

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born enslaved on a Maryland plantation around 1817. One of Douglass's owners taught him to read, which, at that time, was illegal. When Douglass was 21, his owner rented him out to a shipbuilder. This work gave him the opportunity to escape to the North, settling in New Bedford, Massachusetts. By 1841, he was lecturing about the evils of slavery at abolitionist meetings. In 1845, in order to reach a larger audience, he wrote his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, from which the following excerpt has been taken. He lectured in Great Britain for a time and gained wide popularity there. British friends bought his freedom. Then, in 1847, he returned to the United States and for 17 years published the antislavery newspaper *North Star*, in Rochester, New York. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Douglass recruited African Americans to serve in the Union Army. After the war, he held several federal government positions. For example, he served as U.S. Minister to Haiti from 1889 to 1891.

Why am I slave? Why are some people slaves, and others masters? Was there ever a time when this was not so? How did the relation commence [begin]?

These were the perplexing [puzzling] questions which began now to claim my thoughts, and to exercise the weak powers of my mind, for I was still but a child, and knew less than children of the same age in the free states. As my questions concerning these things were only put to children a little older, and little better informed than myself, I was not rapid in reaching a solid footing [conclusion].

By some means I learned from these inquiries, that "God, up in the sky," made everybody; and that he made white people to be masters and mistresses, and black people to be slaves.

This did not satisfy me, nor lessen my interest in the subject. I was told, too, that God was good, and that He knew what was best for me, and best for everybody. This was less satisfactory than the first statement; because it came, point blank, against all my notions [ideas] of goodness. . . . [H]ow did people know that God made black people to be slaves? . . .

It was some relief to my hard notions of the goodness of God, that, although he made white men to be slaveholders, he did not make them to be bad slaveholders, and that, in due time, he would punish the bad slaveholders; that he would, when they died, send them to the bad place, where they would be "burnt up." Nevertheless, I could not reconcile [make consistent] the relations of slavery with my crude notions of goodness. . . .

Once, however, engaged in the inquiry, I was not very long in finding out the true solution of the matter. It was not color, but crime, not God, but man, that afforded [gave] the true explanation of the existence of slavery; nor was I long in finding out another important truth, viz [namely]: what man can make, man can unmake.

. . . There were slaves here, direct from Guinea [in West Africa]; and there were many who could say that their fathers and mothers were stolen from Africa—forced from their homes, and compelled to serve as slaves. This, to me, was knowledge; but it was a kind of knowledge which filled me with a burning hatred of slavery, increased my suffering, and left me without the means of breaking away from my bondage. Yet it was knowledge quite worth possessing.

I could not have been more than seven or eight years old, when I began to make this subject my study. It was with me in the woods and fields; along the shore of the river, and wherever my boyish wanderings led me; and although I was, at that time, quite ignorant of the existence of the free states, I distinctly remember being, even then, most strongly impressed with the idea of being a free man some day. This cheering assurance [belief] was an inborn dream of my human nature—a constant menace to slavery—and one which all the powers of slavery were unable to silence or extinguish [kill].

Two Viewpoints on Slavery (1858)

Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas

By mid-19th century, the fight over slavery had heated up. Proslavery and antislavery forces were pitted against each other in fierce debate and, sometimes, in bloody combat. Opposing stands on slavery had split the Democratic party. Those Democrats in favor of abolition and those who simply opposed the extension of slavery into new territories came together in 1854 to form a new party—the Republican party.

One of the men who gained an important place in the new party was Abraham Lincoln. In 1858, the Illinois State Republican Convention nominated him to run against Stephen A. Douglas for the U.S. Senate seat. (Douglas, a Democrat, was the incumbent.) In excerpt A, Lincoln on June 17 clearly stated his views on the future of the United States. The “policy” Lincoln referred to in this speech is the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. It allowed the people of those two territories to decide for themselves if they wanted to establish free or slave states.

In the summer of 1858, Lincoln and Douglas met in a series of debates. In one of them, Lincoln asked Douglas if he supported popular sovereignty or the Dred Scott decision. *Popular sovereignty* meant the right of people to decide for themselves if slavery should be established in their territory. Douglas personally supported the idea. However, the Democratic party supported the Dred Scott decision. In this 1857 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court had stated that enslaved persons were property. The right of their masters to retain them as property was protected by law in both the states and the territories. The so-called “Freeport Doctrine” (excerpt B) was Douglas’s response to Lincoln’s question. The debate took place at Freeport, Illinois, on August 27, 1858. The police regulations that Douglas talks about are state slave codes, laws that restricted the rights of African Americans.

Douglas won reelection to the Senate. But Lincoln gained a national reputation because the debate had made his ideas

generally known. Douglas’s answer supporting popular sovereignty came back to haunt him when the two met as opposing candidates in the presidential election of 1860. Southern Democrats distrusted him and supported a third party candidate. In the end, Lincoln won the presidency.

A. “House Divided” Speech, June 17, 1858

Abraham Lincoln

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Convention: If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending [going], 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 [declared] 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 [increased]. 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 [stop] the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is the course of ultimate extinction [dying out], 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. . . .

B. “Freeport Doctrine,” August 27, 1858

Stephen A. Douglas

. . . Can the people of a Territory in any lawful way, against the wishes of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State constitution? I answer emphatically, . . . that in my opinion the people of a Territory can, by lawful means, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State constitution. Mr. Lincoln knew that I had answered that question over and over again. He heard me argue the Nebraska