



June 2008

## Lincoln Versus Douglas: It Wasn't the Top Hat that Made Lincoln so Attractive

Dan Carden '00  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica>

---

### Recommended Citation

Carden '00, Dan (1999) "Lincoln Versus Douglas: It Wasn't the Top Hat that Made Lincoln so Attractive," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 4  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol4/iss1/3>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by editorial board of Res Publica and the Political Science Department at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

---

## Lincoln Versus Douglas: It Wasn't the Top Hat that Made Lincoln so Attractive

### Abstract

On the other hand, Douglas maintained a morally relativist position by promoting popular sovereignty to decide the issue in the Territories and to define states' rights in the Union. Comparing Douglas' moral relativism to Lincoln's moral absolutism, specifically regarding slavery in the Debates of 1858, will show why Lincoln's position is more attractive and explain why America celebrates Lincoln today.

Dan Carden

## Lincoln Versus Douglas:

### It Wasn't the Top Hat that Made Lincoln so Attractive

---

As the only former president of the United States celebrated on a day besides the third Monday in February, Abraham Lincoln holds a special place in American society. The significance of Americans celebrating the achievements of this one president out of forty-one others cannot be overlooked. It demonstrates to people both in the United States and abroad that Lincoln and his accomplishments, which are rooted in the very core of the concept of America, stand above the deeds of all other American leaders. Why is this so? Saving the Union through victory in the Civil War most certainly stands out as the pinnacle of Lincoln's presidential achievements, but other presidents have "saved the Union" in their own way. Without the initial Federalist leadership of George Washington, the current Constitution may never have taken hold and the United States today, if it existed, would likely be a hodgepodge of quasi-independent nation-states. It can be argued that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal "saved the Union" by restoring people's faith in government and demonstrating how government and private enterprise could co-exist in a nation rooted in the idea of *laissez-faire*. Moreover, John Kennedy's and Ronald Reagan's leadership during the Cold War more than just saved the Union, but in a larger sense saved humanity from nuclear destruction. So why Lincoln? Out of all of these great leaders, why do we celebrate an upland Southerner from Illinois who happened to get elected in a four-way race for President in 1860. The answer can be found in the small towns of Illinois during the hot summer of 1858.

Between August and October 1858, the usual Illinois summer activities of farming and harvesting were interrupted—in seven different cities—for three hours of debate on the issues that faced the United States. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas crisscrossed Illinois campaigning for Douglas' seat in the United States Senate. While the primary objective of the debates was to differentiate the candidates for the people of Illinois, the widely published debates, according to the *New York Tribune*, "touch some of the most vital principles of our political system, and no man can carefully peruse it without some benefit..." (Johannsen 3)<sup>1</sup>. These "vital principles" included generally the rights of individual states, specifically regarding slavery. Throughout the debates, Lincoln took a moral absolutist position stating that slavery was wrong in every circumstance and must be ended. On the other hand, Douglas maintained a morally relativist position by promoting popular sovereignty to decide the issue in the Territories and to define states' rights in the Union. Comparing Douglas' moral relativism to Lincoln's moral absolutism, specifically

regarding slavery in the Debates of 1858, will show why Lincoln's position is more attractive and explain why America celebrates Lincoln today.

### Douglas' Moral Relativism

Stephen Douglas was the successful "professional politician" in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. In addition to his many years of service as state's attorney, secretary of state, and justice of the Illinois Supreme Court, the incumbent Douglas had over 15 years of national political experience in both the House of Representatives and the Senate when he faced off with Lincoln (Johannsen 4). Over the years, Douglas secured much popular acclaim and was known throughout the nation for his leadership in Illinois and Washington D.C. In the Senate, Douglas served as chair of the committee on territories and was largely responsible for the Kansas-Nebraska Act: a bill that came out of this committee and was a prime factor in the disputes between Lincoln and Douglas. Going against the Missouri Compromise, which put into law that no slave states could exist above the 36 degree, 30 minute parallel, the Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed for "popular sovereignty" to decide whether to allow slavery in these territories. Popular sovereignty set off a firestorm of controversy leading to the conflict known as "Bleeding Kansas," so named because of a miniature civil war in that territory between abolitionists and pro-slavery forces that fought against each other to vote slavery either up or down. The concept of popular sovereignty and its applications is central to Douglas' moral relativism.

Douglas did not want the United States as a whole to decide the issue of slavery. Further, he believed that the United States as a whole *could* not decide the issue of slavery. Douglas thought slavery to be a local issue for individual states to decide on their own, not something that the Federal government should have a part in. Douglas said in Jonesboro, "Washington did not believe, nor did his compatriots, that the local laws and democratic institutions that were well adapted to the Green Mountains of Vermont, were suited to the rice plantations of South Carolina; they did not believe...that in a republic such as this...that uniformity in the local laws was either desirable or possible" (126-7). Douglas believed that it was better to allow each state to make decisions in regard to its own unique situation. He asked how a lobster fisherman in Maine could understand, let alone pass laws, concerning the situation of a shrimper in Louisiana? For Douglas, slavery was simply a labor option, permitted by the Constitution, that people from different states could choose to utilize as they saw fit.

This is not to say that Douglas did not have any absolute beliefs. Douglas believed absolutely in the white race. He said, "I hold that the negro is not and never ought to be a citizen of the United States. I hold that this Government

was made on the white basis, by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and should be administered by white men and none others" (127). Douglas probably could not express his preference toward whites any better. He believed that one decision that white people must make is in regards to slavery. While personally he didn't care "if slavery is voted up, or if slavery is voted down," he did believe white people should be the only ones enfranchised to make that decision. For Douglas, slavery was never a moral decision, but rather, a simple decision about labor that white people, in each of their respective states and territories, had to decide.

### Lincoln's Moral Absolutism

"The real issue in this controversy—the one pressing upon every mind—is the sentiment on the part of one class of that looks upon slavery *as a wrong*, and another class that *does not* look upon it as a wrong" (316). With these words, Abraham Lincoln summarized his thoughts on slavery during the Lincoln-Douglas debates at Alton. Lincoln continued, "They [Republicans] insist that it should as far as may be, *be treated as a wrong*, and one of the methods of treating it as a wrong is to *make provision that it grow no larger*" (317). These are very powerful moral judgments, and Alton is not the only place that Lincoln announced them. In Galesburg, Lincoln said, "... I believe that the entire records of the world, from the date of the Declaration of Independence up to within three years ago, may be searched in vain for one single affirmation, from one single man, that the negro was not included in the Declaration of Independence" (219). Lincoln took a defined, absolute position on the concept of slavery, a position that flew right in the face of Douglas' idea of popular sovereignty.

Lincoln's absolutism in regard to the moral wrong of slavery draws upon the legacy of the founding fathers of the United States, who according to Lincoln, also viewed slavery as something that would end. Lincoln examined the Constitution and pointed out that the words "slavery" or "negro race" are never used in the text of the Constitution (310). In addition, Lincoln argued that the founders did not want slavery in the Constitution because, "...in our Constitution, which it is hoped and is still hoped will endure forever—when it should be read by intelligent and patriotic men, after the institution of slavery had passed from among us—there should be nothing on the face of the great charter of liberty suggesting that such a thing as negro slavery had ever existed among us" (311). Lincoln pointed out that the founders fully expected slavery to end, inasmuch as they constitutionally barred the African slave trade 1808. Lincoln said at Alton, "They expected and intended that it should be in the course of ultimate extinction. And when I say that I desire to see the further spread of it arrested, I only say I desire to see it placed where they placed it" (311).

Lincoln's moral absolutism, rooted in the thought of the founders, did not allow for popular sovereignty. Primarily, Lincoln believed the founders set slavery on the path to extinction, and every national legislative action concerning slavery, until the Kansas-Nebraska Act, was in line with the eventual end of slavery. In particular, the Missouri Compromise limited the geographic area in which slavery could spread. But the Kansas-Nebraska Act, containing Douglas' concept of popular sovereignty, was in direct conflict with some seventy years of American policy. For Lincoln, slavery was a national moral quandary, not merely a regional decision about labor. Contemporary historian John Patrick Diggins writes, "Lincoln believed that a single standard of morality and justice universally transcended regional differences." Popular sovereignty was not the way to decide the slavery question in the United States because for Lincoln slavery was a moral scrounge that had to continue on its path to elimination.

## Discussion

It is important to remember that Stephen Douglas won the election of 1858. Examining these issues in the context of that era, Douglas' ideas of popular sovereignty were much more popular than Lincoln's absolutist views about slavery. Popular sovereignty promised a quick fix to the burgeoning slavery question facing the citizens of the United States. For Americans, popular sovereignty could work like the Missouri Compromise, further postponing the day when the United States would have to decide the slavery question. At Alton, Lincoln rattled off the history of how the founders had expected slavery to end. But since the founding of the United States, the people never had to make a moral judgment about slavery. It is easy to deal with a moral question by letting someone else deal with it. Popular sovereignty perpetuated the ability of Americans to dodge the slavery question (and avoid civil war) because individual territories would have to decide the question, not each individual citizen. America in the 1850s was ripe to decide the slavery question, and the Republicans desired to do just that, but popular sovereignty allowed Americans to put off answering that question for a few years. Evidence for the popularity of Douglas' positions can be found in Bloomington, Illinois. In the McLean County Museum of History, there is a life-size statue, albeit small, of Stephen Douglas at the South end of the main floor. For Lincoln, who founded the Illinois Republican party at Bloomington, and delivered his famous "Lost Speech" in Majors Hall, now a parking garage on East St., there is a simple plaque on the steps that says "Lincoln rode this way" as a circuit lawyer. Despite what Lincoln would eventually accomplish as president, the story was the same from Bloomington, across Illinois, and to the rest of the United States in 1858—popular sovereignty (and Douglas) was the way to go.

But, in our own era, it is Lincoln's morally absolute position on slavery that we cherish and celebrate. In our view, Lincoln spoke out against a terrible

system and deemed it wrong, not caring who heard him. Lincoln's position is so attractive to us, not because of its intrinsic value of advocating freedom for an oppressed people, but because it allows us to put off our national guilt concerning race and the role racism has played in American society. As Americans today, we cannot come to terms with how white people treated blacks and others, and we look to the past for redemption. Abraham Lincoln's absolutism is the white man's redemption. Whites can point to Lincoln and say, "He knew slavery was wrong, so he freed all of the slaves." Whites happily overlook the fact that Lincoln shared the common view of the times that blacks were in fact less than human, focusing on emancipation instead of the equality of the races. Would Lincoln, who was not necessarily convinced of the equality of the races, have supported the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments and such measures as the Civil Rights Act of 1866 which guaranteed, among other things, equality in housing? We can only speculate. Lincoln's assassination halts completion of the race question, because those who came after him muddled through the issue without similar absolutism about what was right and wrong. Today we cannot decide whether we should have affirmative action to make up for past injustices, or have the federal government formally apologize for allowing slavery to exist. The race question is our quandary and Lincoln is a shining example of when we knew what to do about race, a period long since gone by.

In conclusion, Abraham Lincoln's moral absolutism allows Americans, particularly white Americans, to look back and say, "that Lincoln knew what was right and wrong." Lincoln, and the Republican party of the 1850s, held that slavery was a moral wrong and had to be halted in the American tradition. Lincoln believed that the founders started slavery on the road to extinction, and Stephen Douglas' popular sovereignty went against the founders' wishes by permitting additional slavery in new areas. Douglas believed that popular sovereignty was the proper way to the decide slavery issue—a labor question, rather than a moral dilemma. But popular sovereignty did not put the question before all of America. Rather, it left the decision up to a limited number of individuals in a U.S. territory. Lincoln's position is attractive to us because his actions were the right thing to do at the right time. Taking an absolute position is not easy, and often the morally relativist road is easier to choose. In 1858, Illinois did not want to face the difficult question before them and re-elected Douglas to the United States Senate. In our own age, we celebrate Lincoln because he took the position and made the decisions that we wish we had made then, and long that we could make now.

**Bibliography**

Diggins, John Patrick. "Lincoln the Absolutist." *The New York Times*. Op-ed: Feb. 16, 1998.

Johannsen, Robert W., editor. *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*. New York: Oxford, 1965.

<sup>1</sup>All quotations from the debates are taken from Johannsen, Robert W. *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*. New York: Oxford, 1965. With material taken from the debates themselves, only page numbers will be used in citations for reference. Information taken from the introduction will include the Johannsen name in the citation.