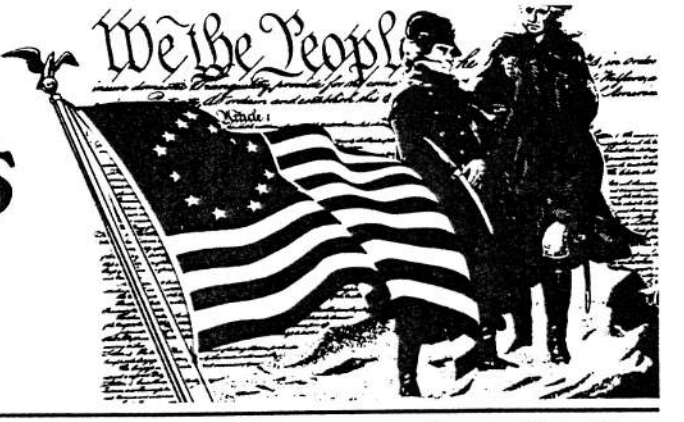
The Family Heritage Series

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.

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«BORN, 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 incumbent 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."

IT 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."

IN 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.