

This Day in History... August 21, 1858

Lincoln-Douglas Debates

On August 21, 1858, Abraham Lincoln participated in the first of seven debates against Stephen Douglas. Part of a race for an Illinois seat in the US Senate, they became known as the Lincoln-Douglas Debates or the Great Debates of 1858.

Lincoln's opposition of Douglas had actually begun a few years earlier. In 1854, he vocally opposed Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise that had restricted slavery.

The act included popular sovereignty, which gave those deemed citizens the right to determine whether or not to allow slavery in their territory. In response to this, Lincoln delivered his "Peoria Speech," which claimed the Kansas Act "declared indifference, but as I must think, covert, real zeal, for the spread of slavery, I cannot but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world..."



Issued for Lincoln's 200th birthday, this stamp features an illustration of a Lincoln-Douglas debate.

By June 1858, the Illinois Republicans unanimously nominated Lincoln as their "first and only choice for the United States Senate." That evening, Lincoln delivered the speech that catapulted him into the national limelight – the House Divided speech.

The attention Lincoln received from his speech led Douglas to agree to a series of debates. The first was held on August 21, 1858, in Ottawa, Illinois. Subsequent debates were held on August 27 in Freeport, September 15 in Jonesboro, September 18 in Charleston, October 7 in Galesburg, October 13 in Quincy, and October 15 in Alton.

One topic was especially prominent throughout the debates – slavery, with much emphasis on the expansion of the institution into new territories. Douglas called Lincoln a divisive radical who supported racial equality, while Lincoln emphasized the moral wickedness of slavery and the bloodshed that resulted from Douglas's popular sovereignty.

Due to the growing interest in the slavery issue in neighboring states and across the country, stenographers were sent to the debates to record Lincoln and Douglas's arguments to be published in newspapers. However, newspapers of the day were often slanted toward the different political parties. It was common for newspapers to correct the grammatical errors made by the stenographers recording their preferred candidate's speeches, while leaving their opponent's speeches in their rough form. This made one candidate appear less intelligent than his opponent.

However, with the publication of his stirring words in countless Republican newspapers across the country, Lincoln established himself as an excellent speaker and soon found his national fame and popularity growing. Shortly after the debates, Lincoln collected his speeches and had them published in a book, which further increased his popularity.

Lincoln lost the election to Douglas. At the time, US Senators were still selected by the state legislature. However, two years later, Lincoln would win the popular vote against Douglas in Illinois, capturing the state's 11 electoral votes. From these earlier debates, Lincoln had gained the national fame that would lead him to the White House.



This stamp was issued in Freeport, Illinois, on the 100th anniversary of the debate there.



Lincoln Pictorial stamp

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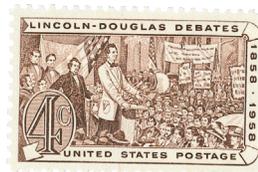
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