

Activity 3: Stephen A. Douglas Primary Document Activity8th-12th grade

Primary Documents

Stephen A Douglas Speeches

Excerpt from the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Debate One:

During the session of Congress of 1853-'54, I introduced into the Senate of the United States a bill to organize the Territories of Kansas and Nebraska on that principle which had been adopted in the compromise measures of 1850....., I put forth the true intent and meaning of the act in these words: "It is the true intent and meaning of this act not to legislate slavery into any State or Territory, or to exclude it therefrom, but to leave the people thereof perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the federal constitution." Thus, you see, that up to 1854, when the Kansas and Nebraska bill was brought into Congress for the purpose of carrying out the principles which both parties had up to that timeevery Whig and every Democrat in the House voted in the affirmative, and only four men voted against it, and those four were old line Abolitionists. (Cheers.)

Excerpt from the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Debate Seven:

I took up Mr. Lincoln's three propositions in my several speeches, analyzed them, and pointed out what I believed to be the radical errors contained in them. First, in regard to his doctrine that this Government was in violation of the law of God, which says that a house divided against itself cannot stand, I repudiated it as a slander upon the immortal framers of our Constitution. I then said, I have often repeated, and now again assert, that in my opinion our Government can endure forever, (good) divided into free and slave States as our fathers made it,—each State having the right to prohibit, abolish or sustain slavery, just as it pleases. ("Good," "right," and cheers.) This Government was made upon the great basis of the sovereignty of the States, the right of each State to regulate its own domestic institutions to suit itself, and that right was conferred with the understanding and expectation that inasmuch as each locality had separate interests, each locality must have different and distinct local and domestic institutions, corresponding to its wants and interests. Our fathers knew when they made the Government, that the laws and institutions which were well adapted to the green mountains of Vermont, were unsuited to the rice plantations of South Carolina. They knew then, as well as we know now, that the laws and institutions which would be well adapted to the beautiful prairies of Illinois would not be suited to the mining regions of California.

Questions for the Primary Documents

Background: These speeches were made four years after the Kansas Nebraska Act, which was authored by Douglas, was passed by Congress. In the debates with Lincoln, Douglas was defending the Act.

1. According to Douglas (in the first debate), what was the best aspect of the Kansas Nebraska Act in relationship to the slave question?
2. Also, in the first debate, what group of politicians were to only ones who opposed the Kansas Nebraska Act according to Douglas?
3. Does Douglas view those who want to end slavery as heroes or villains? Explain your answer.
4. In the seventh debate, what is Douglas's argument against Lincoln's claim that the country cannot continue to be divided half slave and half free?
5. Why does Douglas think it best for the states to make most of their own laws instead of the national government making the rules?
6. Based on what Douglas said in these speeches, what would his response be to the argument that slavery should be ended because it is wrong for humans to be owned by others? Explain your answer.