

# ABRAHAM LINCOLN AGAINST SLAVERY

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*In the 1850s Abraham Lincoln, then a lawyer in Illinois, began speaking out on the issue of slavery. He did not call for its immediate abolition, but did stand against allowing slavery to spread any further. These are condensed selections.*

Before proceeding, let me say that I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist among them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us, we should not instantly give it up.

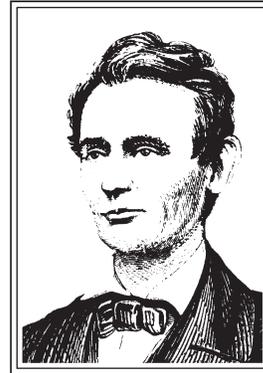
Doubtless there are individuals on both sides who would not hold slaves under any circumstances, and others who would gladly introduce slavery anew if it were out of existence. We know that some Southern men do free their slaves, go North and become tip-top Abolitionists, while some Northern ones go South and become most cruel slave masters.

When Southern people tell us they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery than we are, I acknowledge the fact. When it is said that the institution exists and that it is very difficult to get rid of it in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying.

I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself. If all earthly power were given to me, I should not know what to do as to the existing institution. (1854)

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 the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; 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. (1858)



*In a famous series of debates in 1858 with Senator Stephen Douglas, Lincoln summed up his view of the slavery issue:*

That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles – right and wrong – throughout the world.

They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time, and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity, and the other the divine right of kings.

It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, “You toil and work and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.” No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle. (1858)

**Group Discussion:** *Why does Lincoln feel he cannot blame the Southern states for not immediately ending slavery? What was his fear about the future of the nation? What was his position on the morality of slavery?*