

The Origins and Purpose of Lincoln's "House-Divided" Speech

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The chronology of Abraham Lincoln's sudden rise from relative obscurity to a presidential nomination includes no more decisive date than June 16, 1858. At Springfield, Illinois, late that warm Wednesday afternoon, the Republican state convention unanimously designated him as its "first and only choice for the United States Senate," and he responded in the evening with his famous "House-Divided" speech. Either of these two events would have made the day significant; together they constituted a major turning-point in Lincoln's career.

The resolution endorsing Lincoln for the Senate was more important than anyone realized at the time, for without it there probably would have been no Lincoln-Douglas debates. Douglas saw little profit for himself in joint discussions and rejected Lincoln's suggestion that they canvass the state together. He proposed instead — and Lincoln accepted — an alternative plan for just seven debates.¹ Only the fact that his rival had been specifically named as the Republican candidate induced the reluctant "Little Giant" to go even that far. So the convention's resolution, amounting to an informal nomination, proved to be the door of opportunity for Lincoln. Through it he stepped to the memorable contest with Douglas, and thus, at the age of forty-nine, to the stage of national politics.

This was not an ordinary door, however, but something strange and new, carpentered especially for the occasion. The nomination of a senatorial candidate by a state convention had no precedent in American politics. Even in the casual form of a resolution from the floor, the action represented an intrusion upon the vested authority

¹ Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (9 vols., New Brunswick, 1953-1955), II, 522, 528-32.

of the legislature and a step toward the popular election of senators.² Yet the resolution was not offered as a constitutional experiment, but as a gesture of defiance. It was the angry response of Illinois Republicans to the praise and support which some of their eastern colleagues were thrusting upon Douglas as a result of his spectacular fight against the admission of Kansas under the Lecompton constitution.

The revolt of Douglas had thrown the political scene into confusion during the early months of 1858. Out of favor, now, in the South, and at swords' points with the Buchanan administration, he appeared to be cutting loose from his old Democratic moorings and drifting toward the Republican shore. The prospect of enlisting the author of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the antislavery crusade stirred up considerable excitement in Republican circles and fairly intoxicated self-appointed strategists like Horace Greeley. Such a conspicuous accession to the cause of freedom, Greeley thought, would be worth some little sacrifice. In the columns of his *New York Tribune*, as well as in private correspondence, he argued that Douglas, by opposing the Lecompton iniquity, had earned another term in the Senate, that his re-election would be a severe rebuke to the slave power, and that the Republican party of Illinois ought to join cheerfully in making that re-election unanimous. Similar views were expressed by such sound antislavery publications as the *New York Times*, the *Albany Journal*, the *Springfield Republican*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*.³ In Washington, furthermore, prominent Republicans like Schuyler Colfax, Anson Burlingame, and Henry Wilson had fallen under the Douglas spell; and even William H. Seward was apparently ready to lend him support.⁴

² George H. Haynes, *The Senate of the United States: Its History and Practice* (2 vols., Boston, 1938), I, 99. The uniqueness of the 1858 campaign in Illinois was noted by many contemporaries. Perhaps the most extravagant criticism came from the *Philadelphia Pennsylvanian*, which denounced the Lincoln-Douglas contest as a "revolutionary" invasion of state sovereignty and a "dangerous precedent." Quoted in *Springfield Illinois State Register*, November 13, 1858. See also *Springfield (Mass.) Republican*, September 7, 1858, and *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 6, 1858 (quoted in *Washington National Intelligencer*, November 9, 1858).

³ Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York, 1868), 357-58; *New York Tribune*, March 3, May 4, 11, 27, 1858; Greeley to Schuyler Colfax, March 15, May 6, 12, June 2, 14, 1858, Greeley-Colfax Correspondence (New York Public Library); *New York Times*, April 15, May 10, 1858; *Albany Journal*, May 15, 1858; *Springfield Republican*, April 30, 1858; "Mr. Buchanan's Administration," *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston), I (April, 1858), 756-57.

⁴ Lyman Trumbull to Lincoln, January 3, 1858, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection

Thus the Illinois Republicans, who had expected to profit from the quarrel between Douglas and Buchanan, found themselves earnestly advised by leaders of their own party to abandon the field to the enemy. But this, as one of them protested, was "asking too much for human nature to bear."⁵ After many rounds of bitter hand-to-hand combat with Douglas, they could not suddenly lift him to their shoulders and carry him back into the Senate. To do so, they believed, would only mean humiliation for themselves and disaster for their party. Angered as much by Greeley's patronizing tone as by his presumptuous advice, they warned the meddling editor and other "wiseacres down East" that they would "tolerate no interference from outsiders" in their local political affairs. Republicans elsewhere might sell out to Douglas if they wished, but in Illinois the party was "pledged to the support of the gallant Lincoln."⁶

The same sentiments were registered more formally at Republican county conventions held all over the state during late May and early June, 1858. In many — perhaps most — of these meetings, the delegates approved ringing declarations naming Lincoln as their one and only choice for the Senate.⁷ The resolution passed at the state convention on June 16 was therefore actually the reiteration of an emphatic verdict already given at the grass-roots level. And

(Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); Ovando J. Hollister, *Life of Schuyler Colfax* (New York, 1886), 119, 121; Henry Wilson, *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* (3 vols., Boston, 1872-1877), II, 567. It was widely rumored and believed that Douglas and Seward had concluded a secret agreement looking toward the former's re-election to the Senate and the latter's succession to the presidency in 1860. See, for example, *New York Herald*, April 6, 13, November 20, 1858.

⁵ Jesse K. Dubois to Trumbull, April 8, 1858, Lyman Trumbull Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

⁶ *Chicago Journal*, April 15, 24, May 4, 19, 1858; *Ottawa Republican*, April 24, 1858; *Springfield Illinois State Journal*, May 17, 20, 1858. See also *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, June 15, 1858; *Bureau County Republican* (Princeton, Ill.), April 22, May 6, 1858; *Dixon Republican and Telegraph*, May 20, 27, 1858; *Alton Weekly Courier*, May 27, 1858; Norman B. Judd to Trumbull, March 7, 1858, Trumbull Papers; John H. Bryant to Lincoln, April 19, 1858, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection. The *Chicago Journal* of May 20 printed clippings from many Illinois newspapers denouncing eastern intervention in behalf of Douglas. Various letters in the Stephen A. Douglas Papers (University of Chicago), and in other contemporary correspondence, indicate that there was some movement toward Douglas among rank-and-file Republicans in the state. Party leaders, however, presented an almost solid front against him.

⁷ The *Chicago Tribune* of June 14, 1858, asserted that resolutions for Lincoln were passed in 95 out of 100 counties, but a sampling of convention proceedings as published in various newspapers indicates that this was something of an overstatement.

it served not only to ratify the popular preference for Lincoln but also to rebuke those eastern Republicans who had been giving aid and comfort to Douglas.⁸

The unusual state of affairs which had produced the resolution did not escape Lincoln's attention when he spoke to the delegates on the evening of June 16. His carefully-prepared address closed with a devastating criticism of the Greeley viewpoint and a solemn warning to Republicans against putting any faith in Douglas. How, he demanded, could the fight against slavery be led by a man who proclaimed his indifference to the evil? "Our cause . . . must be intrusted to, and conducted by its own undoubted friends — those whose hands are free, whose hearts are in the work." In a direct reference to the senatorial contest, and with more irony than modesty, he recited a pungent sentence from Ecclesiastes: "A *living dog* is better than a *dead lion*."⁹

But it was another scriptural quotation that gave the speech its name. The part that became famous was neither the conclusion nor the body of the speech, but the opening passage, in which Lincoln asserted his belief that the nation could not "endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*." And here one meets a mystery that has never been satisfactorily resolved.

Why did Lincoln choose this moment for the most provocative utterance of his career? In the long run, to be sure, the speech added appreciably to his political stature. Widely read and acclaimed, it marked him out among party leaders in the nation and raised him to Seward's level as a Republican phrasemaker. But whether the house-divided metaphor suited the immediate needs of the day in Illinois is another question. Many of Lincoln's friends considered it more eloquent than wise. A group of them, given an advance reading of the manuscript just before the convention, registered almost unanimous disapproval.¹⁰ And there were others, like the Chicago

⁸ There was an added complication in the figure of John Wentworth, antislavery editor, former congressman, and recently mayor of Chicago. Various Democratic newspapers in the state had repeatedly asserted that Wentworth was using Lincoln as his stalking-horse and would eventually emerge as the real Republican candidate for the Senate. This story, although palpably untrue, was damaging to the Republican cause and offered a second reason for nominating Lincoln. See Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Chicago Giant: A Biography of "Long John" Wentworth* (Madison, 1957), 157-59.

⁹ This and all other quotations from the speech are taken from Basler (ed.), *Collected Works of Lincoln*, II, 461-69.

¹⁰ Paul M. Angle (ed.), *Herndon's Life of Lincoln* (Cleveland, 1949), 326. Hern-

editor, John L. Scripps, who admired the speech when it appeared in print, but feared that it would be misinterpreted as a promise to make war upon slavery in the southern states.¹¹ Leonard Swett, an old companion on the judicial circuit, never departed from his belief that Lincoln invited certain defeat in 1858 with the "unfortunate" and "inappropriate" doctrine which he enunciated at the beginning of the campaign.¹²

The speech caused such misgivings because it seemed likely to alienate the very votes that Lincoln needed in order to unseat Douglas. With Illinois divided, like the nation, into Republican north and Democratic south, the senatorial contest would actually be decided in a belt of doubtful counties stretching across the middle of the state. The crucial zone was a stronghold of old-line Whig elements whose traditional hostility to Locofoco Democracy was balanced by a deep aversion for the excesses of abolitionism. Sound political strategy seemed to require that the Republicans court the favor of this important group by striking a note of moderation and restraint as they opened the campaign. Instead, Lincoln pitched his first words to a Garrisonian key and thus exposed himself to the persistent Democratic charge that he was a dangerous radical.

The standard explanation for this apparent recklessness is the one distilled from memory and imagination by William H. Herndon. It pictures Lincoln as a man wrapped in passion like a Hebrew prophet, determined to speak his thoughts without concern for the consequences. "The time has come when these sentiments should be uttered," he is supposed to have told his faint-hearted friends, "and if it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to the truth — let me die in the advocacy of what is just and right." As for the house-divided phrase itself, he allegedly declared: "I would rather be defeated with this expression in the speech, and uphold and discuss it before the people, than be victorious without it."¹³

don's recollection that he was the only man to respond favorably is supported by the testimony of others who were present, but one may be permitted to doubt that he actually predicted: "Lincoln, deliver that speech as read and it will make you President." See David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon* (New York, 1948), 118, 119 n.

¹¹ John L. Scripps to Lincoln, June 22, 1858, Robert Todd Lincoln Collection.

¹² Leonard Swett to Herndon, July 17, 1866, published in Emanuel Hertz (ed.), *The Hidden Lincoln* (2nd ed., New York, 1940), 295-302.

¹³ Angle (ed.), *Herndon's Lincoln*, 324-26. In reconstructing Lincoln's words, Herndon drew upon his own memory and upon that of John Armstrong, a local Re-

It is hard to agree with the historian who detects a "ring of authenticity" in such words.¹⁴ Direct quotations raked out of dim remembrance — a kind of retrospective ghostwriting — are questionable sources at best, and certainly less than conclusive as evidence of motivation. This pretentious talk does not sound at all like the flesh-and-blood Lincoln of 1858, but rather like the legendary figure subsequently evoked from the ashes of martyrdom by Herndon and others. The real Lincoln was a man of flexibility and discretion as well as conviction. A seat in the Senate had long been his fondest personal ambition, and he knew that the Republican cause would benefit immensely from the overthrow of Douglas. It is unlikely that the uttering of a few dramatic phrases could have seemed more important to him than victory at the polls — or than life itself.

Here another familiar interpretation of Lincoln's conduct may be noticed. It is often asserted or suggested that by 1858 he had already fixed his eyes upon the White House, and that more than once during the contest with Douglas he seemed ready to compromise his chances of becoming senator in order to improve his prospects of becoming president. This idea turns up frequently in accounts of the Freeport debate,¹⁵ and the House-Divided speech — with its apparent disregard of urgent political realities — can also be explained as a gambler's throw for the highest stakes. "It was . . . his most important move in the game for the Presidency," says Albert J. Beveridge, "a game Lincoln meant to win."¹⁶ Similarly, Richard publican leader in Springfield who was apparently present at the pre-convention reading of the speech. Herndon's interview with Armstrong in 1870 is in the Ward Hill Lamon Papers (Henry E. Huntington Library). In another account of the meeting written many years later by William Jayne (brother-in-law of Lyman Trumbull), Lincoln is made to appear even more dedicated and pompous. He responds to the protests against the speech by reciting six verses from a poem by Bryant, quoting the Apostle Paul, and pointing to the example of Martin Luther. William Jayne, *Abraham Lincoln: Personal Reminiscences of the Martyred President* (Chicago, 1908), 38-42.

¹⁴ Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln* (2 vols., New York, 1950), I, 360.

¹⁵ Lincoln, when urged by advisers not to ask his celebrated second question, is quoted as replying: "I am after bigger game. The battle of 1860 is worth a hundred of this." The earliest source for this remark appears to be the campaign biography by John L. Scripps, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago, 1860), 28.

¹⁶ Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858* (2 vols., Boston, 1928), II, 585. On another page (II, 656), Beveridge takes a dim view of efforts to endow Lincoln with "superhuman foresight" in 1858, but here (II, 585 n.) he cites as his only authority a naked assertion by Henry Clay Whitney: "While . . . his political friends were train-

Hofstadter believes he "was making the great gamble of his career at this point."¹⁷

And yet there is little in the contemporary record to support such theories. No one who follows Lincoln's campaign trail back and forth across the hot prairies of Illinois will find reason to doubt that he was concentrating all his attention upon the task immediately before him. Traveling 4,350 miles by train, carriage, and riverboat, he delivered sixty-three major speeches and many shorter ones, wrote scores of letters, conferred with hundreds of local party leaders, and exchanged thousands of greetings.¹⁸ This was no left-handed gesture, but a maximum expenditure of physical and mental effort. Besides, even if vagrant thoughts of the presidency were also crossing his mind, they could only have strengthened his determination to carry the day against Douglas. Repeated failure in one's own state was not the customary path to national leadership. History would have combined with logic to counsel Lincoln that if he expected to be taken seriously in 1860, he must win, not lose, in 1858.

There is an eight-page manuscript in Lincoln's hand which clearly reveals the intensity of his concentration upon the senatorial contest. Using the election returns for 1856, he carefully estimated his chances in each of the doubtful counties, with particular attention to the critical problem of capturing the Whig-American vote.¹⁹ These businesslike calculations were made in the early part of July, only a few weeks after the state convention. Did his outlook change in that short time? Or is it possible that the practical purposes which Lincoln had in mind when he delivered the House-Divided speech have been obscured by its historical consequences? A satisfying him for the Senate, he was coaching himself for the Presidency, two years thereafter."

¹⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), 114 n. Hofstadter reinforces this particular statement with a yarn from the pen of Joseph Medill. In 1862, Medill allegedly asked Lincoln why he had delivered "that radical speech" back in 1858, and Lincoln allegedly replied: "Well, after you fellows had got me into that mess and begun tempting me with offers of the Presidency, I began to think and I made up my mind that the next President of the United States would need to have a stronger anti-slavery platform than mine. So I concluded to say something." Unless Lincoln uttered these words in jest, the whole story is absurd.

¹⁸ Harry E. Pratt, *The Great Debates* (Springfield, Ill., 1956), *passim*, reprinted from *Illinois Blue Book, 1953-1954* (Springfield, 1955).

¹⁹ Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 476-81.

factory answer must take into account the *full* text of the speech, the circumstances surrounding its composition, and the general background of Lincoln's thought on slavery and politics.

It was actually a rather short address, judged by the oratorical standards of the day, and the famous opening passage was crisply spoken in about two minutes. After only one prefatory sentence,²⁰ Lincoln plunged into an attack upon the Kansas-Nebraska policy, which instead of putting an end to sectional controversy had greatly intensified it. Agitation of the slavery question would not cease, he declared, until a crisis had been "reached and passed."

[1] "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

[2] I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*.

[3] 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.

[4] It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other.

[5A] Either the *opponents* of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, [B] and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; [C] 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*.

[6] Have we no *tendency* to the latter condition?

Here, reproduced in its entirety, with Lincoln's own emphases and paragraphing, is the doctrine of the house divided.²¹ These are the lines which Douglas denounced as a "revolutionary" effort to incite "warfare between the North and the South," which historians have often linked with Seward's Rochester speech as an expression of militant Republicanism, and which later generations have found "heavy with awful prophecies."²² Yet when the passage is studied as a whole, with the more eloquent phrases confined to their context, it becomes apparent that much of the provocative quality inheres in the vigor of Lincoln's rhetoric, rather than in the substance of his argument. Nowhere in these sentences does he reproach the South or suggest a program of aggressive action against slavery. Like

²⁰ "If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending," Lincoln began, "we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it." This was a terse paraphrase of the opening sentence in Webster's reply to Hayne. Near the end of his speech, Lincoln also borrowed from Webster's peroration when he described the Democrats as "wavering, dissevered and belligerent."

²¹ Numbers and letters are added to facilitate subsequent references to the passage.

²² Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, III, 8, 111; Joseph Fort Newton, *Lincoln and Herndon* (Cedar Rapids, 1910), 173.

many of his countrymen, he sees another "crisis" approaching, but there is no mention here of "irrepressible conflict," no apocalyptic vision of the bloody years ahead.²³

Instead, Lincoln considers four possible terminations of the sectional struggle, and in the process offers a series of predictions. It was, to be sure, disingenuous of him to protest a few weeks later: "I did not say that I was in favor of anything. . . . I only said what I expected would take place."²⁴ His expectations must have been based in part upon the assumption that the Republican party would pursue a certain course — one that he sanctioned and was helping to determine. What he favored was therefore an understood element of what he predicted, and it is not surprising that to southern ears such predictions should sound like threats. The house-divided passage was more than a prophecy. It must also be read as a declaration of purpose. But even then its total effect is less than incendiary, and certain qualifying words reveal the essential reasonableness of its author.

There is probably no better example of Lincoln's ability to order and compress his thoughts than these six sentences. The first two constituted a clear-cut rejection of the status quo as a final answer to the slavery question. This might be considered revolutionary doctrine if it were not for the insertion of the word "permanently," which lends special emphasis to the fact that the speaker was scanning a distant horizon, not just the proximate ground of sectional controversy. In the third sentence, he examined the alternatives to a divided house, dismissing one and accepting the other. Here his repetition of the verb "expect" was no doubt purely rhetorical, for on the subject of disunion his mind was already firmly set. Thus he curtly rejected partition of the nation as an ultimate arrangement, not because it seemed improbable, but because to him it was impermissible.²⁵ The house could not stand if it remained divided; yet it would not be allowed to fall; therefore it must — some day, somehow — cease to be divided.

²³ Several times during the debates with Douglas, Lincoln made it plain that he expected the slavery controversy to be settled peaceably. "There will be no war, no violence," he assured his audience at Alton. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, III, 316.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 491.

²⁵ "But the Union, in any event, won't be dissolved," Lincoln had declared in a speech at Galena during the campaign of 1856. "We don't want to dissolve it, and if you attempt it *we won't let you.*" *Ibid.*, II, 355.

This line of reasoning had merely led Lincoln to another pair of alternatives, stated in the fourth sentence and elaborated in the fifth. But now he was ready, it seems, for a final prediction. If he had indeed resolved, as Allan Nevins believes, to place the Republican party upon "more advanced ground," he needed only to brush aside as an absurdity any design to make slavery national, then clinch his case with "a statesmanlike examination of the necessity for facing all that was implied in 'ultimate extinction'." ²⁶ Yet he did not take this last, obvious step. Perhaps his courage had momentarily failed him, as Professor Nevins implies; but a more reasonable explanation is that Lincoln's entire argument had simply been directed toward a different conclusion. Beginning with the sixth and final sentence of the house-divided passage, he devoted the major portion of his address to the contention that there was a real and imminent danger of slavery's being forced into the free states.

"Ultimate extinction," although it would ever afterwards be singled out as one of the main points of the speech, actually received only the briefest mention. In the first half of the long fifth sentence, Lincoln presented his own definition of Republican objectives: (A) The further spread of slavery was to be prevented, and (B) the institution was to be placed where the public could rest assured that it would eventually disappear. The clause marked "A" obviously amounts to nothing more than a reiteration of the most familiar and basic tenet of Republicanism. Part B, taken by itself, seems to go further; for by introducing the concept of "ultimate extinction," Lincoln was presumably stepping across the line that divided free-soil principles from the "more advanced ground" of abolitionism.

But the point is that B *cannot* be taken by itself without distorting its meaning, because it was not offered as a separate proposition, requiring separate implementation. The bright promise of ultimate extinction was one of the consequences expected to flow naturally from a settled policy of restriction. The achievement of B required nothing beyond the achievement of A — or so Lincoln believed, and quickly affirmed when his words were misinterpreted. Writing to John L. Scripps only a week after the speech, he denied having any wish to interfere with slavery in the southern states, and then added:

²⁶ Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, I, 359, 361.

"I believe that whenever the effort to spread slavery . . . shall be fairly headed off, the institution will then be in course of ultimate extinction; and by the language used I meant only this."²⁷ He made the same assertion in five of the seven debates with Douglas. Here, for example, is what he said at Ottawa: "Now, I believe if we could arrest the spread, and place it where Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison placed it, it *would be* in the course of ultimate extinction, and the public mind *would*, as for eighty years past, believe that it was in the course of ultimate extinction."²⁸

And Lincoln maintained that once this belief had become firmly implanted "the crisis would be past." Slavery might continue to exist in the South for "a hundred years at least," because abolition would come only "in God's own good time," but the northern conscience would be satisfied without invading southern constitutional rights, and the Union would be safe.²⁹ These benefits were all to accrue from the simple act of confining slavery to the area where it already existed. Moreover, Lincoln continually insisted that the goal of ultimate extinction, far from being new and radical, had been established by the Founding Fathers. Openly disapproving of slavery, they had "restricted its spread and stopped the importation of negroes, with the hope that it would remain in a dormant condition till the people saw fit to emancipate the negroes."³⁰

These subsequent amplifications, which are consistent with the entire record of Lincoln's public and private observations upon the slavery issue, make it clear that he did not intend by his introduction of the phrase "ultimate extinction" to propose any course of action going beyond the exclusion of slavery from the territories. He did deliberately affirm, however, that exclusion was more than an end in itself, that it implied a moral judgment against slavery and a commitment to freedom. Republicanism, as Lincoln defined it, embraced a belief (that slavery was wrong), a program of action

²⁷ Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 471.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 18. See also his statements at Jonesboro, Charleston, Quincy, and Alton, *ibid.*, III, 117, 180-81, 276, 306-308.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 18, 92-93, 181.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 78. These words are from the newspaper report of a speech that Lincoln delivered at Carlinville, Illinois, on August 31, 1858, but he identified his own views with those of the "fathers of the republic" in his speech at Peoria in 1854, and many times thereafter. See *ibid.*, II, 274, 276, 501, 513, 520-21; III, 18, 87, 92-93, 117-18, 181, 276, 306-308, 333, 484, 488, 489, 496, 498, 535, 537-38, 550, 551, 553; IV, 17-18, 21-22.

(federal legislation preventing its extension), and an ultimate objective or hope (complete extinction of the institution at some distant date and by some peaceful means not yet discovered). Such a definition was bound to invite trouble; yet Lincoln returned to it again and again, with mounting emphasis, as the campaign progressed.³¹ His reasons for doing so were not quixotic but practical, and can be understood only against the background of unusual circumstances which had already produced his nomination for the Senate.

Remote as it may seem in retrospect, the possibility that the Republican party — or a considerable portion of it — might become a tail fastened to the Douglas kite loomed up before Lincoln's eyes as a real and imminent danger in the spring of 1858. The Leecompton controversy, besides making Douglas a hero to many antislavery leaders, had also softened their opposition to his "great principle." Popular sovereignty now wore a more benign aspect. Recent events in Kansas tended to support the argument that a policy of non-intervention, if honestly applied, would be sufficient (along with the iron necessities of climate) to prevent the extension of slavery into the remaining western territory. No less a Republican than William H. Seward had recently announced on the Senate floor that the battle for freedom in the territories was already substantially won.³² Why then, it was asked, should the South be antagonized and the Union endangered by insistence upon a superfluous policy of congressional restriction?

Such arguments were especially persuasive as long as attention was narrowly centered upon the Kansas crisis and the issue of slavery in the territories.³³ But Lincoln regarded the territorial

³¹ *Ibid.*, II, 498; III, 92-93, 254-55, 312-13.

³² Seward's remark, made on the floor of the Senate, is in *Congressional Globe*, 35 Cong., 1 Sess., 521 (February 2, 1858). The *New York Times*, March 1, 1858, said that the statement "substantially dissolved" the loose alliance constituting the Republican party. The *Chicago Democratic Press*, March 9, 1858, carried an angry reply to the *Times*. For the drift of an important Republican editor toward Douglas and popular sovereignty, see George S. Merriam, *The Life and Times of Samuel Bowles* (2 vols., New York, 1885), I, 242. Lincoln's apprehensions were greatly augmented by a report from his law partner. Herndon, after visiting Washington, New York, and Boston in the spring of 1858, returned home fully convinced that a group headed by Greeley was plotting to lower the party platform so that Douglas could climb onto it. See Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon*, 114-17; Newton, *Lincoln and Herndon*, 153, 203, 209, 215-16, 219, 241-42, 245-47.

³³ The historical viewpoint which holds that slavery was actually a relatively

problem as just the point of contact in a larger and more fundamental struggle.³⁴ To him, the Douglas-Republican convergence on the Lecompton question seemed superficial and transient because it had not resulted from agreement on basic principles. It was also dangerous because it threatened the unity and purpose of the Republican party. In response to this threat, Lincoln laid down, in the House-Divided speech, a definition of Republicanism which, while merely articulating what everyone knew, served to emphasize the doctrinal gulf that still yawned between Douglas and the Republicans. The concept of "ultimate extinction" could thus be used as a touchstone for separating the true from the casual or pretended opponents of slavery. His object, it appears, was not to lead a Republican advance to higher, more radical ground, but rather to check an ill-considered retreat to the lower ground of popular sovereignty.

The brevity with which he treated the subject in the House-Divided address was not necessarily a mark of diffidence. A convention composed exclusively of party leaders needed no elaborate instruction in the meaning of Republicanism. Later, for the mixed political audiences attending the debates, he would explain, qualify, and vigorously defend the proposition that slavery should be restricted *because* it was wrong, and *in order to* anchor national policy upon the expectation of its ultimate demise. Now, however, he proposed to consider the sinister alternative: progressive legalization of slavery everywhere in the United States. This was the major theme to which his historic opening sentences had led. He proceeded to spend nearly three fourths of the entire speech detailing a solemn charge that the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision were part of a maturing Democratic plot to nationalize slavery. The leading conspirators, he said, were Douglas, Pierce, Taney, and Buchanan. Having first repealed the Missouri Compromise restriction upon slavery in the territories, and then denied the power

minor problem, inflated to dangerous proportions by fanatical minorities in both sections, is a product of this same concentration upon the territorial aspects of the issue. Douglas, not surprisingly, usually fares extremely well in such interpretations.

³⁴ For Lincoln's opinion that Kansas constituted hardly "a tithe" of the whole problem, see discussion of the "House-Divided fragment" below. In a speech to Chicago Republicans on March 1, 1859, he said: "Never forget that we have before us this whole matter of the right or wrong of slavery in this Union, though the immediate question is as to its spreading out into new Territories and States." Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, III, 369.

of Congress to impose such a restriction, they needed only one more victory, namely: "another Supreme Court decision, declaring that the Constitution of the United States does not permit a *state* to exclude slavery from its limits." That decision was soon coming, Lincoln predicted. "We shall lie down pleasantly dreaming that the people of Missouri are on the verge of making their State free; and we shall awake to the reality, instead, that the Supreme Court has made Illinois a slave State."³⁵

Modern scholars, however much they may admire Lincoln, are inclined to see in this sweeping accusation and somber warning only the extravagance of partisanship.³⁶ There is, it appears, no evidence of any organized movement in 1858 to push slavery into the free states, or of any disposition among members of the Supreme Court to attempt such folly. In short, the conspiracy that Lincoln described did not exist; the danger that he professed to fear was extremely remote. And so this, the major part of the House-Divided speech, is commonly dismissed as "an absurd bogey," unworthy of intensive scrutiny.³⁷ But political rhetoric is a response to historical developments, not a record of them, and circumstances can sometimes make the most erroneous statement credible, even justifiable, thus giving it a kind of temporary validity. The conspiracy charge may have been absurd, but the real problem is to explain why Lincoln, certainly a reasonable man, insisted that it was true.

In the setting of 1858, the charge carried conviction. It is not surprising that even reasonable men should have seen an ominous pattern in the sequence of events which had begun four years earlier with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Nor was it hard for them to believe that behind such a pattern there must be some kind of concert. Lincoln, to be sure, was exercising the politician's privilege of overstating his case. In subsequent speeches he admitted that the existence of a plot could only be inferred, not proved, and he conceded that Douglas might have been playing the role of dupe instead of conspirator. But the effects were what mattered, he argued, not the

³⁵ Lincoln was by no means the first person to voice this fear, which was a part of the general Republican reaction to the Dred Scott decision. On March 10, 1857, for example, the Bloomington *Pantagraph* warned: "One little step only remains, to decide all *State* prohibitions of Slavery to be void."

³⁶ Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, I, 361-63; James G. Randall, *Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg* (2 vols., New York, 1945-1946), I, 107-108.

³⁷ Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, I, 362.

motives. A trend toward the nationalization of slavery had become manifest; it was more than mere accident; and the advocates of popular sovereignty, whether intentionally or not, were contributing to it.³⁸

Still, even if there was some basis for suspecting a design to make slavery national, how could a reasonable man, knowing the strength of the antislavery forces in the North, have had any fear of its success? It is precisely at this point that the argument contained in Lincoln's June 16 declaration is often misconstrued. The error usually stems from a failure to observe the close connection between the "conspiracy" section of the speech and the "house-divided" passage which preceded it. In that passage Lincoln had asserted that one of two opposing policies must eventually prevail. The triumph of either would obviously have to begin with the disablement of the other. Just as the first step toward ultimate extinction of slavery was the thwarting of efforts to extend it, so the first step toward nationalization of slavery was the blunting of the moral opposition to it. Lincoln thought he detected signs of the latter. His warning that slavery might become lawful everywhere was therefore not absolute but conditional, and, within its context, far from absurd. He was describing what could happen *if* the existence of slavery should become a matter of general indifference — *if*, in other words, the Republicans should allow themselves to be deflected from their purpose.

And this was where Douglas fitted into the picture with his enunciated philosophy of not caring whether slavery was "voted down or voted up."³⁹ Douglas' function, Lincoln maintained, was to instill a complaisant attitude toward slavery in the minds of

³⁸ Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 521; III, 20-22, 27-30, 232-33. For an elaborate and persuasive defense of Lincoln's argument that there was a legal and political tendency toward the nationalization of slavery, see Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York, 1959), Chapters XI and XII. Professor Jaffa's book appeared after this article was written and submitted.

³⁹ *Cong. Globe*, 35 Cong., 1 Sess., 18 (December 9, 1857). This remark, which Republicans lifted from context and quoted repeatedly, was directed specifically at the slavery clause of the Lecompton constitution, due to be submitted to the voters of Kansas on December 21. Douglas was merely announcing his opposition to the constitution no matter which way the vote went on the clause. Nevertheless, Lincoln believed that the phrase was an accurate summary of popular sovereignty, which, he said, "acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty." Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, IV, 155.

northerners and thus prepare the way for new advances, new court decisions which would make the institution universal and permanent. Here was the burden of Lincoln's case against Douglas and popular sovereignty, and to no other argument did he return more persistently and eloquently in his later speeches. He repeated it in ever stronger terms to the crowds attending the debates, to Ohio audiences in 1859, and to New Englanders in 1860. The proslavery conspiracy, he said, could not succeed without Douglas, its indispensable advance agent — its "miner and sapper." The "don't-care" policy was "just as certain to nationalize slavery as the doctrine of Jeff Davis himself." They were "two roads to the same goal," and the Douglas road, if somewhat less direct, was "more dangerous."⁴⁰ These and similar amplifications reinforce the conclusion that Lincoln aimed the conspiracy charge of the House-Divided speech primarily at Douglas and those who imitated him in "groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong."⁴¹

The third — or "living-dog" — section of the speech followed logically. Here Lincoln considered and firmly rejected the Greeley proposition that Douglas, by his stand against the Lecompton constitution, had qualified himself as a leader of the antislavery forces. If not quite a dead lion, Douglas was "at least a caged and toothless one" as far as the battle for freedom was concerned. "Clearly," Lincoln declared, "he is not *now* with us — he does not *pretend* to be — he does not *promise* to *ever* be." The Republican cause, therefore, should be "intrusted to, and conducted by its own undoubted friends." With these remarks, justifying the decision to fight Douglas in Illinois, Lincoln had brought his argument down to the business immediately at hand. He then concluded with a brief plea for Republican perseverance and this final prediction:

The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail — if we stand firm, we shall not fail.

Wise councils may *accelerate* or *mistakes delay* it, but, sooner or later the victory is *sure* to come.

⁴⁰ Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, III, 29-30, 233, 316, 369, 404-405, 442, 469; IV, 5, 20-21.

⁴¹ These words, which so crisply sum up Lincoln's view of the Douglas doctrine, are from the Cooper Institute address of February 27, 1860. Such "sophistical contrivances," Lincoln said, were as "vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man." *Ibid.*, III, 550.

The House-Divided address, which probably required about thirty or thirty-five minutes to deliver, can thus be divided into three main parts: the introductory "house-divided" section (constituting approximately 7 per cent of the entire speech), the "conspiracy" section (72 per cent), and the "living-dog" section (21 per cent). It is the fashion to treat everything that Lincoln said after the first two or three minutes as anticlimax, to look upon his argument as running downhill from high principles to low partisanship. Yet the careful reader will discover that from beginning to end the speech is dominated by a single, coherent theme. It opens with an attack upon Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska policy. The house-divided doctrine has the effect of eliminating the middle ground upon which Douglas stands. The concept of "ultimate extinction" defines Republicanism in terms that exclude Douglas. The conspiracy theory links Douglasism with the onward march of slavery. And the last part of the address demolishes the image of Douglas as an antislavery champion. Whatever judgment may be passed upon Lincoln's rhetorical effectiveness, or upon the soundness of his reasoning, or upon the accuracy of his particulars, the immediate *purpose* of the House-Divided speech seems abundantly clear. As a matter of practical politics, it may be viewed as an attempt to minimize the significance and impact of Douglas' anti-Lecompton heroics and to demonstrate the folly of diluting Republican convictions with the watery futility of popular sovereignty — in short, an attempt to vindicate the nomination of a Republican candidate for the Senate in Illinois.

There is, however, another way of probing for the meaning of the House-Divided address which ought not to be neglected. Herndon's assertion that Lincoln spent about one month preparing it is probably true as far as the final draft is concerned,⁴² but the basic ideas were formulated over a longer period. Rudiments of the speech appear in some of Lincoln's earlier writings and utterances. An examination of the circumstances which produced them should throw light upon the progress of his thought.

Such a study was made a number of years ago by the historian Arthur C. Cole, who reported his findings in an address entitled "Lincoln's 'House Divided' Speech: Did It Reflect a Doctrine of

⁴² Herndon to Jesse W. Weik, October 29, 1885, Herndon-Weik Collection (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

Class Struggle?"⁴³ Cole's point of departure is his reluctance to take at face value Lincoln's warning that slavery might spread to all the states. That danger, Cole argues, was simply not serious enough in itself to arouse such apprehension in Lincoln. "Another factor was present, lurking in the background, perhaps, but influencing Lincoln, consciously or subconsciously, in his presentation of the struggle between slavery and freedom."⁴⁴ Cole thus undertakes to rationalize the warning by uncovering a deeper meaning beneath the literal one. His explanation, briefly put, is as follows: Lincoln had come to believe that the theories of proslavery extremists like George Fitzhugh endangered the "white man's charter of freedom." In their idealizing of slave society without regard to race, in their contempt for the doctrine that all men are created equal, in their advocacy of a "defensive and offensive alliance of the forces of capitalism, North and South," Lincoln read the beginnings of an assault upon the entire working class. The evil that he feared was therefore more monstrous than the mere expansion of Negro servitude; it was the progressive degradation of all white men who earned their living by toil.⁴⁵

This line of reasoning, although it hardly tends to absolve Lincoln of raising up an "absurd bogey," has a certain limited validity. That is, Lincoln did assert more than once that the defense of slavery in the abstract posed a threat to the theoretical foundations of human liberty.⁴⁶ He did not, however, present it as a pressing problem demanding attention in the realm of political action. His concern for the white man's "charter of freedom" served to reinforce his belief that slavery was wrong, but that belief was the assumption with which most of his arguments began, not the conclusion toward which they were directed. The central problem to which he addressed himself in his speeches was *how* the widespread

⁴³ Arthur C. Cole, *Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech: Did It Reflect a Doctrine of Class Struggle?* (Chicago, 1923), an address delivered before the Chicago Historical Society, March 15, 1923, and published as a pamphlet.

⁴⁴ Cole, *Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-30.

⁴⁶ Notably, in his eulogy of Henry Clay on July 6, 1852, in his Peoria speech of October 16, 1854, and in his speech at a Republican banquet in Chicago on December 10, 1856. Also, the brief newspaper report of his famous "lost speech" at the Bloomington convention on May 29, 1856, reports him as saying: "The sentiment in favor of white slavery now prevailed in all the slave state papers, except those of Kentucky, Tennessee and Missouri and Maryland." Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 130, 255, 275-76, 341, 385.

belief that slavery was wrong could be implemented within the framework of the American constitutional system. Convinced that the program of the Republican party offered the best solution, he regarded the Douglasses, rather than the Fitzhughs, as the major obstacle to its success. Cole's elaborate inquiry consequently ends more or less in frustration. He is forced to concede that the class-struggle theme does not manifest itself either in the House-Divided address or in Lincoln's other recorded speeches of the campaign.⁴⁷ He acknowledges that most of the address was "directed, in its formal logic, against the leadership of Douglas." But, adhering to the view that the house-divided passage stands in "comparative isolation" from the rest of the text, Cole suggests that "a sense of the larger conflict between slavery and freedom served as a sub-conscious factor in Lincoln's historic statement."⁴⁸ This cautious conclusion scarcely constitutes an affirmative answer to the question posed in his title. Not without value, perhaps, as an insight into the general course of Lincoln's thought, it nevertheless adds little to our understanding of what he said on June 16, 1858.

The search for the origins of the House-Divided speech leads back to the year of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and even beyond. Before 1854, according to Lincoln's own testimony, he had been opposed to slavery, but had believed that it was in the course of ultimate extinction, and had therefore looked upon it as "a minor question."⁴⁹ Thus the expectation that the "house" would some day "cease to be divided" was virtually native to his thinking. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, from his viewpoint, amounted to a revolution. It impaired the hope for ultimate extinction, opened the way for slavery's unlimited expansion, and made this corrosive issue paramount in American politics. From the beginning, too, Lincoln objected to the doctrine of popular sovereignty as one of moral

⁴⁷ Cole, *Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech*, 14, 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15, 34. Cole's study obviously influenced Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 109-19. Here Lincoln is presented as a man "never much troubled about the Negro," who exploited the race prejudice of his constituents and whose assertion that slavery might become national was "a clever dialectical inversion" of Fitzhugh's challenge to the freedom of the white man. Hofstadter's influence, in turn, has been extensive. It is acknowledged, for example, by Daniel J. Boorstin in *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953), 113-14, where Lincoln's opposition to the extension of slavery is attributed primarily to his concern for the welfare of the white workingman. For criticism of the Hofstadter interpretation, see Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 363-81.

⁴⁹ Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 514.

evasion. The germ of the conspiracy theory can be detected in a sentence from his famous Peoria speech of October 16, 1854: "This *declared* indifference, but as I must think, covert *real* zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate."⁵⁰ The disruptive effects of the Kansas-Nebraska policy soon confirmed his fears and inspired the analogy of the divided house.

The surprising strength of the anti-Nebraska coalition in the elections of 1854 heartened Lincoln and, indeed, almost carried him into the Senate, but he still saw only uncertainty in the future. Writing to George Robertson, a Kentuckian, on August 15, 1855, he declared that there was no prospect of a peaceful extinction of slavery. Then he added: "Our political problem now is 'Can we, as a nation, continue together *permanently* — *forever* — half slave, and half free?' The problem is too mighty for me. May God, in his mercy, superintend the solution."⁵¹ Other men, North and South, were of course asking the same question, and Lincoln himself later disclaimed credit for originating the concept of the absolute incompatibility of slave and free society.⁵² But in other hands the concept tended to be merely descriptive, or, in the case of southern radicals, to point toward dissolution of the Union. Lincoln's unique contribution was not the invention of, but the use to which he put, the house-divided doctrine. He was the first to couple it with an adamant rejection of disunion, thus formulating the major premise of a disjunctive syllogism which presented a choice between uniform freedom and uniform slavery, but eliminated all mediative positions, all obscuring evasions, in between.

The obscuring force in 1858 was Douglas and the anti-Lecompton Democrats. During the middle years of the decade, however, it was primarily the Know-Nothing movement that stood in the way of the emerging Republican party and a clear-cut decision on the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 255.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, II, 318.

⁵² *Ibid.*, III, 431, 451; IV, 6-7, 23. Lincoln repeatedly cited the *Richmond Enquirer's* use of the concept in 1856, but he also asserted that "almost every good man" since the formation of the government had uttered the same sentiment, including Washington, Jefferson, Jay, and Monroe. Prudently, he neglected to add that the idea of the incompatibility of slavery and freedom, together with the theory of a great slave power conspiracy, had long been a stock-in-trade of the abolitionists. See Russel B. Nye, *Fettered Freedom: Civil Liberties and the Slavery Controversy, 1830-1860* (East Lansing, 1949), 217-49. But it was the logic of events, not the example of northern and southern extremists, which brought Lincoln to a similar belief.

slavery question. In the presidential campaign of 1856, much of Lincoln's energy was expended in efforts to convince the followers of Fillmore in Illinois that by deflecting votes from Frémont they were actually aiding Buchanan and the cause of slavery.⁵³ Here, it would seem, was a situation which might have invited use of the house-divided doctrine. Did Lincoln give utterance to it that year? There is a tradition that he did, perhaps several times, but especially in a speech at Bloomington on September 12. Lincoln shared the platform that evening with his friend T. Lyle Dickey, a moderate antislavery Whig. It was Dickey's story, written down only a number of years later, that Lincoln on this occasion "proclaimed it as his opinion that our government could not last — part slave and part free." Dickey further recalled that in their hotel room after the meeting he remonstrated with Lincoln, and that the latter, while defending the truth of his statement, admitted it might have a harmful effect and promised not to use it again during the campaign.⁵⁴

Since there is no precise corroboration of Dickey's assertion, it must be viewed with appropriate caution. Nevertheless, his veracity is to some extent endorsed by testimony from Lincoln's own pen. Before this can be demonstrated, however, it is necessary to examine the brief summary of Lincoln's remarks which appeared in the local newspaper. Bloomington, it should be noted, was in strong Whig territory where the Know-Nothing appeal met with a favorable response. Lincoln therefore centered part of his attack upon the American ticket:

He showed up the position of the Fillmore party in fine style, both as to its prospects of success, and as to the propriety of supporting a candidate

⁵³ See especially his form letter to Fillmore men in Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 374. This letter, it should be noted, was dated September 8, 1856, only four days before the Bloomington speech discussed below.

⁵⁴ T. Lyle Dickey to Herndon, December 8, 1866, Herndon-Weik Collection. Dickey told substantially the same story in a letter to Isaac N. Arnold, February 7, 1883, Isaac N. Arnold Papers (Chicago Historical Society). Herndon included the incident in his biography, but said only that it took place "at Bloomington in 1856." Angle (ed.), *Herndon's Lincoln*, 325-26. This may have led some of his readers to connect the incident with the Republican convention at Bloomington on May 29, 1856, thus contributing to the development of a tradition that Lincoln used the house-divided doctrine in his famous "lost speech." The error may have begun with Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1872), 398. The manuscript of Dickey's letter to Herndon removes all doubt. It states that the speech was given at "a political meeting" held in the evening of "some day in September or October of 1856."

whose greatest recommendation, as urged by his supporters themselves, is that he is *neutral* upon the one only great political question of the times. He pointed out in regular succession, the several steps taken by the Administration in regard to slavery in the Territories, from the repeal of the Missouri Compromise down to the latest Border Ruffian invasion of Kansas, and the inevitable tendency of each and all of them to effect the spread of slavery over that country . . . contrasting all this with the assertion of our Northern Democratic speakers, that they are not in favor of the extension of slavery.⁵⁵

Here, beyond any doubt, was a framework suitable for the introduction of the house-divided doctrine; for in it one finds not only rudimentary traces of the conspiracy theory, but also condemnation of that same moral neutralism (here represented by both the northern Democrats and the Fillmore party) which was to be the primary target of Lincoln's historic address in 1858.⁵⁶

But it was not until a decision had been rendered in the Dred Scott case that the house-divided argument could be used with full force. The Supreme Court's pronouncement, coming only two days after the inauguration of Buchanan, supplied the materials which had been lacking for manufacture of the conspiracy charge. Now, for the first time, Lincoln could specify the means by which slavery might be extended into the free states — a "second Dred Scott decision" — and thus confront his listeners with a categorical choice between policies leading toward ultimate extinction and policies promoting nationalization of the institution. Yet, with all the pieces of his argument ready for assembling by March, 1857, he waited another fifteen months before enunciating the house-divided doctrine. Opportunities to introduce it earlier were admittedly few, because this was a relatively fallow period in local politics. Nevertheless, he did discuss the Dred Scott decision at length in a major address at Springfield on June 26, 1857. Rejecting the Court's

⁵⁵ Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 375.

⁵⁶ Henry B. Rankin, in his *Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1916), 235-36, asserted that Lincoln used the house-divided doctrine in a speech at Petersburg on August 30, 1856. He, too, misinterpreted Dickey's story as a reference to the Bloomington convention of May 29 (See note 54 above), and thus concluded, mistakenly, that in uttering the doctrine at Petersburg, Lincoln broke his promise to Dickey. Rankin's statement, published sixty years after the event, is of dubious value but perhaps adds something to the credibility of Dickey's recollection. Petersburg, it may be noted, was also in the heart of old Whig territory, and the newspaper account of Lincoln's speech shows him making an appeal to the Fillmore supporters. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 366-68.

assumptions, Lincoln ridiculed its logic and defended the Republican refusal to accept its judgment as final. But at the same time, he said nothing about the possibility of a second decision legalizing slavery everywhere. He did not allege a conspiracy to accomplish that purpose; nor did he advance the proposition that the nation could not endure permanently half slave and half free. The speech, in short, contained scarcely a hint of the one that he would make on the same spot one year later.⁵⁷

These interesting omissions may mean nothing more than that Lincoln's thinking along house-divided lines had not yet fully crystallized in the summer of 1857. It is equally likely, however, that they reflect the current political situation, which was to change so abruptly before the end of the year. With the Democratic party ostensibly united behind a new president, with Douglas defending the Dred Scott decision, with the lines of battle clearly drawn, there was less need for the house-divided doctrine, as Lincoln used it. Only when the Lecompton controversy blurred the political picture, exalted Douglas, and confused many Republicans, did Lincoln decide to advance his provocative argument as a means of clearing the air and preserving the integrity of his party. There is no escaping the simple chronological fact that it was the revolt of Douglas, not the Dred Scott decision, which called forth the House-Divided speech.

This explanation would carry more weight if it could be shown that Lincoln actually began to compose the speech soon after Douglas first announced his opposition to the Lecompton constitution — that is, in December, 1857, rather than in May, 1858 (as Herndon leads us to believe). There is good evidence that Lincoln did just this, but it has long been obscured by the persistent misdating of an important document. In the first edition of their *Complete Works* of Lincoln, Nicolay and Hay grouped several undated manuscripts together and marked them "October 1, 1858?" One of these, obviously a draft of a speech, is about three quarters the length of the House-Divided address and contains the basic

⁵⁷ The editors of the *Collected Works* maintain that Lincoln's belief in the house-divided doctrine was "implicit" in his 1857 Springfield speech (II, 452 n.), but this is true only in so far as the belief was implicit in everything he was saying and doing by that time. The striking thing about the 1857 speech is the absence of any *explicit* reference to the ideas and arguments that dominated the House-Divided address.

ideas, as well as some of the phraseology, of the latter document.⁵⁸ For convenience, it may be labeled the "House-Divided fragment." The editors of the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, pointing out that the fragment must have been written considerably earlier than October 1, chose to date it "c. May 18, 1858." But their reasons for doing so are unpersuasive, and it seems almost certain that in this instance they have committed one of their rare mistakes.⁵⁹

With a single reading it becomes clear that the fragment was written while certain events of December, 1857, were still fresh. For example, referring to Buchanan, Lincoln says: "And now, in his first annual message, he urges the acceptance of the Lecompton constitution." The annual message was read to Congress on December 8. But it was Buchanan's special message of February 2, 1858, submitting the constitution for approval, which set off the real legislative battle, and Lincoln does not mention it at all. Then there is the attention that Lincoln devotes to a bill sponsored by Douglas in the Senate. This measure, authorizing the people of Kansas to frame another constitution, was introduced on December 18 and quickly buried in committee. It remained a subject of public interest for no more than a few weeks. Yet Lincoln treats it as a live issue and gives it his endorsement. Furthermore, at one point he uses the words "last year" in what is obviously a discussion of the

⁵⁸ John G. Nicolay and John Hay (eds.), *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works* (2 vols., New York, 1894), I, 422-27. It seems likely that Nicolay and Hay were influenced in their selection of this date by the location of the manuscript in Lincoln's files. Since they used it, the manuscript itself has disappeared, except for the final page, which is in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City. The Morgan Library associates two other pages of manuscript with this page, but there is apparently no convincing reason for doing so. See Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 552-53.

⁵⁹ The fragment appears in Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 448-54. All quotations from the fragment are taken from this source. The editors followed Nicolay and Hay and the page of manuscript in the Pierpont Morgan Library. The date which they assign obviously takes into account Herndon's statement that Lincoln spent about one month writing the House-Divided speech (See note 42 above). They suggest May 18 specifically because on that day Lincoln delivered a speech at Edwardsville; but there is apparently no evidence of any kind linking the fragment with that speech. On the other hand, the contents of the fragment indicate beyond any doubt that it was written much earlier. For instance, Lincoln discusses the question of "whether the Lecompton constitution should be accepted or rejected" by Congress. But the Lecompton bill was, in effect, defeated on April 1 in the House, and the chief topic of public discussion in the latter part of April was the substitute English bill. This measure, which is not mentioned in the fragment, became law several weeks before May 18.

campaign of 1856. These and other clues lead to the conclusion that the House-Divided fragment was probably written during the last ten days of December, 1857.⁶⁰ And it was on December 28, significantly, that Lincoln sent off a fretful letter to Lyman Trumbull in Washington. "What does the New-York Tribune mean by its constant eulogising, and admiring, and magnifying of Douglas?" he demanded. "Does it, in this, speak the sentiments of the republicans at Washington? Have they concluded that the republican cause, generally, can be best promoted by sacrificing us here in Illinois?"⁶¹

If Lincoln drafted the House-Divided fragment with the intention of using it immediately in a public address, there is no record of his doing so. Perhaps, in anticipation of a strenuous campaign, he was beginning to put thoughts down on paper — even as he was working hard to make money at his law practice for expenditure in the months ahead. In any case, there can be little doubt that his composition of the fragment was provoked by the signs of Republican infatuation with Douglas, and that it was a preliminary draft of the speech he delivered the following June.

The first and major part of the fragment is a vigorous argument against Republican coalition with Douglas on his terms. It is thus analogous to the third — or "living-dog" — section of the House-Divided speech. Lincoln warns that if the Republicans drop their own organization and "fall in" with Douglas, they may end up "haltered and harnessed," ready to be "handed over by him to the regular Democracy, to filibuster indefinitely for additional slave territory, — to carry slavery into all the States, as well as Territories, under the Dred Scott decision, construed and enlarged from time to time." After several more pages of attack upon "Nebraskaism" and its author, he broadens the scope of his argument with the assertion that "Kansas is neither the whole nor a tithe of the real question." Then follows this passage:

*A house divided against itself cannot stand.*⁶²

⁶⁰ The early part of January, 1858, should perhaps be included as a possibility because Lincoln speaks of "having seen the noses counted, and actually knowing that a majority of the people of Kansas are against slavery." This could be a reference to the Kansas election of January 4. However, the first clear proof of a free-state majority in Kansas had been furnished by the territorial elections of October 5, 1857, and it was probably this event that Lincoln had in mind.

⁶¹ Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, II, 430.

⁶² This is Lincoln's first recorded use of the biblical quotation in connection with

I believe the government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I expressed this belief a year ago; and subsequent developments have but confirmed me. 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 put it in 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. Do you doubt it? Study the Dred Scott decision, and then see how little even now remains to be done.

The eye-catching clause, "I expressed this belief a year ago," loses most of its mystery when a proper date is assigned to the fragment. Lincoln is almost certainly referring to his use of the house-divided doctrine during the campaign of 1856, thereby lending support to Dickey's account of the Bloomington incident.⁶⁸

In the final pages of the manuscript, Lincoln briefly discusses the ominous implications of the Dred Scott decision and the dangerous futility of a "don't-care" attitude. "Welcome, or unwelcome, agreeable or disagreeable," he declares, "whether this shall be an entire slave nation, *is* the issue before us. Every incident — every little shifting of scenes or of actors — only clears away the intervening trash, compacts and consolidates the opposing hosts, and brings them more and more distinctly face to face." The conflict, he concludes, will be severe, and it will be fought through by "those who *do* care for the result." But victory can be won, under the Constitution, with "peaceful ballots," rather than "bloody bullets."

Verbally, the House-Divided fragment bears only an occasional resemblance to the House-Divided speech, but in substance the two documents are remarkably similar. The fragment, like the finished speech, may be divided into three parts: the rejection of Douglas

the sectional controversy. In 1843, he and two other Whig leaders had quoted it in a circular pleading for party unity. Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, I, 315. By 1858, the sentence had been used so often in one context or another that it was almost a cliché. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln*, II, 575 n., gives several examples. Others will be found in *Northwestern Christian Advocate* (Chicago), March 29, 1854; G. D. Jaquess to John J. Crittenden, March 1, 1858, John J. Crittenden Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); *Chicago Tribune*, March 22, 1858; *New York Herald*, June 8, 1858.

⁶⁸ This clause, which is the only clue to the date of the fragment in its later pages, tends to justify the belief that all parts of the manuscript were written at about the same time and that it is indeed to be regarded as a single document. The belief is strengthened by the logical coherence of Lincoln's argument and by the fact that Nicolay and Hay, who presumably had the entire manuscript in their hands, came to the same conclusion.

(constituting approximately 72 per cent of the whole), the house-divided passage (5 per cent), and a conclusion which contains the core of the conspiracy theory (23 per cent). If, then, there was a continuity between the fragment and the House-Divided speech, it is obvious that between December and June, Lincoln shortened the first section and moved it to the end of the address. At the same time, he greatly expanded the conspiracy argument. Various reasons for these modifications might be suggested,⁶⁴ but fundamentally they appear to reflect the changing political situation. With each passing month, the possibility of a permanent alliance between Douglas and the Republican party became more remote, but the danger of losing potential Republican votes to his magnetic leadership and plausible doctrine remained as serious as ever. Lincoln was shifting his emphasis to meet the needs of the hour. The draft prepared in December is highly revealing as a stage in the development of Lincoln's thought, and it tends to reinforce certain conclusions already advanced, namely, that the different parts of the House-Divided speech were intimately related to one another and constituted a cohesive whole; that the speech was a direct response to the peculiar political conditions created by the revolt of Douglas; and that it was written not only as a statement of principle, but with a practical purpose in mind.

The speech itself represents one of those moments of synthesis which embody the past and illumine the future. Lincoln, who revered his country's historical tradition, believed that the cause he embraced pointed the way to a fuller realization of the ideals upon which the republic had been founded. Enjoying an advantage which accrues especially to founders of new political movements, he experienced little difficulty in squaring his partisan commitments with his moral convictions. He was confronted with no painful choice between expediency and principle.

⁶⁴ Cole, *Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech*, 33, suggests that Lincoln was influenced by editorials in the *Mattoon National Gazette* advocating the legalization of slavery in Illinois. He was probably even more impressed by the widely-discussed decision of the California Supreme Court on February 11, 1858, in the case of the slave Archy, who was held to be still the property of his master even though the latter had settled down to more or less permanent residence in the state (*Sacramento Union*, February 12, 1858). Also, since Lincoln usually kept a watchful eye upon proceedings in Congress, he may have drawn inspiration from a speech enunciating the conspiracy theory which was delivered in the Senate on February 8, 1858, by William P. Fessenden of Maine (*Cong. Globe*, 35 Cong., 1 Sess., 617).

At the level of practical politics, Lincoln was defending his own candidacy for the Senate and trying to save his party from disintegration. He never doubted that the decision to oppose Douglas in Illinois had been absolutely crucial. Speaking in Chicago on March 1, 1859, he said: "If we, the Republicans of this State, had made Judge Douglas our candidate for the Senate of the United States last year and had elected him, there would to-day be no Republican party in this Union."⁶⁵ And he continued to issue warnings against "the temptation to lower the Republican Standard in order to gather recruits."⁶⁶

But if Lincoln had satisfied himself that his personal ambition accorded with the welfare of his party, he seems to have been equally certain that nothing other than unadulterated Republicanism could rescue the nation from the peril into which it had fallen. Although his language in the House-Divided speech contained echoes of old-line abolitionism, he was adapting Garrisonian rhetoric to a more conservative purpose. In his view, the Republican program offered the only solution to the problems of slavery and sectionalism because it alone recognized the tension between moral conviction and constitutional guarantees, and yielded as much to either as the other would allow. Douglas insisted, to be sure, that the concept of ultimate extinction conflicted with the promise not to attack slavery in the southern states.⁶⁷ And so it did, from the viewpoint of 1858. To Lincoln, however, the two propositions were like lines extending into the future, seemingly parallel, but capable of being brought together gradually and gently. Convinced that slavery was wrong, yet willing to settle for a promise of ultimate extinction, he believed that an established policy of restriction would incorporate that promise and bring peace to the nation.

It is at this point that his argument becomes, in retrospect, especially vulnerable. The house-divided doctrine was essentially an effort to polarize public opinion and elicit a clear-cut decision upon the most critical aspects of the slavery issue. Lincoln maintained that such a decision would terminate controversy and terminate it peaceably. He assumed, in other words, that the South would acquiesce in a Republican accession to power. But events soon

⁶⁵ Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, III, 367.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, III, 379.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 265-66, 323.

proved that he had misread the southern mind and seriously underestimated the threat of disunion.

Yet it is unlikely that even a revelation of the future would have changed Lincoln's thinking. Civil war was not, in his opinion, the worst disaster that could befall the American people. Behind his expectation that the South *would* submit to a verdict at the polls was a conviction that it *must* submit; for if majority rule, based on popular elections and bounded by constitutional restraints, could be set aside at the will of a dissatisfied minority, what remained of democratic government?⁶⁸ Furthermore, Lincoln had constructed his political philosophy upon the belief that public policy should reflect an ethical purpose which was not itself subject to the daily barter of politics. "Important principles," he said, in the last speech of his life, "may, and must, be inflexible."⁶⁹ These words were, in a sense, his final postscript to the **H**ouse-Divided speech.

⁶⁸ This question, implicit in Lincoln's approach to the sectional controversy by 1858, was forcefully posed in his First Inaugural address. *Ibid.*, IV, 267-68.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII, 405.