



# The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

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Nominated in 1858 by the infant Republican party to oppose Stephen A. Douglas, Abraham Lincoln challenged the incumbent Democratic senator from Illinois to a series of debates. This volume contains their masterful arguments as well as two speeches, one by each candidate. Paving the way for modern debates between political candidates, the Lincoln-Douglas debates were more than formal discussions between opponents. Lincoln lost the election; but the speeches brought him to national attention and helped propel him to the Presidency in 1860.

## The Lincoln-Douglas Debates Details

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## From Reader Review The Lincoln-Douglas Debates for online ebook

### Michael Austin says

Just wow. I have been familiar with the fact of the Lincoln-Douglas debates for as long as I can remember. In high school, I spent three years participating in the forensic event called “Lincoln-Douglas Debate.” I knew that Lincoln and Douglas argued with each other a lot when they were both running for the Illinois Senate in 1858. But until I read them for myself—as research for a book that I am writing about effective strategies for civil political discourse—I had no idea what a true treasure they were. I will try to organize some of my thoughts about these debates here.

First, though I assumed that slavery would be a large part of the debate, I did not realize that it would be the only topic of debate, but it very clearly was. By 1858, it seems, there were no other political issues even worth mentioning in passing. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates consisted of 7 three-hour debates (21 hours of discussion) about the slavery issue and nothing else.

Second, and along the same lines, I was surprised by just how many different, clearly defined positions one could hold in 1858. This was no simple “for-or-against” political issue. In the course of the debates, I detected at least eight separate positions on slavery, which don’t quite fit into a spectrum (and which often mixed together in single people’s minds), but I am going to pretend for a moment that they are discrete categories.

**1. Full-Equality Abolitionists:** This is the position taken by some Northern abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglas. It held that slaves should be freed immediately and given full citizenship rights, because people of all races are equal and entitled to the same fundamental human and civil rights. It is the position that (I would hope) any reasonable human being takes in 2012, but it was considered quite extreme in 1858—extreme enough that Lincoln spent much of the time in the debates denying Douglas’s assertions that he believed it.

**2. Free Soil Abolitionists:** The Northern free-soilers were usually motivated by economic, rather than moral arguments. They saw slavery as a degradation of labor and wanted to end or contain it, but more in the name of free white labor and not because of any real sense of the humanness of slaves. This was the position of William Seward and the late Martin Van Buren.

**3. Gradual/Compensated Abolitionists:** Whether motivated by human rights or economics concerns, a large number of people wanted to end slavery gradually, either by compensating slave owners for their emancipated slaves or by containing the spread of slavery so that it would die out eventually without producing the social shock that would be produced by millions of suddenly-free slaves.

**4. Anti-Kansas-Nebraska-Act-ians:** Perhaps the largest contingency in Illinois in 1858, this contingency wanted slavery strictly contained in the areas that already had it, set largely by Henry Clay’s Missouri Compromise in 1820. When Stephen Douglas sponsored legislation in 1854 that opened up the possibility of slavery in the new territories (Kansas and Nebraska), a large number of people across the country felt threatened by the prospect of slaver labor coming in and rendering their labor obsolete. This was followed in 1855 by the Supreme Court’s 1857 Dred Scott decision, which ruled that the federal government did not have the right to prohibit slavery in the territories, which made people feel—not entirely unreasonably—that a Democrat Court and a Democratic President would soon nationalize slavery by making it illegal to prevent it in the states. Lincoln largely inhabits this position in the debates, though he moves skillfully through positions 2, 3, and 4 depending on the audience he is addressing.

**5. Popular sovereignty:** This is the creation, trademark, and very consistent argument of Stephen A. Douglas: that each state and each territory have the right to decide for themselves whether or not they will permit slavery in their borders. Douglas saw this as the only way to “solve” the slavery question, and he built much of his senatorial career on crafting legislation to repeal previous compromises and make slavery only a state/territorial issue.

**6. Slavery in All Territories:** Very few people in the South wanted (or at least admitted to wanting) a national mandate requiring all states to be slave states. That would have worked against the notion of states’ rights that most of them held. But, as the United States was acquiring new territories very rapidly at this time (Texas, New Mexico, California, Oregon, Utah, etc.), the felt that these federally administered territories should not be permitted to prohibit slavery until such time as the territories became states and crafted their own constitutions. the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision essentially constitutionalized this position.

**7. National Slavery:** Some few people in the South demanded that slavery be acknowledged as, not only a good thing, but the only correct way for the races to interact in the United States which should, therefore, be permitted (and actively encouraged) in every state. This was also the Republican bugaboo that Lincoln often presented as the end of the slippery slope that the Kansas-Nebraska Act set us upon.

**8. Secession:** By 1858, many Southerners had come to the conclusion that the slavery issue was unsolvable and that the only solution was to do what, just a few years later, they did. Both Lincoln and Douglas were strong union supporters, however, who viewed disunion as something like an ultimate evil.

It is interesting to watch Lincoln and Douglas maneuver through these various positions (and scare their audiences with arguments about #1 and #7). I would say that, for the first four debates, the debate is largely one between Douglas’s Popular Sovereignty (#5) and Lincoln’s often inconsistent amalgamation of positions #3, #4, and #5). In the fifth debate, however, Lincoln hits a stride that, in my humble opinion, became the most consequential argument of the 19th century. It is not so much a new argument as it is a clarification of things that he kinda-sorta said in the earlier debates and in his “House Divided” speech at the convention that nominated him.

The position that coalesces (for me) in the fifth debate is simply this: that it wrong to treat slavery as a morally neutral enterprise. It is therefore not possible to say (as Douglas says in every debate) that one does not care whether freedom or slavery prevails in a state. One can recognize the difficulties of eradicating an entrenched institution, and one can even say that eliminating slavery where it exists produces evils that offset the good of elimination. But it is irrational and immoral to say that slavery and freedom should exist in our political hearts as morally equal options. In the last three debates, Lincoln hones this argument into a surgically precise instrument.

Douglas won the election (which was held in the Illinois legislature, not among the general population), but Lincoln appears to have convinced the masses—and positioned himself to bear the Republican standard in 1860. From all that I read, he maintained this position until his death. And I can only admire the way that, through a process of debate and disagreement, Lincoln fine-tuned what began as a largely pragmatic argument into a moral imperative that sustained him—and the Union—through the most difficult days either of them had ever seen.

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## Karl says

In my opinion, the benefit of revisiting these debates is not rehashing Lincoln's arguments, which most of us

know and agree with, but understanding how plausible and understandable Stephen Douglas's arguments were when and where they occurred. Lincoln and Douglas's positions were much more similar than commonly remembered, as both Lincoln and Douglas were happy to leave the question of slavery to the democratic processes. The central dispute was whether the Supreme Court had made democratic choice on the question impossible and what, if anything, could be done about it. Lincoln was clearly correct that the court had made democratic choice impossible, though Douglas denied it. Douglas was clearly correct that the cost of defying the court would be war, though Lincoln denied it.

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### **Emartinez says**

Riveting debates. This is not my typical style of literature but I could not stop listening. Tensions are high in this discussion of "state's right to choose" vs "does any state have the right to legislate that which is not moral?" Abraham Lincoln presses for slavery to trod the road that leads to its ultimate extinction while Douglas champion's limiting the federal government's reach (an interesting fact about early Democrat ideology). I wish modern debate took this form and engaged the American people the way the debates of our forefathers occurred.

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### **Bill says**

Glad I read this before the election this year. Things are different now for sure. Regardless of who you align yourself with, Lincoln or Douglas, one must admit that no one debates like this any more. The way they presented and defended their stance was commendable. Attacking or questioning each other was interesting as well. Neither let the other get by with a less than adequate answer. If politicians would still debate in this format AND the American people actually cared, we would not be stuck with the likes of the last several presidents. Both Lincoln and Douglas referred to Thomas Jefferson as being on their side. These comments lead me to get a book about Jefferson. If you have any interest in politics or how our country continues to change, I would recommend this book.

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### **Maria Rowe says**

I've read pieces of these debates over the years, and I'm glad I finally listened to this - one of the most famous debates in American history!

What surprised me is that the ENTIRE debate is about slavery. I thought most of it would be since that was the key issue at the time, but I was surprised it was the ONLY thing debated. The setup was interesting too - one candidate spoke for 60 minutes, the other for 90 then the first candidate for 30. They alternated speaking first.

One thing that tripped me up a little was David Strathairn speaking for Lincoln because I've watched the movie Lincoln so many times that I associate his voice with William Seward now. But he and Richard Dreyfuss both were excellent.

This was really amazing to listen to and I'd like to come back to it someday and listen to it again. I'm not quite as familiar with a lot of things they were mentioning such as previous speeches, debates, acts, compromises, etc. as I wish I was.

## **Benjamin B. says**

Great debates and speeches, what remarkably eloquent speakers both were. I initially assumed this would be Lincoln towering with his serene oratory above an unknown and a vile opponent. But alas, I was disappointed. Douglas is at least just as eloquent as Lincoln, and can seem deceptively logical t times. Lincoln was younger, Douglas was at the height of his career. The arguments he comes up with - racist, unjust, and plainly evil as they were- are not as easy to refute as I assumed; It is a very uncomfortable read to put it mildly, especially if the issue at hand (slavery, citizens rights for black people) is one about which one is not entirely disinterested.

One start is missing because they do go on a bit. Also, while the introduction does explain the background, it berries the essential facts in a heap of boring meandering chitchat we come to know and expect from introductions. I had to stop halfway through to read the background of the supreme court decision and the nullification issue on my own.

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## **Jennifer says**

At some point I decided that reading original documents was the way to go when it came to studying history (Maybe it was when I realized that the David Barton school of thought I'd been brought up in was... sketchy. Though, DB always claimed to own and base all of his stuff off of original documents, he just never expected anyone to check up on him I guess, but even before I realized all the problems with DB I still admired the idea of reading originals). I now think reading contemporary commentaries/biographies, etc can be good (after all, if you don't live in an older culture you will miss alot if someone doesn't explain it to you), but you have to be on the lookout for spin. Anyway, I bough this book on ebay years ago, it was the earliest printing I could find for a reasonable price. And... it's just been sitting on my shelf ever since. I've been trying to read through books I already own, rather than buying more, so that I can declutter (...and then buy more books!), and doing the library challenge is always a good time to do a short book! So...

Perhaps I had learned some of these details in the past, but history usually isn't one of my favorite subjects so without "maintenance" alot of facts get forgotten. Anyway, these were debates for the Illinois Senate race of 1858 and were published in newspapers at the time (my book was published in 1918, I don't know when the first bound copy of the debates was published). Lincoln ultimately lost that race, but apparently the exposure helped him win the Presidency during the next election. I had heard that Lincoln had never held (major?) office before (actually, he had been in both the state legislature and was a Representative in the House), but hadn't realized that Lincoln was the first Republican president. Which means, he basically won as a 3rd party candidate. Impressive! Illinois was a free state, and was more-or-less the Western frontier of the nation at that time. Kansas and Nebraska were soon to become states, and this was a big issue because people had different opinions on whether or not territories could allow slavery, whether new states could have slavery, what to do with fugitive slaves in free states, slave owners who traveled into free states/territories with their slaves, etc...

Well, Lincoln was against slavery, but he wasn't yet trying to abolish it in the slave states, and in fact wanted to distance himself from abolitionists. He was hoping slavery would just die out, but in order for that to happen we had to keep territories free, so that new states would not have a history of slavery when being admitted to the US, and thus would continue from free territories to free states. He also did not believe in equal rights for negroes. He wished freedom for them - but not citizenship, or even the right to intermarry.

He believed whites were superior. I guess I was surprised that Lincoln wasn't nearly as progressive as I had thought - though people have told me that his views evolved during his presidency (Maybe I need to find a good biography on Lincoln? In an interview with Harrison Ford I once read that HF loved to read biographies and Lincoln was his hero...).

Reading reviews it seems there is a really good audiobook version where Dustin Hoffman reads Lincoln... now I feel sorry to have missed out on that one!

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## Frederick says

I listened to an audiobook of the entire series of debates as read by Richard Dreyfuss (as Stephen A. Douglas) and David Strathairn as Abraham Lincoln.

I won't be able to do justice to the audiobook (recorded in 2008), which I highly recommend to anybody who thinks reading these debates might be a daunting task. But here is a link to David Frum's positive review of the audiobook:

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles...>

And now, I (Fred Wemyss), have this to say about the debates themselves:

What strikes me about the debates is that Lincoln did very little yarn-spinning in them. We know him as a teller of tales with morals and pointed jokes, but what he does here, for the most part (but not for the most important part) is react to Douglas, swatting Douglas's attacks as if they were flies. In other words, Lincoln is actually on the defensive a lot of the time, while Douglas simply keeps repeating that Lincoln has made deals with abolitionists. Finally, though, in one of the last debates, Lincoln lays down moral law in an absolutely universal way. In these debates, Lincoln lost the immediate battle, Douglas beating him in a race for the Illinois senate. But, the telegraph having been invented by then, the debates were published word-for-word in newspapers in every major city in America, usually within two or three days of each debate. This means Lincoln and Douglas were, essentially, household words across the United States for almost the entire year of 1858. People read these debates aloud to their friends and families as soon as they got the latest newspaper. Their were etchings of the candidates accompanying the text. In short, Abraham Lincoln was able to get his message across to a wide spectrum of people a good two years before his run for President. Stephen A. Douglas, who was as powerful then as Newt Gingrich was in the 1990's, ran against Lincoln for President in 1860 and would have probably won if his party hadn't been split between Douglas and several other candidates. The South considered Douglas too anti-slavery. This will be hard for 21st-century readers to believe, given Douglas's proud (if that's the adjective) racism. But Douglas was a backroom politician par excellence and he had finessed himself into a corner after years of sneaking pro-slavery policies into various expansionist bills. In order to promote slavery he had disguised his objectives as choices given to future territories and states. The South wanted no ambiguity about slavery, or, if I may be less ambiguous about it, they wanted the government to permit it everywhere. It is almost impossible to tell whether Douglas really thought slavery was right or not. He keeps saying, in these debates, that as a senator from Illinois he is proud of his state's decision not to have slavery; but he always points out that, had his state chosen slavery, he'd have supported it there. Lincoln simply reiterates that the entire country was either going to allow slavery in every corner or abolish it. Douglas keeps saying the U.S. has long been "half slave and half free" and that there's no reason to believe, as Lincoln does, that the country can't survive with that status. This is where one's head spins. Lincoln worked, into the Gettysburg Address, five years after these debates, the famous words, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Douglas points out that Lincoln is misusing the Bible here. Who, in 2014, can even think that anyone back then thought Lincoln was twisting Scripture to base purposes in applying the concept to the rift which caused the most massive carnage in American history?

It is interesting to note that, after Lincoln defeated Douglas for the Presidency, he sent Douglas to the Border states as an ambassador of sorts, in the hope of keeping them in the Union. Douglas, for all his divisiveness leading up to the war, hated the notion of Secession. His last days were spent in a frantic tour of the most combustible part of the country, hoping to patch it together. He died of typhoid contracted on his tour, not two months after the start of the war. I think, in the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln was perhaps addressing the ghost of his rival. It may be what made it the most powerful speech he'd ever deliver.

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### **Quincy says**

Although the issues and ideas were dealt with in much greater depth than one would find in modern political debate, there was still a liberal amount of mudslinging by both men.

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### **Jay says**

I am very glad I listened to the audio version of the debates, with David Strathairn and Richard Dreyfus performing. If I hadn't listened to the debates in their entirety, I don't think I would have really appreciated the masterful jobs both Lincoln and Douglas did with strategizing their arguments. You can see many of the things we see in today's politics – the kowtowing to political correctness, the name calling (here liar and forger are the bad ones), acting badly to create an impression, nuancing a previous questionable statement, dredging up decades old news stories, showing perverse researching skills, storytelling like a local, and more. Lincoln did all these things, Douglas did most if not all. In the end, it felt like Douglas always felt he was in the right, never changed his story, but Lincoln really modified his "attack" from a legal to a moral perspective, which really only surfaced in the last debates. I found the debate topics interesting, the strategies employed intriguing, and the performances on audio really matched what I would expect those speakers sounded like, Dreyfus as Douglas having a little Foghorn Leghorn in him. I even followed on in text for a while to see if I was missing things. So well done that after 16 hours of audio, I'd be willing to read more on the same topic...

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### **Drtaxsacto says**

Any one who had a decent US history teacher had some encounter with the debates that took place between the incumbent Senator from Illinois (Stephen A Douglas - the Little Giant) and the candidate Abraham Lincoln in 1858. They were 7 structured encounters that took place during that election which allowed the first speaker one hour to speak, then the opponent took one and a half hours and then the original speaker took a half hour to rebut. I had never taken the time to read all seven debates - and I would argue that this format is much more accessible than reading dry words on the page.

A lot of what was said in those debates is now obscure - many of the names mentioned, especially by Douglas, are unknown. But the issues then discussed were and are important. They discussed both Dred Scott and the Fugitive Slave Law. Lincoln both supported and was criticized for his "house divided" speech.

One could listen to the rhetoric and get something out of the presentation - Douglas was somewhat of a wonk and insider. Richard Dryfuss who does Douglas does a great job of recreating how I think Douglas actually sounded.

But there is also the benefit of understanding the skills of each orator in creating arguments. Douglas kept hammering at one main point - the states and territories should have the right to determine how they felt about slavery. Lincoln makes a couple of arguments including one which suggests that the founders used odd constructions in forming the Constitution because they envisaged that slavery would eventually die away (for example he ties the 1808 clause to that notion). Lincoln criticizes Douglas for being unwilling to recognize the immorality of slavery.

From my perspective Lincoln is at his finest in debates 5,6, and 7 - where he demolishes Douglas.

Ultimately Douglas won in 1858. But the last few years of his life were in turmoil. He ran for President in 1860 and the democrats split (with the Southerners going for John C Breckinridge). He worked hard to try to keep the south in the Union after Lincoln's election but then died of Typhoid fever in June 1861.

This is well worth your time.

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### **Kusaimamekirai says**

I've listened to these debates too many times to count on my daily commute, at home, and many other places. If you are a history nerd like me, this is manna from heaven. Listening to David Strathairn as Abraham Lincoln and Richard Dreyfuss as "the little giant" Stephen Douglas, you almost feel transported back to 1858 as these two political giants trade barbs and debate the most monumental issue of the day, slavery. So fascinating, and yes, so much fun!

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### **David Bales says**

This book is a verbatim transcript of the 14 debates that Abraham Lincoln and Senator Stephen Douglas had during the hot summer and early fall of 1858. Douglas, the Democrat, tries to paint Lincoln as a "Black Republican" abolitionist, while Lincoln denies this but steadfastly holds true to his conviction that slavery must not be extended to the territories, (while conceding that the government cannot alter slavery where it already existed). These debates took place in a country that was on the brink of disintegration, and although Douglas would win the election for senator, Lincoln won the moral ground and later defeated Douglas in 1860 for the presidency. For hardcore political fans.

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### **Hank Pharis says**

I enjoyed listening to these famous debates as performed by Richard Dreyfus and David Strathairn. Stephen Douglas said that Lincoln was the best lawyer he ever saw. But they disagreed on how the slavery issue should be dealt with. Douglas believed that each state should freely decide for itself. But the way he speaks about blacks would be viewed as racist today. Lincoln's highest priority was to save the Union. He evolved on the issue of slavery. He hoped it would go away on its own. But he obviously finally decided that it had to be eliminated.

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## **Nathan says**

Excellent audio rendering by Strathairn and Dreyfuss of the Debates.

A few notes:

- Neither (Andrew) Jackson nor T. Jefferson did not believe in the binding force of judicial (esp. SCOTUS) decisions other than as applied to that case specifically (speaking on Dred Scott).
  - Lincoln thought that the Founders did not make the country part-slave and part-free, rather, they found the existence of slavery and left it in place for the time being because "they knew of no way to get rid of it at that time." The Founders cut off the source of slavery by the abolition of the slave trade and restricted it to where it existed at the time and placed it where all understood that slavery would be in the course of ultimate extinction. But they did not see the coming of the cotton gin, which led to the necessity of slavery.
  - Lincoln thought that Whites and Blacks were created equal as to certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He didn't think that they were necessarily equal in color, size, intellect, moral development or social capacity.
  - Ultimately, thought Lincoln, the struggle of slavery is the struggle between right and wrong, the struggle from the beginning.
-