

Abraham Lincoln and the Slavery Question

- I. About Abraham Lincoln
- II. Summary
- III. Thinking about the Text
- IV. Thinking with the Text

How To Use This Discussion Guide

Materials Included | For this discussion guide, we recommend the following texts from our reader, “Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday”:

- Abraham Lincoln, Peoria Address
- Abraham Lincoln, Speech on the Dred Scott Decision
- Abraham Lincoln, Cooper Union Speech
- Abraham Lincoln, 1855 letter to Joshua Speed
- Abraham Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation
- Frederick Douglass, “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln”

Materials for this guide include background information about Lincoln and discussion questions to enhance your understanding and stimulate conversation. In addition, the guide includes a series of short video discussions conducted by WSPWH Diana Schaub with Lucas Morel (Washington & Lee University). These seminars help capture the experience of high-level discourse as participants interact and elicit meaning from a classic American text. These videos are meant to raise additional questions and augment discussion, not replace it.

Learning Objectives | Students will be able to:

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it;
- Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text;
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development;

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- Summarize the key supporting details and ideas;
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text;
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone; and
- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning and the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Common Core State Standards Addressed | Literacy in History/Social Studies:

RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.2, RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.5, RH.9-10.8
RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.2, RH.11-12.4, RH.11-12.8, RH.11-12.9

English Language Arts:

RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.3, RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.9
RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, RL.11-12.4, RL.11-12.5

Writing Prompts | Based on Common Core Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies:

- Did Lincoln change his position on slavery? Explain your opinion.
- Did Lincoln’s position on slavery in his campaigns reflect his personal convictions about slavery and race, or one that would best ensure winning the election?
- To what extent did the Emancipation Proclamation reflect a change in Lincoln’s position on slavery between 1830 and 1863?

I. About the Author

The sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln (1809–65) was born in Kentucky and studied law in Illinois, earning the nickname “Honest Abe” for his upright moral character. In 1858, he ran for US Senate against Stephen A. Douglas, catapulting him to national fame even though he lost the race. He was elected to the presidency in

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1860, just before the Civil War began. Lincoln did not accept the secession of the Confederacy, declaring the states to be in a state of rebellion. Assassinated in 1865, Lincoln would be remembered as a great wartime leader who was deeply devoted to maintaining the national union. His Gettysburg Address of 1863 is one of the most quoted speeches in American history.

II. Summary

By 1854, Abraham Lincoln's rather undistinguished political career seemed to be over. He had served four terms in the Illinois State House and one two-year term in the U.S. House of Representatives, but since 1848 he had returned full-time to his law practice.

Lincoln's re-entry into politics was triggered by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. That legislation, spearheaded by Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas, repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which prohibited slavery in the former Louisiana Territory north of the parallel 36°30' north. Douglas hoped that his principle of "popular sovereignty," which allowed settlers to decide the issue of slavery in the territories, would put slavery to rest as a national issue.

The contest between Lincoln and Douglas came to a head in the Senate campaign of 1858 in a series of seven debates. We should remember that the Lincoln-Douglas debates did not pit an abolitionist against a slaveholder. Neither man was an extremist. They represented the principal divisions within Northern opinion, not the division between the most radical Northerners (like the abolitionist Frederick Douglass) and the most reactionary Southerners (the followers of John C. Calhoun). And yet, the divisions between them were quite deep. We can analyze their disagreements on three main topics: first, slavery in the territories; second, slavery and the Constitution; and third, the subject not of slavery, but of race.

III. Thinking about the Text

On the issue of slavery in the territories, the policy difference between Lincoln and Douglas is clear. Lincoln supported national restrictions against slavery that would effectively quarantine slavery, whereas Douglas supported an open-ended policy, called "popular sovereignty," leaving the question of whether slavery would be allowed to the determination of each territory and each new state.

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On the subject of slavery itself, the difference between Lincoln and Douglas was more a moral difference grounded on the rights enunciated in the Declaration of Independence but not fully guaranteed under the Constitution. Lincoln held slavery to be wrong and proposed to yield to it only the minimum protection guaranteed by the Constitutional bargain. Douglas refused to pass any judgment, either pro or con, upon slavery. He professed indifference to its ultimate fate.

For this section, students should read the Peoria Address, Lincoln's Speech on the Dred Scott Decision, the Cooper Union Speech, and Lincoln's 1855 letter to Joshua Speed.

A. Slavery in the Territories

1. What is "popular sovereignty," and how does it address the slavery question? What did Douglas hope to achieve by proposing it?
2. Why was Lincoln so opposed to popular sovereignty? Isn't the rule of the majority at the heart of democracy?
3. According to Lincoln, what's wrong with (or missing from) Douglas's account of democracy? How does the principle of popular sovereignty undercut the "sacred right of self-government," according to Lincoln? How does Lincoln understand free government?
5. In an 1855 letter to his friend Joshua Speed, a Kentucky slaveholder, Lincoln discusses his dislike of slavery and his policy towards it. He says that some people have called him an abolitionist. He says he is not. Why isn't he an abolitionist? In what ways does his position differ from that of the abolitionists proper?
6. What is Lincoln's alternative policy toward slavery in the territories?

B. Slavery and the Constitution

1. In the 1857 *Dred Scott* case, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney declared that "no negro slave ... and no descendant of such slave can ever be a citizen of any state, in the sense of that term as used in the Constitution of the United States." In his response, Lincoln defends both the Declaration and the Constitution against Taney's misrepresentations of those documents. How does Lincoln counter these slanders? What is Lincoln's interpretation of the Declaration?
2. Lincoln believed that the *Dred Scott* case was wrongly decided. Douglas, on the other hand, expressed his agreement with the decision, and further argued that the Republicans, by questioning the rightness of the decision, were

behaving in a revolutionary fashion, undermining the legitimacy of the government. How does Lincoln respond to this charge? Given what Lincoln says about his reverence for the Constitution and the law, is he contradicting his own principles? What is his view of judicial precedent?

3. In his 1860 Cooper Union Address, Lincoln takes as his text for the speech a single sentence from Douglas which stated that “Our fathers, when they framed the Government under which we live, understood this question [the question of the powers of the federal government respecting slavery in the territories] just as well, and even better, than we do now.” Lincoln agrees with Douglas that the Founding Fathers had the right understanding and he proposes to show what that understanding was. How does Lincoln proceed and what does he accomplish in this speech?

C. Equality and Race

1. Where did Douglas and Lincoln stand on the relationship between races?
2. In the debates, Lincoln argues for the fundamental equality of all men and the right of African Americans to enjoy the fruit of their labor. However, he also declared his opposition to Negro suffrage, and political and social equality in general. As a result, commentators, both then and now, have accused Lincoln of not really believing in the principles of the Declaration. Is Lincoln sincere? Is he consistent?
3. What is the relationship between natural and political rights? With his words, is Lincoln foreclosing the possibility of civil rights for African Americans, or rather is he preparing the ground for later securing those rights?
4. How important was public opinion to Lincoln’s position on civil rights for African Americans? Note in particular what Lincoln says about the role of “universal” feelings in public life in his Peoria Address. Is Lincoln right to take public opinion into account?

IV. Thinking with the Text

Lincoln did not publicly call for emancipation throughout his entire life. As we have seen, he began his public career arguing against slavery’s expansion, but not calling for immediate emancipation. But he would eventually become the “Great Emancipator,” freeing all slaves in those states that were in rebellion. He supported the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery throughout the United States, and, in the last speech of his life, recommended extending the vote to African Americans.

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In this final section, students should read the Emancipation Proclamation and Frederick Douglass’s “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln” to assess Lincoln’s words and deeds on achieving racial equality.

A. Lincoln and Emancipation

1. Before his election to the presidency in 1860, Lincoln often stated that he had no intention, and no constitutional authority, to interfere with slavery in the states where it existed. He reiterated his pledge to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act in his First Inaugural address. How, then, did he come to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and how did he justify it?
2. There were many who urged Lincoln to take the step of freeing the slaves much earlier. They wanted him to convert the war for the Union into a crusade against slavery. How did Lincoln understand the relation between these two causes: the cause of Union and the cause of Emancipation?
3. We know that Lincoln pushed hard for the 13th Amendment—the amendment that bans slavery forever in the United States. His great biographer Lord Charnwood indicates that Lincoln may have used some questionable means to secure the congressional vote proposing the amendment. Why was the Amendment necessary? Wouldn’t the Emancipation Proclamation have been sufficient to end slavery?
4. What about Frederick Douglass’s claim in 1863 that the Constitution was already an anti-slavery document? “Abolish slavery tomorrow,” he said, “and not a sentence or syllable of the Constitution need be altered. It was purposely so framed as to give no claim, no sanction to the claim, of property in man.”

B. Assessing Lincoln

1. Although the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass had been fiercely critical of Lincoln, in the years after Lincoln’s death, Douglass often spoke appreciatively of Lincoln. His most extensive consideration of Lincoln comes in his 1876 “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln,” a speech delivered on the occasion of the dedication of the Freedmen’s Monument, the nation’s first statue of the martyred president, paid for by subscriptions raised among the newly freed slaves. What is Douglass’s assessment of Lincoln?