

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Four

## Abraham Lincoln

### LESSON IDEA

To increase understanding of the issues that divided the North and the South, and ultimately led to the War Between the States, by learning about the debates between Lincoln and Douglas, and Lincoln's subsequent election as President.

### PREPARATION

Review Lesson #63, particularly the discussion of slavery in the Western territories and the Compromise of 1850, so that you can fill in any memory gaps family members may have as we discuss the Lincoln-Douglas debates and the events leading to the Southern secession from the Union.

\* \* \* \* \*

“**B**ORN, February 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. Education defective. Profession a lawyer. Have been a captain of volunteers in the Black Hawk War. Postmaster at a very small office. Four times a member of Illinois Legislature. And was a member of the lower house of Congress.” This is how Abraham Lincoln described himself to the voters of Illinois in 1858 when he was seeking election to the United States Senate. His critics, undoubtedly would have added the following: A gangly, awkward fellow with a sallow, wrinkled face, coarse dark hair, and a large crooked nose. A failure at business. A political reject who had lost races for the Illinois Legislature, the United States Congress, the United States Senate, and the Vice Presidency. He had even failed in his bid for an appointment to the United States Land Office.

Lincoln's Democratic opponent was the in-

cumbent Senator, Stephen Douglas, a popular leader who certainly could be forgiven for failing to take his opponent seriously. Douglas was a Congressman of note whose name had made headlines in newspapers from East to West. He had worked hard and long in the Senate to find a solution to the problem of slavery in the new territories of the West. He thought the answer was popular sovereignty — which meant letting the inhabitants of each territory determine by majority vote whether or not to permit slave ownership in their state. During the Senate battle over the Compromise of 1850, Douglas had said:

“The position that I have ever taken, has been that this and all other questions relating to the domestic affairs and domestic policy of the Territories, ought to be left to the decision of the people themselves; and that we ought to be content with whatever way they may decide the question, because they have a much deeper interest in these matters than we have, and know much better what institutions suit them than we, who have never been there, can decide for them. Why except African slavery? If the inhabitants are competent to govern themselves upon all other subjects and in reference to all other descriptions of property, — if they are competent to make laws and determine the relation between husband and wife, and parent and child, and municipal laws affecting the rights and property of citizens generally, they are competent, also, to make laws to govern themselves in relation to slavery and negroes.”

**I**T WAS THIS DOCTRINE of popular sovereignty that formed the backbone of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. But the issue had not been resolved there. Do you remember why? [Review the "Bleeding Kansas" story from last week's lesson, showing that the pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces had merely used Kansas as a battleground to outdo each other in numerical strength and power.]

The failure of popular sovereignty in Kansas was a point Lincoln hit again and again in his campaign against Douglas in 1858. "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," the lanky self-educated lawyer declared. "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."

Douglas took strong exception to Lincoln's statement that the government "cannot endure permanently half slave and half free." It was, of course, an established fact that the government had existed for almost one hundred years "half slave and half free," with both free states and slave states respecting each other's rights. But the key word in Lincoln's phrase was *permanently*. Could the government *permanently* endure half slave and half free? Especially when the lawmakers were dealing with new, sparsely populated territories in which each side of the slavery controversy wanted its view to dominate?

It was such a contest for domination that Douglas hoped to avoid and feared his opponent was encouraging. "Mr. Lincoln advocates boldly and clearly a war of sections," he charged, "a war of the North against the South, of the free States against the slave States, — a war of extermination, to be continued relentlessly until the one or the other shall be subdued, and all the States shall become free or become slave. I assert that it is neither desirable nor possible that there should be

uniformity in the local institutions and domestic regulations of the different States of this Union. Uniformity in local and domestic affairs would be destructive of State rights, of State sovereignty, of personal liberty and personal freedom."

**I**N ARGUING FOR popular sovereignty and the right of a state to govern its own domestic affairs, Douglas wanted the federal government to be a neutral referee, rather than a moral judge, in affairs between states.

Lincoln, however, saw it differently; and although he did not advocate that the federal government become the moral judge of state actions, he did attack Douglas' position from a moral standpoint of right and wrong, and allowed no distinction to be made between the Senator's personal convictions on slavery and the position proper for a national government.

"He says he 'don't care whether it is voted up or voted down' in the Territories," argued Lincoln, speaking of Douglas and slavery. "I do not care myself in dealing with that expression, whether it is intended to be expressive of his individual sentiments or only of the national policy he desires to have established. It is alike valuable for my purpose. Any man can say that who does not see anything wrong in slavery, but no man can logically say it who does see a wrong in it; because no man can logically say he don't care whether a wrong is voted up or voted down. He contends that whatever community wants slaves has a right to them. So they have, if it is not wrong. But if it is a wrong, he cannot say people have a right to do wrong. He says that upon the score of equality, slaves should be allowed to go into a new Territory, like other property. If it and other property are equal, his argument is entirely logical. But if you insist that the one is wrong, and the other right, there is no use to institute a comparison between them. That is the real issue."

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

We recommend John Clark Ridpath's *History Of The United States*, Volume VIII, for a deeper study of the circumstances leading up to the War Between The States. The Ridpath history should be available at most public libraries.

But within the states where slavery was already established, Lincoln apparently felt that the issue was not a moral one. "... I have no purpose, directly or indirectly," he said in a debate with Douglas, "to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."

In campaigning for the Senate in 1858, Lincoln had challenged Douglas to a series of debates on the slavery question in towns of northern, central, and southern Illinois. It was to Lincoln's advantage, of course, as a political unknown, to share the limelight that surrounded Douglas, a prominent national political figure. The huge crowds, the welcoming committees, the militia units, and most important, the reporters from the big eastern newspapers sent to cover the debates, came to hear Douglas; but they also heard Lincoln; and many were impressed by the sincerity, if not the style, of the six-footer from Springfield. "Honest Abe," as he was known in Illinois, had a friendly way of chatting, neighbor to neighbor, that won the confidence of his listeners, of members of the press, and of the political leaders of his party.

**D**OUGLAS WON the election; but as a result of the debates, Lincoln won a national reputation. His services were immediately sought in other states, and less than two years later, when the new Republican Party was seeking a leader who could win the people's trust, they selected Honest Abe.

The Presidential campaign of 1860 was a four-way race between two Democrat candidates, a Constitutional Union candidate, and the Republican candidate, Lincoln. Lincoln emerged from the split as the winner.

Panic swept the southern states when news of the Republican victory became official. The new administration, many feared, would have no understanding of the needs of the South, and the Congress would be heavily prejudiced against the Southern position. A growing number felt the only answer was to withdraw from the Union. On February 4, 1861, representatives from South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana met in Montgomery, capital of Alabama, to proclaim a new nation, The Confederate States of America. Jefferson Davis of Missis-

issippi was chosen President, and Alexander H. Stevens from Georgia, Vice President.

A feeling of uncertainty and fear stalked the nation, even as the threat of assassination plagued political leaders in both Montgomery and Washington. The inauguration of Abraham Lincoln on March 4, 1861, was described by historian John Clark Ridpath in these words:

"Gathered around him on the platform on the east portico of the Capitol were the principal men of his party. A vast multitude filled the grounds and streets adjacent; but there was no disturbance, and the ceremony passed off quietly and without special incident. There had been many threats and warnings of trouble, but ample precautions had been taken to meet it by the outgoing administration. Prominent among the figures on the platform was Stephen A. Douglas, until then the lifelong political opponent of Lincoln. He had fought steadily for yielding the larger part of the Southern demands up to the very day of the secession of South Carolina, and the disunionists had counted upon his still further support. Now he openly gave notice to his followers, and the country at large, that he was henceforth to be considered a supporter of the incoming administration."

Friend and foe waited for the words the new President would choose to initiate his new administration. There was already talk of war, of soldiers drilling in the South, of a new flag flying over the Confederate capitol building in Montgomery. How did Lincoln propose to treat the seceding states? Would there be a threat of force? An ultimatum? Angry words of denunciation? Or would he recognize their independence and let them go their separate way?

**T**HE PRESIDENT'S first words assured the Southern people that during his administration there would be no violation of their rights on the subject of slavery. But in regard to the action taken by the states which had withdrawn from the Union, he asserted that they had no legal right to secede.

"In contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution," he declared, "the union of these States is perpetual. No State upon its own mere

motion can lawfully get out of the Union. Resolves and ordinances to that effect are legally void; and acts of violence within any State or States, against the authority of the United States, are insurrectionary or revolutionary according to circumstances."

How, then, did Lincoln propose to deal with what he felt was the illegally constituted government of the Confederacy?

"To the extent of my ability I shall take care," promised the newly-inaugurated President, "as the Constitution especially enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States . . . . In doing this there need be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none unless it is forced upon the national authority. The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people anywhere. The mails, unless repelled, will continue to be furnished in all parts of the Union . . . . One section of our country believes slavery is right and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute . . . . Physically speaking, we cannot separate . . . . In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors . . . . We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as they surely will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Most men would agree that Lincoln's inaugural address was firm in tone, and yet conciliatory. Some would point out that the North could not have threatened war, even had she wanted to, at that particular moment. According to Ridpath's assessment: "The Treasury was empty. The current resources of the government, as well as arms and army, were heavily insufficient for the immense

new expenditures called for by the crisis. The few regular soldiers were scattered among the forts on the border, and the ships of the navy had been dispatched to foreign seas . . . . Nearly all the forts and arsenals in the seceded States were in the hands of the secessionists; many prominent officers of both the army and navy had thrown up their commissions and gone with their States. The Border States were on the verge of rebellion. In the North, people were yet divided . . . . The situation seemed desperate; but Lincoln faced it with no weak heart."

### *Looking Ahead*

Next week we'll study the life of Robert E. Lee, the distinguished Virginia general to whom Lincoln offered command of the Union Army and who refused out of loyalty to his native state.

### DURING THE WEEK

If there are teenagers in your family, discuss the role of government as emphasized in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Should the federal government be neutral in matters such as slavery, as Douglas' arguments suggested, or a judge of morals, as Lincoln proclaimed?

If family members are too young for such a discussion, read or study the early life of Abraham Lincoln as told by Augusta Stevenson in *Abe Lincoln: Frontier Boy* (Hardcover \$2.95). The Stevenson book is available in most American Opinion Bookstores, or from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

---

### The Family Heritage Series

Editor: Wallis W. Wood

Staff Writers

Sally Humphries and Frank York

For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

The Family Heritage Series is for all parents with school-age children. It is sure to be valued by all Americans who participate in its Heritage Hour discussions, and would be especially welcomed as a gift.

The Family Heritage Series is published by the Movement To Restore Decency, a project of The John Birch Society. The annual subscription rate is twelve dollars for fifty-two lessons, mailed monthly. Individual lessons may be purchased in any quantity at four copies for one dollar. Address all orders and subscriptions to The John Birch Society, 395 Concord Avenue, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178. ©1974 by The John Birch Society