

INTRODUCTION TO LINCOLN'S SPEECH

The Dred Scott decision came just three years after Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois had engineered the Kansas-Nebraska bill through Congress. Pressure to build a transcontinental railroad had been intensifying, but southerners declared they would continue to block the necessary legislation unless they were allowed additional territory to which to take their slaves. Douglas had come up with a proposal to allow slavery in the northern part of the Louisiana Purchase, but only if it received the blessing of the settlers in the territory. The formula, known as popular sovereignty, temporarily satisfied both southerners and some northerners, since it appeared democratic; as Douglas pointed out, unless a majority of people in a territory supported slavery, it could not take hold. In Dred Scott, the Supreme Court had held that Congress had no power to keep slavery out of the territories, a decision that seemingly nullified the popular sovereignty proposal.

Increasingly, northerners came to the conclusion that opposition to the expansion of slavery in the territories was not enough, that the real evil was the peculiar institution itself. But this commitment to total abolition scared many moderates, who believed that if they attacked slavery in the South, it could spell the end of the Union. Abraham Lincoln was among these moderates. He opposed the expansion of slavery, but believed it had to be left in place where it existed, and he hoped that by so containing it, it would eventually die a natural death. In 1858 the new Republican Party named Lincoln its candidate for the U.S. Senate seat then held by Stephen Douglas, author of the doctrine of popular sovereignty. The debates Lincoln and Douglas held that fall would receive national attention, and turn Lincoln into a serious contender for the Republican Party's 1860 presidential election.

In a speech delivered on June 17, 1858, at the close of the Republican State Convention, Lincoln caught the mood of many in the North who were increasingly concerned about the morality of slavery on the one hand, and the need to preserve the Union on the other. Though the "house divided" phrase had been used frequently before, it was this speech of Lincoln's that gave currency and familiarity to the phrase and the idea.

For further reading: Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (1958); David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered* (1956); and Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (1962).

"A HOUSE DIVIDED"

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Convention:

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction, or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South.

Have we no tendency to the latter condition?

Let any one who doubts, carefully contemplate that now almost complete legal combination -- pieces of machinery, so to speak -- compounded of the Nebraska doctrine and the Dred Scott decision. Let him

consider, not only what work the machinery is adapted to do, and how well adapted, but also let him study the history of its construction, and trace, if he can, or rather fail, if he can, to trace the evidence of design, and concert of action, among its chief architects, from the beginning.

The new year of 1854 found slavery excluded from more than half the States by State Constitutions, and from most of the National territory by Congressional prohibition. Four days later, commenced the struggle which ended in repealing that Congressional prohibition. This opened all the National territory to slavery, and was the first point gained...

While the Nebraska Bill was passing through Congress, a law case, involving the question of a negro's freedom by reason of his owner having voluntarily taken him first into a free State, and then into a territory covered by the Congressional prohibition, and held him as a slave for a long time in each, was passing through the United States Circuit Court for the District of Missouri; and both Nebraska Bill and lawsuit were brought to a decision in the same month of May, 1854. The negro's name was "Dred Scott," which name now designates the decision finally made in the case. Before the then next Presidential election, the law case came to, and was argued in, the Supreme Court of the United States; but the decision of it was deferred until after the election. Still, before the election, Senator Trumbull, on the floor of the Senate, requested the leading advocate of the Nebraska Bill to state his opinion whether the people of a Territory can constitutionally exclude slavery from their limits; and the latter answers: "That is a question for the Supreme Court."

The election came. Mr. Buchanan was elected, and the indorsement, such as it was, secured. That was the second point gained...The Presidential inauguration came, and still no decision of the court; but the incoming President, in his inaugural address, fervently exhorted the people to abide by the forthcoming decision, whatever it might be. Then, in a few days, came the decision.

The reputed author of the Nebraska Bill finds an early occasion to make a speech at this capital indorsing the Dred Scott decision, and vehemently denouncing all opposition to it. The new President, too, seizes the early occasion of the Silliman letter to indorse and strongly construe that decision, and to express his astonishment that any different view had ever been entertained!

At length a squabble springs up between the President and the author of the Nebraska Bill, on the mere question of fact, whether the Lecompton Constitution was or was not in any just sense made by the people of Kansas; and in that quarrel the latter declares that all he wants is a fair vote for the people, and that he cares not whether slavery be voted down or voted up. I do not understand his declaration, that he cares not whether slavery be voted down or voted up, to be intended by him other than as an apt definition of the policy he would impress upon the public mind... That principle is the only shred left of his original Nebraska doctrine. Under the Dred Scott decision "squatter sovereignty" squatted out of existence, tumbled down like temporary scaffolding; like the mould at the foundry, served through one blast, and fell back into loose sand; helped to carry an election, and then was kicked to the winds. His late joint struggle with the Republicans, against the Lecompton Constitution, involves nothing of the original Nebraska doctrine. That struggle was made on a point -- the right of a people to make their own constitution -- upon which he and the Republicans have never differed.

The several points of the Dred Scott decision, in connection with Senator Douglas's "care not" policy, constitute the piece of machinery, in its present state of advancement. This was the third point gained. The working points of that machinery are:

Firstly, That no negro slave imported as such from Africa, and descendant of such slave, can ever be a citizen of any State, in the sense of that term as used in the Constitution of the United States. This point is made in order to deprive the negro, in every possible event, of the benefit of the provision of the United States Constitution which declares that "The citizens of each State shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States."

Secondly, That, "subject to the Constitution of the United States," neither Congress nor a Territorial Legislature can exclude slavery from any United States Territory. This point is made in order that individual men fill up the Territories with slaves, without danger of losing them as property, and thus to enhance the chances of permanency to the institution through all the future.

Thirdly, That whether the holding a negro in actual slavery in a free State makes him free, as against the holder, the United States courts will not decide, but will leave to be decided by the courts of any slave state the negro may be forced into by the master. This point is made, not to be pressed immediately; but, if acquiesced in for a while, and apparently indorsed by the people at an election, then to sustain the logical conclusion that what Dred Scott's master might lawfully do with Dred Scott, in the free State of Illinois, every other master may lawfully do with any other one, or one thousand slaves, in Illinois, or in any other free State.

Auxiliary to all this, and working hand in hand with it, the Nebraska doctrine, or what is left of it, is to educate and mould public opinion, at least Northern public opinion, not to care whether slavery is voted down or voted up. This shows exactly where we now are; and partially, also, whither we are tending...

Why was the amendment, expressly declaring the right of the people, voted down? Plainly enough now, -- the speaking out then would have damaged the "perfectly free" argument upon which the election was to be carried. Why the outgoing President's felicitation on the indorsement? Why the delay of a reargument? Why the incoming President's advance exhortation in favor of the decision? These things look like the cautious patting and petting of a spirited horse preparatory to mounting him, when it is dreaded that he may give the rider a fall. And why the hasty after-indorsement of the decision by the President and others?

We cannot absolutely know that all these exact adaptations are the result of preconcert. But when we see a lot of framed timbers, different portions of which we know have been gotten out at different times and places and by different workmen, -- Stephen, Franklin, Roger, and James, for instance, -- and when we see these timbers joined together, and see they exactly make the frame of a house or a mill, all the tenons and mortises exactly fitting, and all the lengths and proportions of the different pieces exactly adapted to their respective places, and not a piece too many or too few, -- not omitting even scaffolding, -- or, if a single piece be lacking, we see the place in the frame exactly fitted and prepared yet to bring such piece in, -- in such a case, we find it impossible not to believe that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James all understood one another from the beginning, and all worked upon a common plan or draft drawn up before the first blow was struck...

Source: *Roy P. Basler, ed., Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 2 (1953), 461-68.*