

## The Little Giant

Perhaps no national figure was more in the public eye during the decade of the 1850's than Stephen A. Douglas, United States Senator from Illinois, who was known everywhere as the "Little Giant". It appears that this sobriquet described both his physical and his mental stature.

As portrayed by a correspondent of the *New York Times*, he was a man "not above the middle height; but the easy and natural dignity of his manner stamps him at once as one born to command. His massive head rivets undivided attention. It is a head of the antique, with something of the infinite in its expression of power; a head difficult to describe, but better worth description than any other in the country. Mr. Douglas has a brow of unusual size, covered with heavy masses of dark-brown hair, now beginning to be sprinkled with silver. His forehead is high, open, and splendidly developed, based on dark, thick eyebrows of great width. His eyes, large and deeply set, are of the darkest and most brilliant hue. The mouth is cleanly cut, finely arched, but with something of bitter, sad expression. The chin is square and vigorous, and is full of eddying dimples — the



muscles and nerves showing great mobility, and every thought having some external reflection in the sensitive and expressive features."

As in world affairs, the history of a nation, when viewed in retrospect, presents many critical periods and events upon which all subsequent history seems to hinge. In the life of our own country, the 1858 senatorial campaign of the incumbent Stephen A. Douglas, wherein he was opposed by Abraham Lincoln, was such a decisive occasion, for had Douglas been defeated by Lincoln, the latter, probably, would never have become President. And who can say, in that circumstance, what course the destiny of the nation might have taken.

No phase of this important campaign stands out more prominently than the memorable series of debates between Lincoln and Douglas during the late summer and early autumn of 1858. Seven in number, these speeches are now considered among the highlights of American political history, and, it is said, they compared favorably with earlier notable debates, such as those between Daniel Webster and his contemporaries. Commencing at Ottawa, on August 21st, the senatorial candidates swung around through a series of joint meetings at Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton.



These debates were attended by thousands of people and were widely publicized in the newspapers of Illinois and many other States throughout the nation. After each debate an interval elapsed, ranging from a few days to about three weeks, which gave ample opportunity for partisan followers to digest the import of the ideas presented, and for full discussion of the issues. With each new debate ever increasing interest was shown. Toward the close of the series, local business was suspended so that everybody could hear the Little Giant and his mighty challenger.

During the period between debate engagements, each candidate went about his own affairs, meeting and mingling with the voters, looking after his political fences, and accepting as many invitations to make addresses along the way as was convenient. It was Lincoln's policy to follow Douglas whenever possible, to answer his arguments. Among other places along the Iowa border where Lincoln spoke were Augusta, Toulon, Monmouth, Carthage, and Oquawka; while Douglas spoke at Galena, Rock Island, and also at Oquawka on October 4th, preceding the Galesburg debate of October 7th.

Douglas's appearance at Oquawka was made the occasion of considerable interest in Burlington, some twenty miles down the river. Being the for-



mer Iowa capital, Burlington had always been civic minded and was the center of much political activity. The rival newspapers, the *Hawk-Eye* and the *Gazette*, it seems, never lost an opportunity to take advantage of a situation which might prove embarrassing to the other. While the *Gazette* bore the Democratic cudgel, the *Hawk-Eye* as stoutly brandished the Republican club.

"It is not generally known how Stephen A. Douglas received the sobriquet of 'Little Giant,'" declared the editor of the *Hawk-Eye* on September 19, 1858, but went on to allege that he was "indebted to Joe Smith, the Mormon Prophet for first applying it to him. It was elicited during an exciting discussion in the Illinois legislature upon the Mormon difficulties, in which Douglas cut a conspicuous figure in the defence of the Saints, when their great leader, in giving vent to his unbounding admiration for Douglas, called him the 'Little Giant'."

While this is an interesting explanation, if true, the purpose of publishing it at that time was probably not historical. Readers of the *Hawk-Eye* were expected to construe the story as being derogatory to Douglas, inasmuch as the Mormons were then in bad repute in southeastern Iowa. Meanwhile, the *Gazette* was favorable to Douglas. "Bear in mind", announced a local item on



October 3rd, "that the steamer Keokuk will leave the landing Monday morning, at precisely 8 o'clock, for Oquawka. All who desire to hear Hon. Stephen A. Douglas, will not fail to go. Fare to Oquawka and return only 75 cents."

On October 5th, the *Gazette* contained the following account of Douglas's speech at Oquawka, typical of the partisan spirit of the times. "We attended the great and enthusiastic democratic gathering at Oquawka yesterday, and listened to one of those masterly efforts of 'Judge Douglas,' in which the 'living lion' strips the 'dead dog' Lincoln, of his very hide. Not a position was assumed by the Speaker which was not clearly defined — not a charge referred to, which was not boldly and satisfactorily refuted.

"Thousands were present on the ground and they gave their undivided attention to the 'Little Giant' for at least two hours and a half, without seeming to be the least wearied. Even his enemies remained sitting or standing, during the entire time occupied in his speech.

"After the meeting at Oquawka, Douglas came aboard the steamer Keokuk and took passage to Burlington and addressed a large concourse of people in this city last night."

According to the *Hawk-Eye* of October 5th, the Burlington rally for Douglas was a "BAD SELL".



Apparently the Democrats "got up an extemporaneous 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 everybody and materially lengthened the visages of his admirers. Since he undertook to take 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 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."

As might be expected, the *Gazette* was obliged to challenge such a prejudiced version. "The *Hawk-Eye* of yesterday contains a most contemptible allusion to the speech of Mr. Douglas", observed the Democratic advocate; "but what else might we expect from the editor of such a sheet. Mr. Douglas has been speaking almost daily for weeks past and had that very day addressed the people of Oquawka for three hours in the open air, hence it could not be expected that he would address our citizens at any length. But the *Hawk-*



*Eye's* fling is too contemptible to elicit further notice at our hands — it will but return to plague its author while it falls harmless at the feet of the 'Little Giant'."

On the same day, the *Hawk-Eye* published an item which was not intended to be complimentary. "It is rumored", gossiped the Republican editor, "that if Douglas is defeated for U. S. Senator, he will remove to Minnesota and try to be returned at the first vacancy which may occur in that state. It has been a good move for Shields, and it might prove an equally lucky one for the 'Little Giant,' but before the next vacancy occurs, Mr. Douglas should remember that Minnesota will be a Republican constituency."

And thus did this particular political storm at Burlington blow over. On Saturday evening, October 9th, following their joint debate at Galesburg on October 7th, Lincoln spoke before a large gathering in Grimes Hall at Burlington. He too came down the river on a packet from Oquawka, where he had spoken on the afternoon of the same day. Those who listened to his logical discourse, "replete with sound argument, clear, concise and vigorous, earnest, impassioned and eloquent," recognized in him a man fully able to cope with the political skill of the "Little Giant".

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