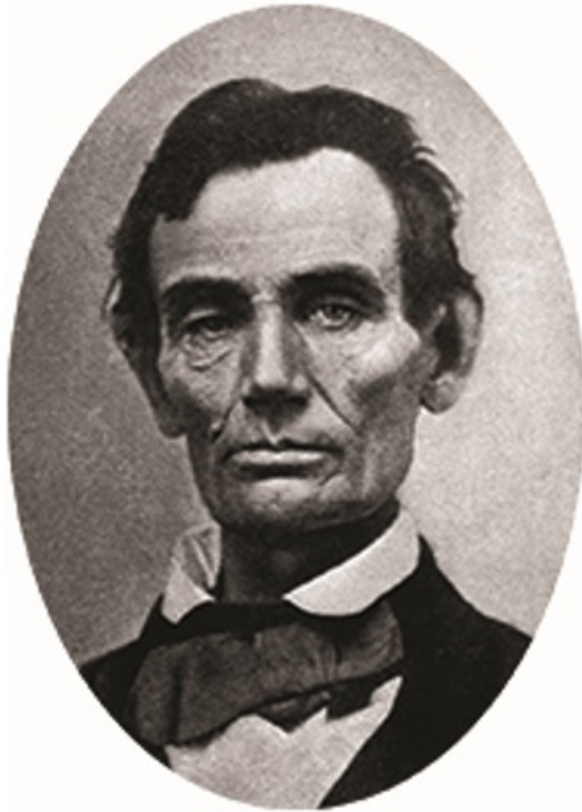
Throughout 1857 and 1858, Lincoln followed Stephen Douglas around Illinois, delivering speeches in towns Douglas had previously visited. He accused Douglas of conspiring with the “Slave Power” to promote slavery and attacked the Supreme Court's decision in the Dred Scott case as a violation of the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. Douglas eventually agreed to a series of formal debates against Lincoln, known as the **Lincoln–Douglas Debates**, which took place in Illinois in the fall of 1858.



TERM TO KNOW

Lincoln–Douglas Debates

Seven debates between Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas and Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln in which they argued the issue of slavery and its expansion.



(a)



(b)

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln (a) debated Stephen Douglas (b) seven times in the Illinois race for the U.S. Senate. Although Douglas won the election, the debates propelled Lincoln into the national political spotlight.

In the debates, Lincoln restated his position on the immorality of slavery and its affront to Republican principles, as well as his rejection of full political and civil rights for African Americans, including the right to vote, hold political office, serve on juries, and interracial marry. He had come to see the battle between slavery and freedom as imminent, and one in which there could only be a single victor.

He made this point most clearly in his “House Divided” speech, delivered in Springfield, Illinois, at the Republican State Convention in 1858. Here is an excerpt from that speech:

Abraham Lincoln, Excerpt From his "House Divided" Speech

“If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it. We are now far into the *fifth* year since a policy was initiated, with the *avowed* object, and *confident* promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, *not ceased*, but has *constantly augmented*. In *my* opinion, it *will* not cease, until a *crisis* shall have been reached, and passed. “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*. I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved* -- I do not expect the house to *fall* -- but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided. It will become *all* one thing or *all* the other.

Either the *opponents* of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its *advocates* will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in *all* the States, *old* as well as *new*—*North* as well as *South*.

Have we no *tendency* to the latter condition?"



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What is Lincoln referring to when he says "a policy was initiated, with the *avowed* object, and *confident* promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation"?
2. What evidence from the 1850s would support Lincoln's statement of the nation's "*tendency* to the latter condition"? What about evidence from before the 1850s?
3. Why does Lincoln think the nation cannot endure "half slave" and "half free"?

Lincoln interpreted the Dred Scott decision and the Kansas–Nebraska Act as efforts to nationalize slavery: to make it legal everywhere in the United States. The Supreme Court ruled that the federal government did not have the authority to ban slavery from any territory, nor violate slaveowners' property rights by granting freedom to enslaved people who resided in a free state. "We shall lie down," he cautioned, "dreaming that the people of *Missouri* are on the verge of making their State *free*; and we shall *awake* to the *reality*, instead, that the *Supreme Court* has made *Illinois* a *slave State*."

In his final debate with Douglas in October 1858, Lincoln likened slavery to a cancer spreading over the body of the Union:

Abraham Lincoln, Final Debate With Stephen Douglas

"What is it that we hold most dear amongst us? Our own liberty and prosperity. What has ever threatened our liberty and prosperity save and except this institution of Slavery? If this is true, how do you propose to improve the condition of things by enlarging Slavery — by spreading it out and making it bigger? You may have a wen or cancer upon your person and not be able to cut it out lest you bleed to death; but surely it is no way to cure it, to engraft it and spread it over your whole body. That is no proper way of treating what you regard a wrong."



REFLECT

If you were a Southern slaveowner, how would you feel about the election of Lincoln as president in 1860? Would you believe his promises to leave slavery alone in areas where it existed?



SUMMARY

Lincoln's views on slavery were complex, evolving, and ultimately incomplete (cut short by his assassination in 1865). As a moderate, antislavery Whig turned Republican, Lincoln's perspective was informed by the region in which he grew up, the dominant racial attitudes of the time, and the free labor ideology of his fellow Northerners. Although he lost the election of 1858 to Douglas, he won the presidency 2 years later. As Southern states seceded and the Civil War began, Lincoln found himself required to not just talk about limiting slavery, but to act on it.

REFERENCES

The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. The Abraham Lincoln Association. Retrieved February 16, 2017, from quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/



TERMS TO KNOW

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Lincoln–Douglas Debates

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DATES TO KNOW

1809

Abraham Lincoln is born in Kentucky.

1847–1849

Lincoln serves as a member of the House of Representatives during the Mexican–American War.

1854

Congress passes the Kansas–Nebraska Act; The Republican Party forms.

1857

The Dred Scott Supreme Court decision rules that African Americans are not American citizens.

1858

Abraham Lincoln runs against Stephen Douglas for U.S. Senate; the Lincoln–Douglas Debates involve the issue of slavery and its expansion.

1860

Republican Abraham Lincoln wins the election of 1860; South Carolina secedes.

