

# The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

## Abraham Lincoln on Popular Sovereignty

“What is Popular Sovereignty? Is it the right of the people to have Slavery or not have it, as they see fit, in the territories? I will state . . . my understanding is that Popular Sovereignty, as now applied to the question of Slavery, does allow the people of a Territory to have Slavery if they want to, but does not allow them *not* to have it if they *do not* want it. I do not mean that if this vast concourse of people were in a Territory of the United States, any one of them would be obliged to have a slave if he did not want one; but I do say that, as I understand the Dred Scott decision, if any one man wants slaves, all the rest have no way of keeping that one man from holding them.

“. . . When [Stephen Douglas] invites any people, willing to have slavery, to establish it, he is blowing out the moral lights around us. When he says he 'cares not whether slavery is voted down or voted up,'—that it is a sacred right of self-government, —he is, in my judgment, penetrating the human soul and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty in this American people. . . . [I]t needs only the formality of a second Dred Scott decision . . . to make slavery alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South.

—Abraham Lincoln, candidate for the U.S. Senate,  
speaking at Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858

## Stephen Douglas and the Freeport Doctrine

“I answer emphatically, as Mr. Lincoln has heard me answer a hundred times from every stump in Illinois, that in my opinion the people of a territory can, by lawful means, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State Constitution. . . .

"It matters not what way the Supreme Court may hereafter decide as to the abstract question whether slavery may or may not go into a territory under the constitution, the people have the lawful means to introduce it or exclude it as they please, for the reason that slavery cannot exist a day or an hour anywhere, unless it is supported by local police regulations. Those police regulations can only be established by the local legislature, and if the people are opposed to slavery they will elect representatives to that body who will by unfriendly legislation effectually prevent the introduction of it into their midst. If, on the contrary, they are for it, their legislation will favor its extension.

"Hence, no matter what the decision of the Supreme Court may be on that abstract question, still the right of the people to make a slave territory or a free territory is perfect and complete . . ."

—U.S. Senator Stephen Douglas,  
speaking at Freeport, Illinois, August 27, 1858

## **Abraham Lincoln on the Spread of Slavery**

"Has anything ever threatened the existence of this Union save and except this very institution of Slavery? 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 be 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 a cancer upon a 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."

—Abraham Lincoln, candidate for the U.S. Senate,  
speaking at Alton, Illinois, October 15, 1858