

Primary Source Activity

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Toward Civil War

Lesson 2 *Challenges to Slavery*

Speaking on Slavery

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas held a series of debates during their bid for the Illinois senate seat. They gave their views on the hottest topic of the day, slavery, so voters would know where they stood. In the first debate, Douglas spoke first, followed by his opponent.

Directions Read the following excerpts from the first Lincoln-Douglas debate.

Reading 1 For the spread of slavery

Excerpt from Stephen A. Douglas's speech, August 21, 1858

Mr. Lincoln ... says that this Government cannot endure permanently in the same condition in which it was made by its framers—divided into free and slave States. ... Why can it not exist divided into free and slave States? Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, Hamilton, Jay, and the great men of that day, made this Government divided into free States and slave States, and left each State perfectly free to do as it pleased on the subject of slavery. Why can it not exist on the same principles on which our fathers made it? They knew when they framed the Constitution that in a country as wide and broad as this, with such a variety of climate, production and interest, the people necessarily required different laws and institutions in different localities. They knew that the laws and regulations which would suit the granite hills of New Hampshire would be unsuited to the rice plantations of South Carolina. ...

At the time the Constitution was framed, there were thirteen States in the Union, twelve of which were slaveholding States and one free State. Suppose this doctrine of uniformity preached by Mr. Lincoln, that the States should all be free or all be slave had prevailed, and what would have been the result? Of course, the twelve slaveholding States would have overruled the one free State, and slavery would have been fastened by a Constitutional provision on every inch of the American Republic, instead of being left as our fathers wisely left it, to each State to decide for itself. Here I assert that uniformity in the local laws and institutions of the different States is neither possible or desirable. If uniformity had been adopted when the Government was established, it must inevitably have been the uniformity of slavery everywhere. ...

Primary Source Activity *Cont.*

networks

Toward Civil War

Reading 2 Against the spread of slavery

I hate it [the spread of slavery] because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it ... enables the enemies of free institutions ... to taunt us as hypocrites and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty. ...

... When he [Douglas] undertakes to say that because I think this nation, so far as the question of slavery is concerned, will all become one thing or all the other, [and that] I am in favor of bringing about a dead uniformity in the various States, in all their institutions, he argues erroneously [in error]. The great variety of the local institutions in the States ... are bonds of Union. They do not make "a house divided against itself," but they make a house united. If they produce in one section of the country what is called for by the wants of another section, and this other section can supply the wants of the first, they are not matters of discord but bonds of union. ... But can this question of slavery be considered as among these varieties in the institutions of the country? I leave it to you to say whether, in the history of our government, this institution of slavery had not always failed to be a bond of union, and, on the contrary, been an apple of discord and an element of division in the house.

Credit: *Abraham Lincoln, Writings Volume One*. New York: The Library of America, Penguin Books, 1989

Directions Answer the following questions.

Analyzing Primary Sources

- 1. Explaining** According to Douglas, what did the founding fathers do about slavery?

- 2. Specifying** What reasons does Lincoln give for his hatred of the spread of slavery?

Primary Source Activity *Cont.*

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Toward Civil War

- 3. Distinguishing Fact From Opinion** Explain whether this statement is fact or opinion: "the granite hills of New Hampshire."

Critical Thinking

- 4. Contrasting** How do the views of Douglas and Lincoln differ about slavery?

- 5. Speculating** Do you think Douglas presented a valid argument for a mix of free and slave states? Explain?
