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The "House Divided" Speech in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858

By

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Dr. Ben McArthur  
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The "House Divided" in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858

"A house divided against itself cannot stand," proclaimed Abraham Lincoln on June 16, 1858, at the Republican convention in Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln was the newly nominated Republican candidate for U.S. Senator. The contents of this speech would resonate throughout the 1858 Senate campaign:

I believe that 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.<sup>1</sup>

What was it that was dividing the house? It was slavery. Slavery had been a source of conflict in America since its very inception. This direful curse was first inflicted on America in 1619 when a Dutch warship needing provisions traded fourteen black slaves for the supplies that they needed.<sup>2</sup> The Declaration of Independence had stated that, "all men are created equal," but Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution had counted slaves as only 3/5 of a person for the purpose of taxation and representation. This ambivalence on the issue of slavery would mark American history from the very beginning. The idea that it was the source of the divided house was not a new idea. A Whig campaign circular written by Lincoln in 1843 had stated many of the ideas later stated in the "House Divided" speech.<sup>3</sup>

The "House Divided" speech set the tone for the 1858 campaign. The campaign would be fought over the future of America. Would the country continue "half-slave and

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<sup>1</sup>Abraham Lincoln, Speeches and Writings 1832-1858. ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), 426

<sup>2</sup>Horace White. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: An Address Before the Chicago Historical Society February 17, 1914. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press), 3

<sup>3</sup>Roy P. Basler. The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln Vol. 1. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 315

half-free," or would it cease to exist? Slavery was tearing at the very fabric of America and its institutions, dividing the nation. My paper will focus on this speech and whether Abraham Lincoln actually remained true to the ideas espoused in it. Did Lincoln waver when he was attacked about them? Did he vary his statements based on where he was in the state of Illinois? Did he change his positions when as Douglas stated, "I trot him down to lower Egypt?"<sup>4</sup> These are the questions I will attempt to answer in the following paper. However, first I will present background on both the setting for the debates and the candidates. Then I will trace the arguments through the seven debates and attempt to answer the questions I have just posed.

### **Setting for the Debates**

As Harry V. Jaffa says, the issues behind the debates are found in, "a series of famous compromises, once familiar to every school boy."<sup>5</sup> These compromises began with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 which banned slavery in the newly acquired Northwest Territories. In 1808, the African Slave Trade was outlawed. By 1820, western territories were being settled and the issue of slavery in these territories was a major source of conflict. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 allowed Missouri to be admitted to the Union as a slave state, but prohibited slavery above the 36 30' parallel in the future. In 1844, the United States annexed the Republic of Texas setting the stage for the next conflict over slavery. Would this newly acquired territory be slave or free? This question nearly tore the country apart, but the cooler heads of Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Stephen Douglas calmed the situation. Thanks to the leadership of Stephen Douglas the series of bills known as the Compromise of 1850 passed through Congress. These bills admitted California as a free state, left the rest of the newly acquired territories unorganized letting popular sovereignty decide the slavery question, ended the

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<sup>4</sup>Robert W. Johannsen, ed. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 39

<sup>5</sup>Harry V. Jaffa, Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959) 433

slave trade in the District of Columbia, and more strictly enforced the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>6</sup> This calmed the storm for four years, but when Douglas submitted a bill allowing Nebraska to enter the union in February 1853. He unwittingly applied the match which caused the next explosion shaking the country to its foundations.<sup>7</sup> Under the Missouri Compromise, Nebraska should have been admitted as a free state. However, southern senators and President Pierce were opposed to this fearing it would further tilt the balance in favor of the free states. Eventually, by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 it was decided that citizens would choose for themselves whether to allow slavery by popular sovereignty. Kansas would be the crucible where popular sovereignty would be tried. It failed miserably. "Border ruffians" from neighboring Missouri crossed over the border into Kansas, violently intimidating anti-slavery voters and voting illegally in the statewide elections concerning slavery. Anti-slavery advocates, known as Free-Soilers, organized their own government so that by January Kansas had two governments. Violence reigned. Pro-slavery groups attacked Lawrence, Kansas, murdering a Free Soil advocate. In reprisal the abolitionist fanatic, John Brown murdered five pro-slavery settlers, and the term "bleeding Kansas" was coined. Impelled by this violence, Congress stepped in and a committee went to Kansas to attempt to sort things out.<sup>8</sup> The pro-slavery legislature submitted the Lecompton Constitution. This flawed document left the voters with no real choice over the slavery question. The voters were allowed to vote on it either "with" or "without" slavery. Either way, the vote did not effect slaves already living within the Kansas territory as they would remain slaves even if Kansas chose to be admitted as a free state.<sup>9</sup> With Free-Soilers boycotting the vote, the Lecompton Constitution passed 6,000 to 600 of which 3,000 of the votes were later found to be

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<sup>6</sup>Saul Sigelschiffer, The American Conscience: The Drama of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. (New York: Horizon Press, 1973) 36

<sup>7</sup>Sigelschiffer, 38

<sup>8</sup>Sigelschiffer, 42

<sup>9</sup>Paul M. Angle, ed. Created Equal? The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) xxiii

fraudulent.<sup>10</sup> In support of this measure, President Buchanan urged Congress to itself ratify the Lecompton Constitution. Douglas led the opposition against this measure and with Republican support it was defeated. When free elections were finally held, under the protection of federal troops, the Lecompton Constitution would be roundly defeated.

The controversy Kansas exemplified the way in which slavery was tearing the nation apart. Both abolitionist and southern sentiment were hardening leaving little hope for a compromise. The Dred Scott Supreme Court decision of 1857 further inflamed the two sides when it said a slave could never become a citizen since he was actually property, and that because of this fact territories could not prohibit slavery as it would be a violation of the Constitution's guarantee of the right to personal property. This decision in effect declared the Missouri Compromise of 1850 unconstitutional, and was one more death knell for a country on its way to disunion. For the newly formed Republican Party, the Dred Scott decision was the straw which broke the camels back. It made them realize that they faced both an administration and a Supreme Court who were sympathetic to slavery and had no interest in seeing slavery placed on the path towards eventual extinction.

Illinois was a battleground state over slavery and the result of the 1858 Senate race would give an idea of how voters felt about slavery in a western state. In some ways Illinois was a microcosm of the nation as a whole. The northern part of the state was heavily Republican with much abolitionist sentiment present. The southern part was a hotbed of pro-slavery sentiment. The Senate race would be between two candidates with contradicting, diametrically opposed views on the issue of slavery. Illinois's voters would have a choice. They would be able to decide if as one candidate believed, popular sovereignty could best solve the slavery question, or as the other candidate believed slavery should be put on a course towards its ultimate extinction.

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<sup>10</sup>Sigelschiffer, 56

### The Two Candidates

Saul Sigelschiffer, a scholar on the Lincoln-Douglas debates says, "The contestants who engaged in the memorable battle of the hustings before the people of Illinois seemed hand-picked by fate."<sup>11</sup> These two men were Stephen Douglas, nicknamed the "Little Giant," and Abraham Lincoln, nicknamed at this time the, "the Tall Sucker." It would have been difficult to pick to men more different in physical appearance. Douglas was five feet four inches, while Lincoln stood six feet five inches. Both weighed one-hundred and eighty pounds. Douglas possessed a rich clarion, baritone voice, while Lincoln possessed a rather high-pitched almost irritating voice. Sigelschiffer contends that each represents a distinct force in a American history: Lincoln, the spiritual, and Douglas, the material.

Stephen Douglas was born in Brandon Vermont on April 23, 1813. He moved west in 1833 eventually arriving in Jacksonville, Illinois with only a dollar in his pocket.<sup>12</sup> Already a devoted Democrat, Douglas began his meteoric rise by holding a variety of local offices. By 1843, he had been elected to Congress, and in 1847 he was elected to the Senate. He was instrumental in the passage of the Compromise of 1850. However, his later support of the Kansas-Nebraska Act caused him to be vilified across the nation causing him to remark, "I could travel from Boston to Chicago by the light of my own effigy."<sup>13</sup> His courageous stand against the Lecompton Constitution restored him to favor among the Democratic voters. Consequently, he was renominated as the Democratic candidate for the Senate in 1858. Douglas's attitudes towards slavery were rooted upon two axioms: the question of slavery must be kept out of the halls of Congress, and that the boundaries of the United States must be extended as rapidly as possible with "popular

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<sup>11</sup>Sigelschiffer, 60

<sup>12</sup>Sigelschiffer, 65

<sup>13</sup>Damon Wells. Stephen Douglas: The Last Years 1857-1861. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971) 31

sovereignty" deciding the slavery question in the new territories.<sup>14</sup> Douglas was more concerned with the territorial growth of the United States than with the potential moral implications that the slavery issue held. He was more comfortable feigning an indifference towards slavery. Furthermore, it seemed that slavery would not be profitable in these new territories. Douglas believed that the eventual withering of slavery had been halted due to abolitionist propaganda and the free-soil movement.<sup>15</sup>

One of his biographer's describes his personality this way "boundless self-confidence and teeming imagination led him at times towards greatness and at times to the brink of folly."<sup>16</sup> He knew that he would be in for a challenge when he learned that Abraham Lincoln would be his opponent. Douglas said, "I shall have my hands full. He is the strong man of his party--full of wit, facts, dates--and the best stump speaker in the West. He is as honest as he is shrewd and if I beat him my victory will be hardly won."<sup>17</sup> Douglas was nationally known as a great orator. His biographer describes his style as, "alternating between attack and defense, depending upon the character of those who had gathered to listen."<sup>18</sup>

He was born on February 12, 1809 in Kentucky and followed the path of many frontier-born Americans moving west to Indiana in 1816. Lincoln finally settled in New Salem Illinois in 1831. The inhumane treatment of blacks he had seen in two previous trips to New Orleans had left him with a lasting animosity towards the institution of slavery. Lincoln was elected to the Illinois legislature from the Whig party in 1834 and reelected in 1836, 1838, and 1840. His opposition to slavery can already be seen by his signing a resolution protesting slavery in 1837.

The success of Abraham Lincoln revolved around the issue of slavery.

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<sup>14</sup>Jaffa, 47-48

<sup>15</sup>Jaffa, 64

<sup>16</sup>Wells, 25

<sup>17</sup>Sigelschiffer, 166

<sup>18</sup>Robert W. Johannsen. Stephen A. Douglas. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 660



Sigelschiffer says, "If there had been no slavery issue. Abraham Lincoln would not have become President of the United States."<sup>19</sup> Lincoln's attitude towards slavery at this time can be summarized as follows. Slavery was morally wrong. The federal government had the right to act against slavery, but had no right to interfere with it where it already existed. Fugitive slaves would have to be recovered due to the Constitution; violence over slavery was bad, and free blacks should be colonized outside the United States. Lincoln served in Congress during the Mexican War, which he opposed. He was one of the strongest supporters of Senator John Wilmot's attempts to keep slavery out of the territories acquired from Mexico. However, he left the Senate in 1849. Sigelschiffer describes the years 1849-1854 as "a plateau in Lincoln's life, a period in which his thoughts were maturing quietly and he was being made, ready for his entrance on the scene of history."<sup>20</sup>

A speech given at Peoria in 1854 renewed Lincoln's assent. In this speech he defended the Missouri Compromise and pointed out the fallacies of the recently passed Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lincoln also posed questions to the validity of popular sovereignty as a basis for solving the issue of slavery. Horace White, a reporter during the 1850s, called this speech Lincoln's first great speech, "It was a profoundly serious speech. The thought impressed upon its hearers was their solemn responsibility to God and man and future generations, to uphold the principles of free government, without flinching doubting or wavering."<sup>21</sup> Lincoln was best at this type of argument. Sigelschiffer says, "he reduced the moral aspect of slavery to the prime requisite of the Negro as a human being who was entitled to liberty."<sup>22</sup> In contrast Douglas made "no very vivid impression that the Negro is human."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sigelschiffer, 92

<sup>20</sup> Sigelschiffer, 114

<sup>21</sup> White, 12

<sup>22</sup> Sigelschiffer, 124

<sup>23</sup> Sigelschiffer, 125

### The Opening Attack

Lincoln's "House Divided" speech was the opening salvo fired in this campaign. From the moment he uttered it his closest associates knew that it could cause their candidate trouble. David Zarefsky, an expert on the debates, says of the "House Divided" speech, "The very reasons that cause the modern reader to see the speech as prophetic made it a liability in its own time."<sup>24</sup> Throughout the campaign, Douglas would attempt to focus the public on the inflammatory rhetoric of this speech.

It is important to understand exactly what Lincoln's motivation for giving this speech was. Why would he jeopardize his campaign with such seemingly radical statements? Some historians, notably Richard Hofstadter, have seen Lincoln as willing to sacrifice this campaign in hopes of winning a bigger triumph in the future--the presidency. He says Lincoln "was making the great gamble of his career."<sup>25</sup> Many of Lincoln's friends considered the speech to be "more eloquent than wise."<sup>26</sup> William H. Herndon has given us the picture of Lincoln at the time of the speech as a man "like a Hebrew prophet, determined to speak his thoughts without concern for the consequences."<sup>27</sup> But would a candidate who would go on to travel tens of thousands of miles and make hundreds of speeches throw away his chances in a current campaign in order to make points for a future one? It defies logic and is inconsistent with the flesh and blood Lincoln of 1858. Lincoln scholar Don Fehrenbacher has given us a more reasonable view. He finds this rhetoric out of character for the Lincoln of the Senate campaign, whom he describes as "a man of flexibility and discretion."<sup>28</sup> In his view,

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<sup>24</sup>David Zarefsky, Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 142

<sup>25</sup>Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (New York, 1948), 114

<sup>26</sup>Don E. Fehrenbacher, "The Origins and Purposes of Lincoln's 'House Divided' Speech," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 46 (March 1960): 618

<sup>27</sup>Fehrenbacher, 619

<sup>28</sup>Fehrenbacher, 620

Lincoln gave the speech to differentiate himself from Douglas. Prior to his nomination, there had been much talk of nominating Douglas himself, especially among eastern establishment figures like Horace Greeley. Thus Lincoln took this opportunity at his nomination to differentiate himself from Douglas and give voters a reason for electing him. Fehrenbacher describes the speech as "a rather short address, judged by theoretical standards of the day, and the famous opening was crisply spoken in two minutes."<sup>29</sup> He describes the famous passage "as a declaration of purpose."<sup>30</sup> David Potter seconds this when he says of the speech that it "served as a blue-print for his entire campaign."<sup>31</sup> There is no mention of war and the speech gains much of its provocative nature from the vigor with which Lincoln delivered the speech rather than the actual contents of the speech. Fehrenbacher points out that rather than continuing to hammer home the theme that a "house divided" cannot stand, from the sixth sentence onward, "he devoted the major portion of his address to the contention that there was a real and imminent danger of slavery's being introduced into the free states."<sup>32</sup> Lincoln abhorred this idea. He wished for slavery to be put on the path towards ultimate extinction on which he felt the Founding Fathers had placed it. It would be this theme which Lincoln would emphasize throughout the entire campaign. In short:

Lincoln laid down, in the 'House Divided' speech, a definition of Republicanism which, while merely articulating what everyone knew, served to emphasize the doctrinal gulf that still yawned between Douglas and the Republicans...The concept of ultimate extinction could thus be used as a touchstone for separating the true form the casual or pretended opponents of slavery.<sup>33</sup>

Lincoln would try to establish this link with the Founding Fathers through the

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<sup>29</sup>Fehrenbacher, 620

<sup>30</sup>Fehrenbacher, 623

<sup>31</sup>David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis 1848-1861. (New York: Harper Row, 1976) 349

<sup>32</sup>Fehrenbacher, 624

<sup>33</sup>Fehrenbacher, 627

concept of ultimate extinction. Throughout the debates, he repeatedly stated the Founding Fathers ambivalence if not outright animosity, towards slavery. Over and over he insisted, "that, in the long run, there was no middle ground between slavery and freedom. The country must become all one thing or all the other, and it was currently tending toward slavery."<sup>34</sup> He remained very proud of this speech throughout his life. Once remarking, "If I had to draw a pen across my record, and erase my whole life from sight, and I had one poor gift or choice left as to what I should save from the wreck, I should choose that speech and leave it to the world unerased."<sup>35</sup> But would Lincoln have the courage to stick by the convictions of this speech throughout the campaign even it might cost him the election?

From the beginning to the end of the debates, the ideas of this speech would be preeminent and mentioned in all the debates.<sup>36</sup> Douglas saw the "House Divided" speech as a great opportunity. He planned to emphasize it so much that he pasted excerpts of it into a notebook which he carried around with him from debate to debate.<sup>37</sup> By highlighting this speech he could accuse Lincoln of advocating a type of civil war. The reasons which make the speech most memorable to the modern reader were exactly what got Lincoln into trouble. Zarefsky says, "The very reasons that cause the modern reader to see the speech as prophetic made it a liability in its own time."<sup>38</sup> Douglas would play upon the filio piety of an age that held the pantheon of heroes Washington, Jefferson, and Madison sacred and would attempt to place Lincoln at odds with them. He would accuse Lincoln of attempting to incite revolution by pointing out the implications which the "house divided" speech had towards the Union. Would Lincoln stand firm to the convictions of this speech?

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<sup>34</sup>Zarefsky, 43

<sup>35</sup>Sigelschiffer, 177

<sup>36</sup>Zarefsky, 142

<sup>37</sup>Johannsen, 660

<sup>38</sup>Zarefsky, 142

Lincoln in turn would defend himself by pleading that, "I only said what I expect would take place."<sup>39</sup> He believed that all of his policies were rooted in the positions of the Founding Fathers. Pointing out that the Declaration of Independence, a document he held to be sacred writ had proclaimed "all men were created equal." Douglas and others believed this phrase meant British subjects living in America should be held equal to those living in Great Britain. Lincoln believed saying it applied to all men just like it said. He countered saying that authors had meant it as "a stumbling block to those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into hateful paths of despotism."<sup>40</sup>

Lincoln saw a theme running through American history. It was that slavery was on its way out. He saw the Founding Fathers as profoundly anti-slavery and denied Douglas's claim that the Fathers made the nation half-slave and half-free. Zarefsky sums up what Lincoln felt the Founding Fathers' feelings towards slavery in the country when he said, "Rather they found it in that condition and not knowing what else to do left it that way."<sup>41</sup> Lincoln believed that the vision of the Founding Fathers was being lost by the possibility that slavery would be made permanent. He believed that this would mean the end of true freedom and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence remarking, "As a nation we began by remarking that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal except Negroes.'...When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty--to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."<sup>42</sup>. This hypocrisy is what Lincoln is trying to point out in the "House Divided" speech.

Jaffa describes Douglas as believing that the only way to abolish slavery was to appeal to the people of the states and territories through popular sovereignty.<sup>43</sup> Douglas's

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<sup>39</sup>Lincoln, 446

<sup>40</sup>Sigelschiffer, 134-135

<sup>41</sup>Zarefsky, 147

<sup>42</sup>Jaffa, 74

<sup>43</sup>Jaffa, 48

positions rested on two axioms: first, that the question of slavery should be kept out of the halls of Congress, second, that the boundaries of the United States should be expanded as rapidly as possible.<sup>44</sup> Douglas believed, "that there is but one path of peace in this Republic, and that is to administer this Government as our fathers made it, divided into free and slave States, allowing each State to decide for itself whether it wants slavery or not."<sup>45</sup>

The Lincoln-Douglas debates would revolve around the question of whether the nation could continue on its present course being "half-slave and half-free." Would Lincoln hold firm to his views or would he like most politicians waver and modify his positions to fit the audience he was speaking to?

### **The Debates**

Horace Greeley, the New York editor, had suggested as early as July 12 that Lincoln and Douglas should engage in a series of formal debates. Illinois had not been redistricted in a number of years. Most of the recent population increase had occurred in the heavily Republican northern section of the state, which was underrepresented. Thus, Douglas had a significant advantage. Lincoln needed to make some sort of bold move or he would have no chance of election. He was unable to draw large of crowds for his own rallies. Thus for the first two months of the campaign he followed Douglas around the state usually speaking the day after Douglas had.<sup>46</sup> By participating in a series of formal debates, he hoped to capitalize on Douglas's ability to draw large crowds. Lincoln tendered the debates formally on July 24 and the Douglas accepted.<sup>47</sup>

Prior to the debates both Lincoln and Douglas had spoken against each other six times. As early as 1839 they had engaged in debate, they spoke against each other in Peoria and Springfield in the midst of the furor over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Earlier in

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<sup>44</sup>Jaffa, 48

<sup>45</sup>Johannsen, 218

<sup>46</sup>Sigelschiffer, 201

<sup>47</sup>Sigelschiffer, 204-205

the campaign they had both spoken against at Springfield and Chicago. Therefore, the rest of the debates would be held in each of the seven other congressional districts. The debate format would have one candidate open by speaking for an hour, the next would then speak for an hour-and-a-half, then the first would conclude by speaking for half an hour.

The first debate was held at Ottawa on Aug. 21. Ottawa, in northern Illinois was friendly territory for Lincoln. Ten to twenty thousand people crowded the town to hear the debate. Horace White describes the scene "the crowd was so dense that the speakers and their appointed escort had much difficulty in reaching their places."<sup>48</sup>

This debate would set the stage for the future debates. The candidates would bring about issues that would be touched upon again and again throughout the debates. Douglas's attacks centered on two issues. First, he would attempt to portray Lincoln as a dangerous revolutionary who was seeking to break apart the Union and abolitionize the entire country. Second, he would suggest the ominous implications that Lincoln's position implied equality of the races something that Douglas believed most of the electorate would find unpalatable.

Douglas began by questioning Lincoln as to whether he still believed, as he had in 1854, that no more slave states should be admitted to the Union. Douglas did this because he believed that Lincoln would change his convictions later when "I trot him down to lower Egypt."<sup>49</sup> Douglas hoped Lincoln would make more radical statements here in Ottawa on friendly turf that later use against in the debates. Douglas next quoted from Lincoln's "House Divided" speech calling it "revolutionary and destructive of the existence of this government."<sup>50</sup> Douglas's views differed from Lincoln's. He believed that the house would naturally be divided saying, "Here I assert that uniformity of local

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<sup>48</sup>White, 18

<sup>49</sup>Johannsen, 41

<sup>50</sup>Johannsen, 44

laws and institutions of the different States is neither possible or desirable."<sup>51</sup> He then turned Lincoln's phrases against him, saying that when the Constitution was adopted twelve states were slave and one was free, thus if there would have been uniformity as Lincoln would have wished. He continued, "I believe that this new doctrine preached by Mr. Lincoln and his party will dissolve the Union if it succeeds."<sup>52</sup>

Lincoln immediately fielded Douglas's challenge to his "House Divided" speech. Cleverly, he pointed out that what he had said was inspired writing and if Douglas disagreed with this statement his problem was with the Almighty and not himself. Lincoln hated slavery and wished to push it on its way to gradual extinction. He believed that Douglas and his allies, President Buchanan and Chief Justice Taney, were placing slavery on a new basis, "which looks to the perpetuity and nationalization of slavery."<sup>53</sup> Lincoln then went on to share his fear that there would be a second Dred Scott decision which would nationalize slavery.<sup>54</sup> He accused Douglas of muzzling the cannon of liberty and standing in the way of history. In this debate Lincoln wavered in his views, he denied that he wished for universal equality and stated, "I have no disposition to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races."<sup>55</sup> In his rejoinder, Douglas countered. "He does not want to avow his principles. I want to avow mine."<sup>56</sup> Douglas again attempted to turn Lincoln's "House Divided" speech against him ending his rejoinder by pointing out, "If it cannot endure thus divided, then he must strive to make them all free or all slave, which will inevitably bring about the dissolution of the Union."<sup>57</sup> Inherent in this statement, is the point that Lincoln had already contradicted

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<sup>51</sup>Johannsen, 45

<sup>52</sup>Johannsen, 48

<sup>53</sup>Johannsen, 55

<sup>54</sup>Johannsen, 64

<sup>55</sup>Harold Holzer, ed. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: The First Complete Unexpurgated Text. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 63

<sup>56</sup>Johannsen, 73

<sup>57</sup>Johannsen, 73



himself about the "House Divided" speech. How could the house quit being divided unless actions were taken to eradicate slavery? Douglas further went on the offensive by accusing Lincoln of advocating political equality for blacks. He pointed out that earlier statements Lincoln had made in reference to the Declaration of Independence implied that "all men are created equal" included blacks.<sup>58</sup>

The second debate was held at Freeport on Aug. 27. Freeport was even further north than Ottawa and another Lincoln stronghold. Here Lincoln attempted to entrap Douglas in his own statements by asking him a series of seven questions. The most important of which was whether he believed the people of a territory could legally prohibit slavery. This question became known as the Freeport Question. Douglas answered the question saying, "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 the State Constitution."<sup>59</sup> Some historians have seen the Freeport doctrine as killing Douglas's chances in the South in a future presidential election, but as Fehrenbacher has pointed out Douglas had already made many statements on the subject very similar to this one. He holds that the doctrine, "was elicited more by the logic of circumstances than by Lincoln's questioning."<sup>60</sup>

In his statements Douglas again attacks Lincoln for his radical views, and Lincoln disgusted answers saying:

"The Judge has again addressed himself to the abolition tendencies of a speech of mine, made at Springfield in June last. I have so often tried to answer what he is always saying on that melancholy theme, that I almost turn with disgust from the discussion--from the repetition of an answer to it. I trust that nearly all of this

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<sup>58</sup>Holzer, 79

<sup>59</sup>Johannsen, 88

<sup>60</sup>Don E. Fehrenbacher. "Lincoln, Douglas, and the Freeport Question," American Historical Review 66 (April 1961) 616

intelligent audience have read that speech. If you have, I may venture to leave it to you to inspect it contains any of those "bugaboos" which frighten Judge Lincoln clarified his if he were to vote for the admission of a slave state that the character of the nation would be permanently fixed. Lincoln seems to be backing down in preparation for the next debate to be held at Jonesboro in the southernmost part of Illinois. He seems very defensive when he states, "I aver as my confident belief, when you come to see our speeches in print, that you will find every question which he has asked me more fairly and boldly and fully answered than he has answered those which I put to him."<sup>62</sup> But neither of the opponents had been able to strike a fatal blow at the other and as eyewitnesses reported, "the audience did not take in the vast importance of the debate and left without any display of enthusiasm."<sup>63</sup>

With the third debate, Lincoln had finally entered the hostile territory of Egypt, the nickname for southern Illinois, because Cairo was the main town in that area. This part of Illinois was "a bastion of pro-slavery, negrophobic sentiment nestled in rural isolation between two slave states, Kentucky and Missouri."<sup>64</sup> It was an area where men took their Democratic politics as straight as their whisky.<sup>65</sup> Jonesboro, where the debate took place, had a population of only 800. This fact plus the tremendous heat led to a rather disappointing crowd for the debate between 1,200 and 1,500 (in comparison to the 20,000 people at the first debate). Lincoln had a surprise in store in Jonesboro and contrary to expectations began to pick up his rhetoric and improve upon his shaky earlier debates.

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<sup>61</sup>Johannsen, 110

<sup>62</sup>Johannsen, 110-111

<sup>63</sup>Holzer, 90

<sup>64</sup>Holzer, 136

<sup>65</sup>Stephen Oates, With Malice Towards None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 151

Douglas spoke first and threw down the gauntlet when he proclaimed, "I say that this is the inevitable and irresistible result of Mr. Lincoln's argument, inviting a warfare between the North and the South, to be carried on with ruthless vengeance, until one section or the other shall be driven to the wall, and become the victim of the rapacity of the other."<sup>66</sup> Douglas went on to point out that, this divided house had thrived. Expanding from Mississippi to the Pacific Ocean, "we have increased in population, in wealth, and in power beyond any example on earth ...all this has been done under a Constitution which Mr. Lincoln, in substance, says is in violation of the law of God."<sup>67</sup> Lincoln provides a brief answer when he simply says that he didn't think the Union could continue half-slave and half-free.<sup>68</sup>

Douglas repeatedly pointed out that the diversity of the divided house was its strength. Lincoln agrees calling them, "the very cements of this Union."<sup>69</sup> Lincoln, however, placed slavery in a different category. He points out that this issue has been a source of constant controversy. Lincoln provides a very adequate explanation for his "House Divided" speech when he says that the trouble will only cease when the issue of slavery is placed back where the Founding Fathers found it on a path towards gradual extinction. In the final paragraph of his speech, Lincoln makes a special appeal to the people of "Egypt," when he says, "I know this people better than he does. I was raised just a little east of here."<sup>70</sup> Douglas counters saying, "I do not know that the place where a man is born or raised has much to do with his political principles."<sup>71</sup> He went on to say that often the most vehement abolitionists came from Alabama and went north to agitate against slavery while living off the profits made from selling their slaves. Lincoln performed excellently at Jonesboro holding true and expounding eloquently upon the

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<sup>66</sup>Johannsen, 125-126

<sup>67</sup>Johannsen, 126

<sup>68</sup>Johannsen, 132

<sup>69</sup>Johannsen, 136

<sup>70</sup>Johannsen, 152

<sup>71</sup>Johannsen, 158

principles of his "House Divided" speech for the first time. He had finally taken the offensive in the debates. He had valiantly withstood Douglas' attack and had shown that he did not change his political positions vary on the place he was speaking.

The fourth debate was held at Charleston in pro-Whig Coles County located in east central Illinois on September 18. In this debate, Lincoln would attempt to reply to Douglas's second challenge to him. What was the proper relationship between whites and blacks? At Charleston we find that he definitely makes the point as he had at Ottawa in debate one that, "We can not make them equals."<sup>72</sup> Later in the speech, Lincoln would advocate a policy of gradual emancipation and possible eventual recolonization to Africa, and would make comments even less favorable towards blacks exclaiming, "I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races."<sup>73</sup> These statements seem very out of character for the Lincoln of whom we have been taught as the great champion of political equality. However, as the historian David Potter points out, the Republicans were trying to quell the charges of extremism that they constantly faced by advocating only a "minimum slavery position."<sup>74</sup> Garry Wills seconds this sentiment when notes, "But for that pledge, Lincoln had no hope of winning office."<sup>75</sup> However, even Lincoln's friends had difficulty believing that Lincoln actually believed these sentiments himself,<sup>76</sup> since these sentiments differed so radically with statements Lincoln had uttered at Chicago earlier in the campaign. At Chicago prior to the debates, Lincoln had said, "I leave you, hoping that the lamp of liberty will burn in your bosoms until there shall no longer be a

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<sup>72</sup>Holzer, 62

<sup>73</sup>Johannsen, 162

<sup>74</sup>Zarefsky, 61

<sup>75</sup>Garry Wills, Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 14

<sup>76</sup>Douglas L. Wilson, Lincoln Before Washington: New Perspectives on the Illinois Years (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 175

doubt that all men are created free and equal."<sup>77</sup> In the very next debate at Galesburg, Lincoln says boldly, "The inferior races are our equals."<sup>78</sup> Hofstadter says on this contradiction that it is not easy to decide whether the true Lincoln is the one who spoke at Chicago or the one who spoke at Charleston. He may have actually believed both at the particular time he delivered those speeches, but it is easy to see a politician looking for votes.<sup>79</sup>

Douglas would pound on this contradiction throughout the next few debates. However, despite the statement at Charleston, Lincoln's positions in regards to blacks were far superior to those of Douglas who throughout the debates took advantage of every opportunity to play on the anti-black sentiment prevalent in Illinois. Potter says, "Lincoln constantly appealed to his hearers to recognize that they shared a common humanity with the blacks, while Douglas was tickling the racist susceptibilities of the same audiences with charges that Lincoln regarded the Negro as 'his brother.'"<sup>80</sup> It is interesting to note that Lincoln never repeated the statements that he made at Charleston again in the debates. Instead, some historians have felt that Lincoln was making a different point. He was placing in the foreground the idea that it was more important to bring about an end to the moral wrongs of slavery, than to have equality for blacks.<sup>81</sup> The fact that Lincoln never uttered statements like these again throughout the debate lead one to conclude that these statements are anomalous from Lincoln's actual position towards blacks. These statements represent the most glaring example of his tailoring the statements that he made to suit his audience.

In his reply, Douglas accused Lincoln, Trumbull, and even Frederick Douglas of attempting to break up the existing political parties and form an abolition party.<sup>82</sup> Later in

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<sup>77</sup>Zarefsky, 61

<sup>78</sup>Sigelschiffer, 410

<sup>79</sup>Hofstadter, 114

<sup>80</sup>David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis 1848-1861. (New York: Harper Row, 1976) 352

<sup>81</sup>Wilson, 175

<sup>82</sup>Johannsen, 189

the speech, Douglas attempts to prove that Lincoln and the Republicans would avow one set of principles in northern Illinois and a different set in southern Illinois.<sup>83</sup> Later he again restates his earlier point that. "We have existed and prospered from a house that is divided."<sup>84</sup> In his rejoinder Lincoln again restates his thesis that there would be no peace until slavery was placed on its true course towards ultimate extinction.<sup>85</sup>

I find the fifth and sixth debates held at Galesburg and Quincy respectively to include very few new arguments. At Galesburg a crowd of over 20,000 congregated in a cold, icy wind to hear the debate. Douglas again accuses Lincoln of modifying his positions to fit the audience. Douglas states, "you find that Mr. Lincoln's creed cannot travel through even one half of the counties of this state, but that it changes hues and becomes lighter and lighter as it travels from the extreme north, until it is nearly white, when it reaches the extreme south end of the State."<sup>86</sup> In his reply one can tell that Lincoln is getting weary of the whole process, he points out that, "Judge Douglas has again, I believe, the fifth time, if not the seventh, in my presence, reiterated his charge of conspiracy between the National Democrats and Republicans."<sup>87</sup> He concludes his portion of the debate by giving voters a reason for electing the Republicans. Lincoln believes that a Republican victory would lessen the chances of a second Dred Scott decision in the courts, which would he feared make slavery permanent. The sixth debate at Quincy, in far-western Illinois, on Oct. 13 contained little that had not already been discussed before.

At the final debate in Alton on Oct. 15 the smallest crowd since Jonesboro was present. Leading observers to believe that maybe some of the novelty had worn off the debates, Nevertheless, this would be a crucial debate as Alton, located in the west-central

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<sup>83</sup>Johannsen, 195

<sup>84</sup>Johannsen, 197

<sup>85</sup>Johannsen, 200

<sup>86</sup>Johannsen, 215

<sup>87</sup>Johannsen, 226

area of Illinois, was inhabited by many old-line Whigs who would hold the key to victory in the election. This swing vote was much sought after by the candidates. I find the last debate to be the most substantive. Zarefsky summarizes Douglas's strategy in this final debate by pointing out that Douglas would finally hope to put Lincoln on the defensive by focusing on three issues: Lincoln's "House Divided" speech, his attack on the Supreme Court, and his belief that Negroes were included in the Declaration of Independence's credo that "all men are created equal."<sup>88</sup> When Lincoln invoked the Declaration of Independence, his strategy was simple: he wanted, "to make Douglas attack the Declaration and the principles it affirmed."<sup>89</sup> Lincoln held the Declaration to be Holy Writ. Previously, Douglas attempted to capitalize on the reverence which the Founding Fathers were held by trying to paint Lincoln as a dangerous radical to the Republic. Now Lincoln would employ the same strategy against Douglas.

At Alton Lincoln had finally rooted himself firmly in his principles. He invoked the revered name of Henry Clay. Pointing out that Clay himself had believed that blacks were included in the Declaration of Independence's "all men" quote. Continuing he pointed out that Clay had held this to be "a great fundamental truth."<sup>90</sup> Lincoln denied Douglas's charges that he was wavering in his positions by saying, "three years ago there never had been a man, so far as I knew or believed, in the whole world, who had said that the Declaration of Independence did not include Negroes in the term 'all men.'"<sup>91</sup> Lincoln says of the repeated reference to the "House Divided" speech saying of Douglas, "He has warred upon them as Satan wars upon the Bible. His perversion's upon it are endless. Here now are my views upon it in brief."<sup>92</sup> Lincoln clarifies what he meant by the "House Divided" speech, "I thought the agitation would not cease until a crisis should

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<sup>88</sup>Zarefsky, 65

<sup>89</sup>Wilson, 175

<sup>90</sup>Johannsen, 307

<sup>91</sup>Johannsen, 304

<sup>92</sup>Johannsen, 309

have been reached and passed."<sup>93</sup> He confides his hope that eventually all mention of slavery will be expunged from the nation's history.<sup>94</sup> To Lincoln, the Founding Fathers had been opponents of slavery, but had been incapable of doing anything about it. Slavery had been nothing but trouble for America and the sooner it was removed the better. "We have had difficulty and turmoil whenever it has made a struggle to spread itself where it was not."<sup>95</sup> This highlights the distinction between Lincoln and Douglas on slavery. Douglas denied that there was any moral component to the slavery issue, while Lincoln saw slavery as a pernicious force in American history. Later in the speech he says, "Has anything ever threatened the existence of this Union save and except this very institution of slavery?"<sup>96</sup> He reiterates his main criticism of Douglas when he says, "that he looks to no end of the institution of slavery."<sup>97</sup>

Douglas in turn replies to Lincoln's theme that slavery was what was tearing the Union apart by saying that it was actually agitation about slavery causing this. Douglas declares, "If agitators would acquiesce in that principle, there never would be any danger to the peace and harmony of the Union."<sup>98</sup> Douglas was right, but he was on the wrong side of history. Across the Western Hemisphere slavery was on the way out, America was its last bastion, and those opponents of slavery could not help but make their views known. He continues asserting in direct contradiction to Lincoln's "House Divided" speech that "this Government can exist as they made it, divided into free and slave States."<sup>99</sup> Later Douglas questions how Lincoln hoped to bring about slavery's ultimate extinction without resorting to force saying that Lincoln "will extinguish slavery in the Southern States as the French general exterminated the Algerines when he smoked them

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<sup>93</sup>Johannsen, 310

<sup>94</sup>Johannsen, 311

<sup>95</sup>Johannsen, 313

<sup>96</sup>Johannsen, 317

<sup>97</sup>Johannsen, 320

<sup>98</sup>Johannsen, 326

<sup>99</sup>Johannsen, 326



out. He is going to extinguish slavery by surrounding the slave States, hemming in the slaves and starving them out of existence."<sup>100</sup> Ridiculing Lincoln by saying he would do this in the name of "humanity and Christianity." Douglas ends his rejoinder by saying that all he wanted was for the people to have a choice whether or not they wanted slavery.<sup>101</sup> With this rejoinder the most famous debates in American political history came to an end, but the debates were only a portion of the campaign. The candidates repeatedly traversed the speech hoping to land that blow which would give them the certainty of victory. Douglas traveled 5,227 miles and Lincoln logged 4,350 miles, by the end of the campaign both candidates were tired and hoarse.

### Conclusion

Yet, we are left with our original question. How close did Lincoln remain to the original statements he made in the "House Divided" speech? Did his message attain different hues as he spoke far and wide across Illinois? Lincoln's thesis throughout the debates was that there was a possibility that slavery would be made permanent in the United States in the near future.<sup>102</sup> Lincoln remained true to this position. At times we see Lincoln moderating his positions, especially at Ottawa and Charleston in regards to whether blacks and whites were equals. However, at Jonesboro in the third debate in hostile territory in southern Illinois, he began to reemphasize his original thesis that slavery was the root of the national strife which had been erupting throughout the 1850s. The danger he saw on the horizon was that slavery would be made permanent and this would tear the nation apart. In regards to his feelings towards blacks, historians have concluded "Lincoln hated slavery because he regarded Negroes as humans and because he believed, philosophically at least in the equality of all men."<sup>103</sup> And if blacks were to be held as equal, then slavery must be placed on a course towards its ultimate extinction,

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<sup>100</sup>Johannsen, 328

<sup>101</sup>Johannsen, 329

<sup>102</sup>Hofstadter, 117

<sup>103</sup>Potter, 342

this was Lincoln's thesis so that when we examine Lincoln's thesis we can reason that underlying it is that the races are equal. This sentiment is contradictory to what Lincoln said at Charleston and Ottawa. In conclusion, Lincoln's positions regarding blacks were in constant flux throughout his life and it is very difficult to tell exactly what they are.

Lincoln lost the election, but received more popular votes 125,430 to 121,609. However, prior to the Seventeenth Amendment Senators were elected by the state legislature and here Lincoln was defeated by a total of 54 to 46. As noted, previously, the election map was weighted heavily in favor of the Democrats, and this result should not be used to mar Lincoln's performance in the debates. It was said of his effort in the campaign "no man could have done more."<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, Lincoln may have lost the election, but he won the war. His positions were more progressive and on the right side of history. Lincoln was essentially right. This nation could not continue "half-slave and half-free." A scant fact that two years later he would defeat the same opponent in a nationwide election and the nation would subsequently come apart not be reunited until it was all one thing.

Zarefsky explains, "Lincoln ultimately 'won' the debates, not because he triumphed on any one argument, and certainly not because he was later elected president, but because his arguments met the needs of his own time yet he spoke to the ages as well."<sup>105</sup> Lincoln himself realized he would have another chance someday. He wrote to his friend, Charles H. Ray, "Another 'blow-up' is coming; and we shall have fun again. Douglas managed to be supported both as the best instrument to put down and to uphold the slave power; but no ingenuity can long keep these antagonisms in harmony."<sup>106</sup> Again, he writes to Henry Asbury saying, "Another explosion will soon come."<sup>107</sup>

In conclusion, I hold that Lincoln remained relatively true to his original position

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<sup>104</sup>Oates, 160

<sup>105</sup>Zarefsky, 244

<sup>106</sup>Lincoln, 832

<sup>107</sup>Lincoln, 831

as stated in the "House Divided" speech. I believe that his statements during the last debates at Alton prove this. The "House Divided" speech was meant to be a blueprint for his campaign. It was not meant to be taken literally, meaning, that he would not actively work to dissolve the Union, but rather he was simply pointing out that this division had lead to much trouble and turmoil throughout our nation's history. There is nothing particularly radical in any of Lincoln's debate statements. He was a candidate actively campaigning for office and had to remain moderate while at the same time holding true to the principles that separated him from his opponent. It was this that he was doing when he made the "House Divided" speech. I believe he consistently and eloquently defended the sentiments of the speech throughout the hard-fought Illinois Senate Campaign of 1858. The speech's mettle was tested throughout the debates and Lincoln remained true to the substance of his message.

In completing my research paper I had no paucity of sources. The debates have been thoroughly collected and studied. The versions of the debates which I relied upon for the purpose of this paper were The Lincoln-Douglas Debates, ed. By Robert Johannsen, and The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: The First Complete, Unexpurgated Text, by Harold Holzer. Johannsen's version is the traditional account, whereas Holzer takes his version from that printed in the opposition paper of each candidate, the Republican paper's version for Douglas, and the Democratic's version for Lincoln. Holzer feels that this method is more accurate. However, Douglas L. Wilson in the book, Lincoln Before Washington: New Perspectives on the Illinois Years questions this method, feeling that it does both of the candidates an injustice. I mainly used Johannsen's edition. Although, I did occasionally used Holzer's work, as it provided excellent backgrounds and settings to each of the debates.

There have been numerous books written about the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Those that I am most indebted to are: Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates by Harry V. Jaffa, The American Conscience: The Drama of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates by Saul Sigelschiffer, and Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery by David Zarefsky. All three works provide excellent insights into the substance of the debates. Zarefsky is a speech professor and takes a less historical look at the debates. However, it is his book which informed me of the importance of the "House Divided" speech in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. This information provided me with my thesis. Jaffa's book provided me with an excellent overview and background to the debates themselves. From his book, I was made aware that Douglas was primarily concerned with the growth and expansion of America, and that this was his motivation for espousing "popular sovereignty. I discovered Sigelschiffer's work late in my research. It provided me with a tremendous overview of the situation in the United States prior to the debates. This book gave further buttressing to my arguments and is an especially fine and well-researched book.

Countless biographies of Abraham Lincoln are in print and I had nowhere near enough time to search and delve into all of them. The two that I gave only the most cursory glances to were: Lincoln by David Herbert Donald, and With Malice Towards None by Stephen Oates. Two biographies of Douglas provided me with excellent information into his life and work. Robert Johannsen's monumental work,

Stephen A. Douglas, and Stephen Douglas: The Last Years by Damon Wells. These four books helped me to a better understanding of the lives of the men involved in the debates.

I also discovered two journal articles by Lincoln scholar, Don E. Fehrenbacher which were very helpful to me in preparation of this paper. They are: "The Origins and Purposes of Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech," and "Lincoln, Douglas and the Freeport Question." Both are found in the Mississippi Valley Historical Review. The first in the March 1960 issue, and the second in the April 1961. These provided me with more detailed information on these two specific occurrences in the campaign.

The two collections of Lincoln's writings which I used were the Library of America collection ed. By Don E. Fehrenbacher, and Roy P. Basler's The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. These gave me the information I needed directly from one of the participants of the debates. I did not use any of the collected papers of Stephen Douglas.

At times in this project I felt overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material that was available on my topic, and this probably was the greatest challenge. I was forced to decide what was and was not important and to synthesize all his information together. A research paper of this size has tested both my will and patience and hopefully I am a better person for doing it. Working on a paper of this size has given me an even greater amount of respect for scholars who complete works a hundred times larger than my measly effort. In conclusion, I learned much from my research into the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and while I do not have the knowledge or expertise to develop any revolutionary new interpretation. I feel that by this study I have come to a more complete understanding of both the debates and the candidates who participated in them.