

SOURCE MATERIAL OF IOWA HISTORY

A BURLINGTON EDITOR COMMENTS ON THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATES OF 1858

[The now famous Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 in Illinois aroused little interest or attention in Iowa newspapers, busy with their own state's political campaign. Some newspapers of the Mississippi River towns, however, being closer to the scene than those inland in Iowa, paid passing tribute to the Illinois canvass. Clark Dunham, one of the foremost journalists in Iowa at that time, was editor of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*. An enthusiastic Republican, Dunham wrote editorials on the debates which were naturally favorable to Lincoln and critical of Douglas. Born in Vermont in 1816, Dunham and a brother-in-law had come to Iowa in 1854, bought the *Hawk-Eye*, and, after the formation of the Republican party in the state in 1856, had made the paper a strong supporter of the new party.]

The seven Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 took place in Ottawa, August 21; Freeport, August 27; Jonesboro, September 15; Charleston, September 18; Galesburg, October 7; Quincy, October 13; and Alton, October 15. Dunham did not give editorial notice to each debate, but from time to time wrote editorials, highly unfavorable to Stephen A. Douglas and particularly to the Illinois Senator's "Freeport Doctrine," enunciated in his speech at that Illinois town. This "Doctrine," that the people of a territory could lawfully exclude slavery in spite of the Dred Scott Decision, lost Douglas much Southern support in the 1860 presidential campaign. In his editorial on September 2, 1858, Dunham, recognizing the importance of Douglas' statement, ridiculed the "Doctrine" from the Republican point of view. The Lincoln-Douglas debates have been printed in book form several times, the latest edition being Paul M. Angle (ed.), *Created Equal? The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958).]

Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, August 27, 1858:

THE DIFFERENCE — The Republicans of Illinois, with Mr. Lincoln at their head, are conducting the canvass with the most perfect fairness and courtesy, although with great spirit. On every occasion, whether in discussion or speaking separately, Mr. Lincoln has treated his opponent with perfect courtesy and fairness — never misrepresenting him in a single instance or using language coarse or unbecoming. To make the result hinge

upon a perfect understanding of the points at issue, the speeches of both Douglas and Lincoln have been reported verbatim, with an accuracy not denied in any quarter, and published side by side in all the leading Republican papers. This is a new feature in the canvass, which is much to the credit of the Republicans of Illinois. We hope to see the same feature becoming general over the country in future contests.

But how has this spirit been met by Mr. Douglas? We are pained to say that he has not, as might have been reasonably anticipated, deported himself in a similar manner. He has exhibited ill-nature and coarse invective when speaking of his adversary, and he persisted on almost every occasion in misrepresenting his positions and falsifying his record. "You're a liar" is his knock-down argument. He speaks in boastful and vulgar language — talks about bringing Mr. Lincoln "to his milk," and uses epithets and terms of denunciation and abuse unworthy of the high position he aspires to occupy before the country. At Ottawa, he committed a most shameless fraud and deception — one that would have consigned him to a call at Alton had it been made with a view to gain. He read a resolution, ultra on the subject of slavery, which he asserted was found in the platform of the Republican Party, gotten up by Lincoln and others, and adopted by the Republican party of Illinois assembled in State Convention, at Springfield, on the 5th of October, 1854, when it was taken from the proceedings of a town meeting held at Aurora. With this falsehood upon his lips, he attempted, in the worst spirit, and with a meanness which his enemies hardly attributed to him, to make Mr. Lincoln appear as the author, and the Republican party responsible for a resolution which Lincoln never saw and few of the Republicans ever heard of.

Losing the courtesy of his first speech, and at every succeeding appearance upon the stump becoming less a gentleman and more a blackguard, he uses at Ottawa the epithet "Black Republicans" frequently.

With one single exception the courtesy of publishing both Lincoln's and Douglas' speeches side by side has not been extended by any Douglas paper. None have ventured to let their readers see what Mr. Lincoln says for himself with the exception of the Chicago Times, which reports both speeches at Ottawa, but takes care to emasculate Mr. Lincoln's before it ventures on its publication. His language is modified, altered, and the force of his strong points broken and subdued. That this is designedly so is very apparent from the fact that Douglas' remarks are accurately and spiritedly reported.

Thus is the canvass conducted in Illinois. On one side, with truthfulness and fair-dealing, so that right may prevail. On the other, with equivocation, falsehood, deception and fraud. Upon one side we find the utmost courtesy and good humor; — upon the other, coarse invective and opprobrious epithets. Upon one side we find the newspapers publishing correct and undeniably authentic copies of the speeches of the rival candidates; — upon the other, but one solitary journal in the whole State publishes, and it but a single mutilated speech of Lincoln. That is the way things are done in Illinois.

Ibid., September 2, 1858:

A NEW TRICK — Judge Douglas, as every body has seen recently, is, to use a vulgarism, "in a tight place." All efforts to bring around a reconciliation with the Administration have failed. His peace commissioners have returned from their pilgrimage to Washington and report Buchanan inexorable. The Little Giant [Douglas] can get no quarter in that direction. On the other hand Lincoln is pressing him very hard — harrowing his sensibilities by showing up the monstrous inconsistencies and absurdities of his record and hollowness and rottenness of the principles and political axioms which he professes. But most damaging of all, [Lyman] Trumbull demonstrated at Alton, from the [Congressional] Record, that Douglas, in June, 1856, struck from the Toombs enabling act for Kansas, the clause requiring the Constitution to be submitted to the people for approval or rejection, and not only so, but to cover the whole case, added a clause in express terms requiring that "no other election should be held in the Territory," thus prohibiting any submission. This is a clincher which fastens a bundle of absurdities, not to say falsehoods, upon the back of the Little Giant that he cannot shake off. Instead of bringing Abe Lincoln "to his milk," "trotting him out," cutting off Trumbull's ears, and doing a great many other things threatened in vulgar and boastful language, he is having his time very well occupied in "saving his own bacon." Although he came to Chicago with a great flourish of trumpets and entered upon his canvass with the booming of cannon and the clangor of brazen instruments loaded upon cars chartered with his own means, and made a very general display of bags in which was to be stored the wool shorn from the "Black Republicans," yet the indications now are that he has already fallen into the hands of the shearers, and is making a great outcry because the clip is very close to the cuticle.

The stress of Douglas' condition is well illustrated in his recent enunciation at Freeport. — Up to that time he had endorsed the Dred Scott decision, although it swallowed up popular sovereignty by declaring that neither Congress nor the people had the power, under the Constitution, to exclude slavery from the territories. At Freeport, to relieve himself from the ridiculous absurdity of this position, he declared that the people had the right while in a territorial condition, to exclude slavery. Of course this is at war with the Supreme Court — the Dred Scott decision. It effectually kills the fine spun theory of property in negroes, so sacred and so well protected in the Constitution as to secure to slave-holders the right to take this property unquestioned and unmolested into all the territories. For the last two years himself and his friends have put this forth as the quintessence of National Democracy. Every man who did not endorse it was cast out as a Sectionalist, an Abolitionist and Amalgamationist — a Black Republican — a woolly! We were called, those of us who refused to bow submissively to the pronunciamento of the negro-drivers and their toadies, made through the Supreme Court, enemies to the Union, to the Constitution, and a string of opprobrious epithets too vulgar to repeat here. We were lectured by the whole galaxy of Union-savers and most pathetically implored to "acquiesce." Now, forsooth, the ringleader — the man who expected to be made President by the repeal of the compromises and the nationalization of slavery, but wasn't, thinks negro slaves may be excluded from a territory! Where sleep the thunders of the National Democracy?

What next?

Ibid., October 5, 1858:

BAD SELL — The Democracy got up an extempore Douglas demonstration last night of which they are a little sick. They printed bills, employed the band and drummed up a large crowd at Mozart Hall to hear Douglas. He came from Oquawka in the Keokuk, made a very tame speech of half an hour which disappointed every body and materially lengthened the visages of his admirers. Since he undertook to bring Abe to his milk, Douglas has lost his pluck. His bold and defiant manner is not exhibited. There is very little of the "Giant" about him. His speech was a small potato affair.

Mr. Starr [Henry W. Starr, an attorney and former mayor of Burlington] undertook to cover the retreat of Douglas and followed up his meagre speech

with a lengthened harangue after the manner of Mr. Starr, which we consider a very proper finale.

Ibid., October 8, 1858:

MR. LINCOLN
HAS CONSENTED TO SPEAK IN THIS CITY
SATURDAY EVENING NEXT

Those who attended the debate at Galesburg yesterday returned last night. They say it was an immense gathering of the people, some twelve thousand persons being present. Those we conversed with think Mr. Lincoln the ablest and most popular speaker they ever heard — say he had altogether the advantage of Douglas in the argument, even Douglas' friends acknowledging it.

Mr. Lincoln speaks at Oquawka Saturday. — All who desire to hear him there can go up and return in the Rock Island packet. After he has finished speaking there he will come down on the boat to this city, and speak on the street if the weather will permit, if not in Grimes' Hall. He says he has got so used to speaking that it don't hurt him a bit, and he will talk just as long as we want to hear him!

Huzza for Lincoln!

Ibid., October 11, 1858.

ABE LINCOLN'S SPEECH AT GRIMES HALL.

Saturday evening [October 9] Grimes' Hall was filled to its full capacity by citizens of Burlington and vicinity for the purpose of listening to a speech from Mr. Lincoln, the man who all Republicans desire and a great many are very certain will succeed Judge Douglas as Senator from the State of Illinois. So great is the sympathy felt here in the spirited canvass in Illinois, and so high is the opinion entertained of the ability of Mr. Lincoln as a speaker that a very short notice brought together from twelve to fifteen hundred ladies and gentlemen.

High, however, as was the public expectation, and much as was anticipated, he, in his address of two hours, fully came up to the standard that had been erected. It was a logical discourse, replete with sound argument, clear concise and vigorous, earnest, impassioned and eloquent. Those who heard recognized in him a man fully able to cope with the Little Giant any where, and altogether worthy to succeed him.

We regret exceedingly that it is not in our power to report his speech in full this morning. We know that we could have rendered no more acceptable service to our readers. But it is not in our power.

Mr. Lincoln appeared Saturday evening fresh and vigorous. There was nothing in his voice, manner or appearance to show the arduous labors of the last two months — nothing to show that the immense labors of the canvass had worn upon him in the least. In this respect he has altogether the advantage of Douglas, whose voice is cracked and husky, temper soured, and general appearance denoting exhaustion.

Mr. Lincoln remained in the City at the Barrett House and goes, we believe, to Monmouth to-day.