

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, "A HOUSE DIVIDED":
SPEECH AT SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS (16 JUNE 1858)

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Abstract: Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech was not a prediction of civil war but a carefully crafted response to the political situation in which he found himself. Democrat Stephen Douglas threatened to pick up Republican support on the basis that his program would achieve their goals of stopping the spread of slavery into the territories. Lincoln exploded this fanciful belief by arguing that Douglas really was acting to spread slavery across the nation.

Key words: Lincoln, slavery, territories, conspiracy, house divided, Douglas, Kansas-Nebraska Act, *Dred Scott* decision, popular sovereignty

The speeches for which Abraham Lincoln is best known are three of his presidential addresses: the First and Second Inaugurals and the Gettysburg Address. They are masterpieces of style and eloquence. Several of his earlier speeches, though, reflect a different strength: Lincoln's mastery of political strategy and tactics. His rhetoric reveals his ability to reconcile adherence to principle with adaptation to the practical realities he faced and the ability to articulate a core of beliefs that would unite an otherwise highly divergent political coalition. A strong example of discourse which demonstrates these strengths is the "House Divided" speech that Lincoln delivered on June 16, 1858 as he accepted the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate seat from Illinois that was held by Stephen A. Douglas.

This speech is most remembered for Lincoln's quotation of the biblical phrase, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." What did these words mean? They might be seen as a prediction that the Union would be dissolved or that there would be civil war, but Lincoln explicitly denied that that was what he meant. He contended that the nation would stay intact but that it would become either all slave or all free, and that it was tending toward nationwide slavery—a tendency that he believed had to be arrested at once. Were there grounds for Lincoln's fear? Why was it useful for him to sound this alarm? How did he try to prove his charges? What effects did he have? And why does this episode matter, more than 150 years later? These questions will be addressed in the analysis that follows.

Lincoln's Political Career

At the time he gave the "House Divided" speech, Lincoln, 49, was a lawyer in private practice in Springfield, Illinois. He had been born in Kentucky in 1809 and had moved with his

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family to Indiana in 1816 and then to Illinois in 1830. His mother died in Indiana, and he was raised largely by his stepmother after his father remarried. When he reached the age of 21, Lincoln left his family and settled in the town of New Salem, Illinois, where he was a storekeeper, postmaster, and surveyor while he studied law. He served briefly as a militia captain during the Black Hawk War of 1832. He then moved to Springfield in 1837, married Mary Todd in 1842, and had four sons, only one of whom would survive to adulthood.¹

Beginning in 1834, Lincoln was elected as a Whig to four two-year terms in the Illinois state legislature. In 1846 he ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, which he occupied for a single term. In the House he was best known for his opposition to the then-popular Mexican War. He returned to private life in 1849, having declined President Zachary Taylor's offer to become territorial governor of Oregon, and he did not become actively engaged in politics again until Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. This act, authored by Douglas, repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820. That compromise had forbidden slavery north of 36°30' in the territory acquired by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The northern part of this land, organized into the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, now could be open to slavery if that were the desire of the people who would settle there.

To Lincoln, the Kansas-Nebraska Act overturned a settled presumption that slavery, being wrong, eventually would die out. He believed that the nation's founders shared that presumption and acted upon it, accepting slavery where it already existed but, since they believed it to be wrong, doing nothing to permit its spread. In contrast, the Kansas-Nebraska Act implied a stance of moral neutrality so that it did not matter whether slavery was expanded or curtailed. This prospect rekindled Lincoln's passion and his interest in politics and led him to campaign vigorously in the 1854 election for Illinois Whigs who were opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and committed to its repeal. He was unsuccessful in his quest for a U.S. Senate seat in 1855. Although many "anti-Nebraska" candidates were elected to the state legislature, which chose the U.S. Senator, some were Democrats who were unwilling to break with their party. The Whig Party was in a state of rapid decline, and in 1856 Lincoln formally associated himself with the newly-formed state Republican Party. He emerged as a leader of the state party and became its preferred choice for the U.S. Senate seat up for election in 1858.²

The Debate Over Slavery

That Lincoln was nominated for the Senate by a state convention was a historical oddity. Prior to the ratification in 1913 of the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, U.S. Senators were chosen not by direct popular vote but by the state legislature. The audience for a Senate campaign was the legislators, and the campaign did not begin until they themselves had been chosen. The state convention of 1858 effectively determined in advance how Republican legislators would vote. This unusual procedure was the result of the state of political flux after the Kansas-Nebraska Act had undermined the stability of both the Whig Party and the Democratic Party.

Both parties historically had been broad intersectional coalitions that avoided the vexing issue of slavery, which they regarded as a state rather than a federal matter. But when the United States gained vast new territory in the aftermath of the Mexican War, the slavery question came to the forefront because territories were under the control of the federal

government. Indeed, slavery would eclipse every other issue. Region trumped party, and the two broad coalitions were gone. The Whigs ran their last national ticket in 1852.³ The Democrats would survive a bit longer because they took advantage of a strategic ambiguity. They favored "popular sovereignty," the principle that those who went to a territory to live would decide whether the territory would be slave or free.⁴ But they did not specify *when* the inhabitants would exercise that right, and timing was crucial. If the decision were not to be made until the territory requested admission as a state, then slavery would be permitted throughout the territorial period, and there was a high probability that the territories would become slave states. But if the decision were made earlier—say, as soon as the initial wave of settlers arrived—then there was a realistic chance that a new territory, and the states to be formed from it, would be free. Until this ambiguity was highlighted, Democrats could espouse the former view when addressing southern audiences and the latter view when speaking in the North.

It was uncertain who would replace the dying Whigs. Eventually the Republican Party would be formed, at different times in different states, by combining what Abraham Lincoln in the "House Divided" speech would call "strange, discordant, and even, hostile elements" (75):⁵ former Whigs who opposed slavery, former northern Democrats who had opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, adherents of the Free Soil Party of the late 1840s and early 1850s, abolitionists who sought a practical political outlet for their hatred of slavery, and former Know Nothings who came to see that slavery was a greater threat to political freedom than was unchecked immigration. This was a fragile coalition that easily could come apart. Illinois was a microcosm of the country, having been settled from south to north and including people with views ranging from sympathy with the South to outright abolitionism. But the Republicans had a clear platform that overcame what otherwise was their disunity: they united in opposition to the spread of slavery to new territories.⁶

Meanwhile, events in 1857 made it harder for Democrats to maintain their ambiguous position about popular sovereignty or to claim that they were indifferent to the outcome. By holding in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that Congress lacked the power to prohibit slavery in the territories, the U.S. Supreme Court seemingly had undermined popular sovereignty also. Territorial legislatures were the creatures of Congress. If it could not outlaw slavery, then presumably neither could they.⁷ But Douglas found what he thought was a way out of this dilemma: supporting the *Dred Scott* decision while denying that it outlawed popular sovereignty. He said that the right to take a slave into a territory was an abstract right that would be meaningless unless backed up by territorial legislation to protect the slaveowner's property—and territories were under no obligation to pass such laws. But without them, it was highly unlikely that slaveholders would move there.⁸ So, as a practical matter, a territory still could prohibit slavery if it so chose.

Douglas was in more trouble, though, when a Kansas territorial convention meeting in the town of LeCompton proposed that Kansas enter the Union as a slave state, without a popular referendum on the entire proposed constitution. Seeing that migration to Kansas would soon favor the antislavery side, the proslavery convention quickly finished its work and, having earlier promised a public referendum, submitted to popular vote only the slavery clause. But even under "the constitution without slavery," those slaves already in Kansas, as well as their descendants, would remain slaves. Believing that they had no legitimate option for which

to vote, antislavery advocates boycotted the referendum, in which "the constitution with slavery" passed overwhelmingly. President James Buchanan endorsed the measure and insisted that all Democrats in Congress support it as a test of party loyalty.

Douglas demurred. For him the question was whether or not this constitution counted as an exercise of popular sovereignty. True, it was adopted by duly authorized representatives of the people, but it clearly did not reflect Kansas public opinion. He therefore broke with Buchanan and denounced the measure as a fraud. Buchanan vowed to destroy Douglas as a result, and supporters of slavery might well believe that Douglas was not the neutralist he professed to be but that he supported popular sovereignty only when the results would lead to freedom. Together with the growing evidence of Republican strength, this move left defenders of slavery less willing to rely on presumably neutral principles and more committed to obtaining positive institutional protection for slavery.⁹ As a result, Douglas's leadership in the national Democratic Party—a party that was becoming increasingly southern in its orientation and influence—no longer seemed secure.

In the unsettled political world of the 1850s, if Douglas were not welcome among Democrats, he had other options. There was even talk, especially among the Eastern Republican establishment, that he might switch parties and become a Republican, a prospect that posed both an opportunity and a threat. It would bring one of the nation's most prominent political figures into the Republican fold, but it would smother the hopes and aspirations of Illinois Republicans who had a fair share of ambition themselves.

Douglas did not even need to switch parties in order to threaten the prospects of Illinois Republicans. The more likely danger was that he might woo some of the "strange, discordant, and even, hostile elements" (75) of the Republican Party to support him. The new party included many former Democrats; perhaps they might be drawn back to their original home once it became clear that Douglas would not condone the spread of slavery into Kansas. Old-line Whigs might support Douglas if they were convinced that his Republican opponent was a dangerous radical. Prominent eastern Republicans, especially Horace Greeley, urged Illinois Republicans at the very least not to challenge Douglas's re-election bid.¹⁰ Certainly Lincoln took seriously the prospect that Douglas might cause mischief for the Republicans without truly subscribing to Republican principles.

The basis for the easterners' hope in Douglas was his break with Buchanan over Lecompton. Lincoln accordingly set out to argue that the break was superficial. It was not a clash over principles but only on the factual question of whether the Lecompton constitution represented the will of the Kansas voters. Buchanan and Douglas, Lincoln's logic suggested, "agreed on fundamentals; and were cooperating either by design or coincidence."¹¹ Therefore, Illinois Republicans should not take seriously either the prospect that Douglas might join them or the argument that they must not stand in the way of his re-election.

There were other possibilities for mischief, as well. One was to encourage multiple Republicans to seek the Senate seat. Democrats selected their nominees by convention but Whigs and Republicans normally did not. There was little pressure for Republicans to agree on a single candidate under these circumstances. Lincoln had been encouraging the Whigs to unite through a convention as far back as 1843; ironically, that was also when he first quoted the "House Divided" line from Scripture. Without a convention, there was no process to narrow the field. Even if Republicans were in the majority in a district, they could lose an

election by plurality vote to a Democrat who enjoyed the united support of his party. So the Republicans held a state convention in 1858 at which, resentful of the attempts by easterners to influence them, resolved that Lincoln was their "first and only choice" for the Senate seat occupied by Douglas.¹² This would remove the threat of multiple Republican candidates, but the continuing residual threat of defections to Douglas would require a more elaborate response.

This was the political context for the "House Divided" speech. It dictated several specific purposes for the speech. It must sharply distinguish Lincoln from Douglas, in order to prevent voters from agreeing with Greeley that the two candidates would achieve the same goal, just by different routes. It must minimize the significance of Douglas's break with Buchanan, in order to undermine the credibility of claims that Douglas was independent. It must articulate Republican principles in a way that would unite the disparate elements of the party, minimizing the risk of defections. And it must present the situation as urgent, in order to magnify the significance of the election and motivate the weakly-committed to vote. Far from being an abstract historical discussion or a prophecy of impending civil war, the speech was, as Robert W. Johannsen quotes one of Lincoln's contemporaries, "made at the commencement of a campaign and apparently made for the campaign."¹³

The "House Divided" Speech

Lincoln wrote the "House Divided" speech with care, drawing on ideas he had written over many months on slips of paper that he had filed away. The use of the "house divided" metaphor was not original; Johannsen notes that it was a common rhetorical device in the early nineteenth century.¹⁴ Lincoln not only used the phrase in 1843, but he alluded to it in several speeches and documents beginning in 1854. John Channing Briggs cites Lincoln's contemporaries stating that the phrase was in the "Lost Speech" Lincoln delivered in Bloomington during the 1856 organizing convention of the Illinois Republican Party (so designated because no text survives). Lincoln himself claimed to have been inspired by an article penned by the proslavery writer George Fitzhugh (who supported national slavery) in the *Richmond Enquirer*. The idea is featured prominently in a fragment that Lincoln probably wrote in December of 1857, when the Lecompton controversy erupted. This fragment may be regarded as the "first draft" of the "House Divided" speech.¹⁵

The speech has been the subject of considerable scholarship. Addressing the question, "Why did Lincoln choose this moment for the most provocative utterance of his career?," Don E. Fehrenbacher answers that the speech had its origins in the threat posed by Douglas to the nascent Republican Party and that its purpose was to unify Republicans in the face of that threat.¹⁶ He identifies three distinct portions of the speech: one asserting that the house cannot permanently remain divided; one maintaining that there was a plot to spread slavery nationwide; and one charging that Douglas was in on the plot. But Fehrenbacher does not examine the textual details or assess whether or how the speech achieved what he believes to have been its purpose. In contrast, Michael Leff offers the most authoritative reading of the text.¹⁷ He explored how Lincoln used the variable of time and timing in the speech in order to enhance the plausibility of his predictions about the future, and hence the credibility of his argument. Leff also hypothesizes a possible relationship between Fehrenbacher's second

("conspiracy") and third ("living dog") sections of the speech: that the former may be hyperbole in comparison to which the latter seems reasonable. It may be hard to accept that Douglas was an active conspirator but not that he was an unwitting dupe doing the plotters' work.¹⁸

Building on both of these works, Michael William Pfau argues that the "house" referred *both* to the Union (the conventional understanding) and to the Republican Party itself.¹⁹ He reads Lincoln as warning against division within the Republican Party and imploring its members to unite in order to be able to meet and overturn the challenge to the Union itself. Most recently, Briggs inquires about the function of the conspiracy charge.²⁰ Unwilling to stop with the judgment that the charge was not literally true, he finds that the urgency of the charge was necessary in order to arouse an audience that, by the speech's own analysis, was being lulled into complacency. (Presumably Briggs has in mind the larger public audience, not the immediate audience of enthusiastic Republican Party leaders.)

The goal of the following analysis, which adopts Fehrenbacher's three-part division of the speech, is to explore how the speech can be understood as a response to the particular rhetorical situation in which Lincoln and the Republicans found themselves in 1858.

The "House Divided" Opening Section

The overall strategy of the speech is evident in the introduction (1-10). Three elements are particularly important: the necessity for decision, the binary choice between asymmetric alternatives, and the suggestion that there is a "tendency" toward one of them.

Necessity for decision.

After previewing the four questions the speech will address, Lincoln answered the first of them, "where we are." He located "we" in time: in the fifth year since the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (2). But rather than the calm promised by that act (by moving decisions about slavery from Congress and placing them in the hands of settlers), the country had witnessed renewed agitation. For Lincoln the source of the trouble was the country's failure to reach and pass a crisis—in the classical sense of the term, a moment when a decision must be made among alternative choices each of which would have far-reaching consequences. In the current situation, the reason such a decision is required is contained in the biblical maxim, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."²¹ Lincoln enlisted Scriptural authority against Douglas, who believed that a divided house—a nation part slave and part free—*could* exist indefinitely, if only the radical agitators would let it alone.

The asymmetric alternatives.

One popular understanding of the speech is that the crisis to which Lincoln referred was civil war and that he was prophesying that success by the Union would be necessary to reunite the divided house. But Lincoln explicitly denied that he was making any such forecast (7). The house would cease to be divided, but without war: it "will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other" (8).

What were "one thing" and "the other"? One might think that the two terms referred to freedom and slavery: the country would become all free or all slave. Certainly that is how many of Lincoln's opponents read the text, finding in it an open admission of Lincoln's previously hidden abolitionism. But that is not what Lincoln said. His two alternatives were strikingly asymmetrical. The second option indeed was nationwide slavery, but the first option

was not abolition; it was that "the *opponents* of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction" (9). The alternative to national slavery, then, was *containment*: keeping the institution within its current limits so that people would think that it *ultimately* would die out.

Lincoln must have selected this formulation with care. He knew that, except in the northernmost tier of counties, no mainstream politician in Illinois would have a chance of being elected as an abolitionist—and he was not an abolitionist himself. He shared the belief of many former Whigs that slavery was wrong but that abolition was a drastic act with unacceptable social consequences. Not knowing what else to do, he postponed slavery's demise until the distant future, meanwhile insisting at least that the evil not be allowed to grow.

This formulation would seem particularly appealing in the crucial battleground of the election—the central counties—heavily populated by old Whigs who combined commitments against slavery in principle with an insistence on moderation in practice. For these swing voters, it would be smart politics to portray oneself as occupying the middle ground while positioning the opponent as a dangerous extremist. Lincoln could do this by supporting containment, to stop the further spread of slavery while seeing its extinction as an *ultimate* goal postponed to the distant future.

Furthermore, Lincoln did not even pose "ultimate extinction" as one of his two alternatives. He said that the alternative to national slavery was that "the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction" (9). Not the future act itself, but public opinion that it was forthcoming, would resolve the crisis Lincoln thought the nation had to meet. This statement reflected his belief in the power of public opinion.²² Moreover, there was a direct correlation between the strength of this public conviction and the length of time that Lincoln was willing to wait. So long as the nation was clear about its basic commitments, he was willing to condone political compromises and long delays in fulfilling them. This is why he did not regard the Missouri Compromise or the Compromise of 1850 as threats to a presumed national consensus, whereas he judged the Kansas-Nebraska Act to be fatal. This would appeal to the old Whigs' insistence on moderation.

The tendency.

After noting where we were—approaching a moment of crisis—Lincoln introduced the discussion of "whither we are tending" by asking a rhetorical question, "Have we no *tendency* to the latter condition?" (10). This question indirectly established a presumption: In the absence of a deliberate decision to the contrary, the country may be presumed to be heading toward national slavery. That was the default position.

Body of the Speech: The Conspiracy Argument

The long middle section of the speech (11-58)—three-fourths of the total, by most estimates—attempted to prove that national slavery was "whither we are tending" (1). Few people believed that, so Lincoln's rhetorical task was to establish that it was not a farfetched idea but a real danger unless steps were soon taken to change the course of events.

Lincoln attempted this task principally by alleging that a group of conspirators had set out to hijack the public faith that slavery was temporary and to replace it with a commitment to neutrality between slavery and freedom. This would pave the way for national slavery by removing the rationale for opposing it. Not only did Lincoln posit the existence of a conspiracy,

but he strongly suggested that among the plotters were the President of the United States, his immediate predecessor, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Senator Douglas.

These were seemingly preposterous charges. The allegation that a "slave power conspiracy" had been working to nationalize slavery had been made by others over the preceding decades, but typically by radicals on the periphery of politics, not by mainstream candidates for a seat in the U.S. Senate.²³ Alleging that President James Buchanan, former President Franklin Pierce, Chief Justice Roger Taney, and Senator Stephen A. Douglas were in on the plot was virtually unheard of. David Donald maintains that the charge "was not based on fact."²⁴ But to dismiss the charge at the level of factual inaccuracy is to miss both its deeper layers of meaning and the work it did in the speech, helping to "mainstream" the argument so that it would not be seen only as the province of fanatics but would be taken seriously by a general audience not already committed to support Douglas. Careful reading of the speech text makes clear how Lincoln did so.

Lincoln began by suggesting that the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the *Dred Scott* decision were interlocking pieces of a machine. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, the "first point gained" by the machine's bosses, required the doctrine of popular sovereignty. This doctrine of Douglas's was, to Lincoln, a perversion of the right to self-government. But it seemed to carry the day, and the Act was endorsed by the people, albeit ambiguously, through the election of 1856. Meanwhile, the *Dred Scott* case was making its way through the courts, reaching the U.S. Supreme Court prior to the 1856 election but held for decision until afterwards. Lincoln's telling of the tale encouraged the inference that the justices, before they voted, wanted to be sure that the Kansas-Nebraska Act would receive public support. After the election but before the inauguration, the *Dred Scott* case was reargued. The Court again deferred its decision, but in his Inaugural Address, Buchanan urged all the people to abide by it, "whatever it might be." The decision, announced only two days later, implied that a territory could not outlaw slavery. That was the second piece of the machine.

Lincoln believed that the next step would be another decision (for convenience here labeled *Dred Scott II*) holding that no *state* could outlaw slavery. That would not happen just yet, because public opinion was not ready for it. So the third part of the machine was the preparation of public opinion, a role being performed by Douglas. When Douglas broke with Buchanan over the Lecompton constitution, he said that he "don't care" whether slavery was voted down or voted up.²⁵ His point was that he opposed Lecompton because it was fraudulent, not because it was proslavery. But Lincoln took the statement as a confession of Douglas's true beliefs about slavery itself, beliefs that he would now impress upon "the public mind" (9), so that the people would not care either. Then, when the public was suitably tranquilized, the Supreme Court would issue a new decision (*Dred Scott II*), which was all that was lacking to make slavery legal all over the land. Such a decision would be coming soon, Lincoln warned, unless the current direction of action was reversed.

What made this argument even potentially credible?

First, Lincoln described the parts of this machine as reflections of human purpose. For example, he said that the reason the Supreme Court held that the "Negro" could not be a U.S. citizen was so that the Court could deny to blacks the protection of the "privileges and immunities" clause in the U.S. Constitution (34-35). He said that the Court ruled that Congress could not outlaw slavery in a territory because the Court wanted to "*fill up* the territories with

slaves" (37) in order to perpetuate the institution. And he said that the Court invoked the principle of interstate comity in the *Dred Scott* case in order to assure that the decision about whether an African American was slave or free would be made by the courts of a slave state (38-39). In short, Lincoln inferred purpose from acts.

Second, Lincoln suggested that if the components of the machine were understood in this way, they naturally would be seen as interlocking, hence working together. He reinforced this point with a simple and compelling narrative about the building of a house with timbers that have been taken from different places at different times but which miraculously fit together. It is impossible not to believe that the builders were working from a common plan (48). Likewise, when the pieces of legal doctrine fit together so well, it was reasonable to assume that Buchanan, Pierce, Taney, and Douglas all worked from a common plan. Narrative reasoning allows people to judge that the story is credible and hangs together. This is aided, as Pfau notes, by the accumulation of details.²⁶ Each individual step in the narrative may not have great probative force, but taken together, they establish a pattern that is more persuasive. This is a form of inference Trudy Govier calls *conductive* and Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, and Francisca Snoeck Henkemans call *coordinative*.²⁷ The individual pieces of evidence are logically independent of one another and each independently leads to the conclusion. Yet none of them does so with much force. It is the fact that they can be assembled into a coherent pattern that strengthens the power of the conclusion to which they point. Any one of the details might be in error, but it is highly unlikely that all of them are.

Third, Lincoln noted that accepting his interpretation resolved what otherwise would be historical anomalies. Going back over the record, he observed:

Several things will *now* appear less *dark* and *mysterious* than they did *when* they were transpiring. The people were to be left "perfectly free" "subject only to the Constitution." What the Constitution had to do with it, outsiders could not *then* see. Plainly enough *now*, it was an exactly fitted *niche*, for the *Dred Scott* decision to afterwards come in ... (42).

Similarly, Lincoln maintained that the defeat of the Chase amendment (which would have explicitly permitted a territory to outlaw slavery), the delay in announcing the *Dred Scott* decision, and Buchanan's advance endorsement of the decision, all of which might have been inexplicable at the time they happened, could be seen "plainly enough now" (43-45). Some of these episodes, Lincoln alleged, could be understood as devices to anticipate the *Dred Scott* decision; others, as devices similarly to anticipate the hypothetical *Dred Scott II*. The accumulation of these solutions to what otherwise would be historical puzzles gave to the conspiracy theory a large measure of explanatory power. It was an elegant explanation that left little unaccounted for, and this elegance increased the disposition of an audience to accept it as true. This is an excellent example of abductive reasoning—inference to the best explanation.²⁸ The existence of a conspiracy was the simplest and most elegant explanation for these seeming anomalies.

Fourth, Lincoln made the argument credible by invoking an historical analogy. Just as the defeat of the Chase amendment was meant to create a space for the *Dred Scott* decision, so the failure of that decision to disclaim its applicability to the states must have been meant to create a space for *Dred Scott II*. Correspondingly, Douglas's public advocacy of his "don't care"

philosophy would prepare the public by convincing people that it was a trifling matter whether slavery was voted down or up.

Fifth, Lincoln acknowledged that this somewhat preposterous hypothetical future decision was not imminent because there was not yet public support for it (39). By acknowledging possible rebuttals to his argument, he could seem more reasonable to those who did not share the intensity of his concern. Moreover, he paid homage to the value of public opinion in saying that the reason the decision was not imminent was that the Supreme Court knew that it would not *now* be supported. But this apparent concession actually allowed him to emphasize the harm in Douglas's seemingly neutral position. By convincing audiences not to care, he would be able to tranquilize the public. *Dred Scott II* was not an imminent threat, but it "*is probably coming, and will soon be upon us*" (57), especially in light of Douglas's vigorous advocacy that he "*don't care*" (55). Lest the whole idea of a second *Dred Scott* decision seem absurd, Lincoln reminded his listeners that as recently as five years ago, no one was considering a Supreme Court decision denying Congress the power to regulate slavery in the *territories* (13).

Sixth, Lincoln employed connotative language and rich imagery in explaining the steps in his argument, structuring time so as to create momentum behind his prediction for the future.²⁹ For example, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the *Dred Scott* decision were described together as a *machine* working toward a predetermined goal. The key actors were referred to as *chief bosses*, implying perhaps complete control or single-minded determination and also conjuring up images of party machines and bosses.³⁰ Douglas's version of popular sovereignty was disparaged as *squatter* sovereignty, making it an object of ridicule. Support for Douglas's notion was characterized as the "*roar of loose declamation*" (18), suggesting that it was not genuine advocacy and should not be taken seriously. The bitter disagreement between Douglas and Buchanan was reduced to a "*squabble*" (29). The effect of the *Dred Scott* decision was that "*'squatter sovereignty' squatted out of existence*" (30) and the suggestion that it was "*temporary scaffolding . . . kicked to the winds*" (30) made the outcome appear to be part of a deliberate plan. This image, Pfau notes, suggested a reference to the Sermon on the Mount in which a house is built on sand, lacking a firm foundation.³¹

Finally, throughout this long section of the speech, Lincoln was careful not to claim more than he could prove. He did not say that there *was* a tendency toward national slavery; he asked "*any one who doubts*" to "*carefully contemplate*" the evidence (11). He did not contend that the anomalous circumstances proved the existence of a conspiracy, but that assuming its existence explained them. He did not insist that they *were* evidence but said that they "*look like the cautious patting and petting a spirited horse, preparatory to mounting him, when it is dreaded that he may give the rider a fall*" (46). He did not explicitly assert the existence of a plot; indeed, he acknowledged, "*We can not absolutely know that all these exact adaptations are the result of preconcert*" (48), but said, "*we find it impossible not to believe*" it (48). He did not explicitly predict *Dred Scott II*, but said, "*Put that and that together, and we have another nice little niche, which we may, ere long, see filled with another Supreme Court decision . . .*" (54). These are indicators of a prudent person making reasonable judgments and inferences from the evidence.

Although the existence of a conspiracy could not be definitively proved, the methods described here made it seem plausible, at least to those who opposed or entertained doubt

about Douglas. This could put pressure on Douglas to try to deny the charges. But such a move would be futile, since by its nature, a conspiracy charge cannot be conclusively denied. It is impossible to prove a negative; moreover, a denial would only add to the credence of the charge: what would one *expect* a wily conspirator to do, other than to deny involvement in the plot?

Clearly more was at issue here than the seemingly simple factual question of whether the conspiracy charges were true, the level at which some historians stop their analysis of the speech. And even on the question of fact, the answer was hardly as clear-cut as it might seem. Lincoln sincerely believed his allegations; Donald maintains that Lincoln "so totally distrusted Douglas" and "thought the senator utterly unprincipled," that he was "capable of anything."³² He made over fifty speeches between 1854 and 1860 in which he alleged a conspiracy to nationalize slavery.³³ Later in the summer of 1858, he wrote that, although his evidence in the "House Divided" speech was circumstantial, "nevertheless it seemed inconsistent with every hypothesis, save that of the existence of such conspiracy." And of Douglas's role, Lincoln wrote, "From warp to woof his handiwork is everywhere woven in."³⁴

Lincoln's invoking of the conspiracy argument illustrates a general strategy described by Michael F. Holt by which Republicans tried to make northern Democrats "surrogates for the Slave Power." Since Republicans campaigned only in the North, their opponents were not reactionary southerners but other northerners. It was therefore necessary for them to establish "that Republicans alone, and not simply any Northern politicians, were needed to resist and overthrow the slavocracy."³⁵

Moreover, the means by which national slavery would come about—a second *Dred Scott* decision—was hardly a farfetched idea. At the time, the case of *Lemmon v. the People* was making its way through the lower courts. It involved slaves who were brought from Virginia to New York for shipment to Texas. While in New York, they sued for their freedom on the basis of the state's personal liberty law, and state courts found in their favor. But Republicans worried that the U.S. Supreme Court under Taney would overturn the New York courts and establish "the right of transit of slaves through free states." Fehrenbacher judges it "very likely" that the Court would have issued a proslavery decision had the case come forward before it was rendered moot by the secession crisis.³⁶

Lincoln's choice of the conspiracy argument was useful in achieving the "House Divided" speech's apparent purposes. He clearly distanced himself from Douglas by portraying his rival as a conspirator to bring about national slavery. The break between Douglas and Buchanan was trivial if the two men were co-conspirators. Hatred of Douglas was perhaps the conviction on which all elements of the Republican Party could most strongly unite. And as Briggs suggests, the conspiracy charge provided the intensity needed to mobilize Lincoln's potential voters. If, as Lincoln had maintained, Douglas was lulling the public into quiescence, then a loud alarm was needed to awaken the public to danger before it was too late. The boldness of the conspiracy accusation provided that wake-up call.³⁷

Lincoln took advantage of several features of the genre of conspiracy arguments. They explain ambiguous evil, providing reassurance in times of social stress and strain. They provide a plausible narrative that explains what otherwise would be puzzles and anomalies. They polarize positions, eliminating uncertainty and providing grounds for loyalty and unity. And if they establish a compelling motive, they effectively shift the burden of proof, requiring that

opponents deny them even though they are impossible to disprove.³⁸ At the same time, Lincoln made unique contributions to the "Slave Power" conspiracy argument. Whereas most located the conspiracy in what David Brion Davis characterizes as "a small oligarchy of Southern planters,"³⁹ for Lincoln the conspirators were northern Democrats. Lincoln also emphasized the role of public political acts—the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the *Dred Scott* decision—as well as secret designs. He saw the conspiracy as being directed against "this government" rather than against the people or the Union, implying perhaps that the conspirators were motivated by political ambition rather than demonic evil.⁴⁰ He identified the legal and political means by which the conspirators would work their will—*Dred Scott II*—rather than relying either on the specter of further expansion to the South or an apocalyptic vision of civil war. And, of course, he connected Douglas to the plot.

The "Living Dog" Conclusion

The final part of the speech (59-78), often called the "living dog" section, addressed the last two questions Lincoln had posed at the outset: what to do and how to do it. The first of these questions was answered in a single sentence: "To meet and overthrow the power of that dynasty [referring to the conspiracy to make slavery national], is the work now before all those who would prevent that consummation" (59). The fact that the conspirators used the political process to achieve their goals meant that they could be overcome by political means as well; they did not pose an apocalyptic threat requiring a mortal struggle which itself compromised the integrity of those who would defend themselves against it.⁴¹ The dynasty had to be stopped by depriving it of political power. But how to do it?

At this point Lincoln directly addressed the claim by Greeley and others that Douglas might be the Republicans' best instrument. Of course, that would be impossible if Douglas actually were one of the conspirators. But, sensing perhaps that that claim was still implausible, Lincoln here developed a different argument. Noting that Douglas himself had not said that he supported the Republicans' goals or wished to ally with them, he contended that Douglas was disqualified for the task. He could not exclude slavery from the territories, and he could not be counted on to resist the revival of the African slave trade (65-66), because he had said that he "don't care" whether slavery was voted down or voted up. Douglas thus could not be trusted to meet and overthrow the slave power conspiracy because his advocacy was furthering the plotters' cause, whether he was a plotter himself or not. And to further his argument, Lincoln acknowledged that Douglas was a great man, still, quoting Ecclesiastes 9:4, "a *living dog* is better than a *dead lion*" (63). In another masterful image, Douglas, though not dead, was depicted as "*caged* and *toothless*," (63) impotent to help the Republicans.

This view of Douglas was less extreme than his portrayal as an active participant in a proslavery conspiracy; it suggested that he may have been an unwitting dupe. One might wonder why Lincoln chose to present both characterizations of Douglas in the same speech and in this order. Perhaps, as Leff has suggested, after confronting the prospect of Douglas as an active conspirator and finding it implausible, listeners would be more likely to accept the less extreme portrayal of Douglas as unwitting dupe.⁴² Perhaps Lincoln thought that some listeners would incline toward one view and some toward the other. Moreover, it is not clear which view was the more damaging to Douglas—that he was actively planning to spread slavery or that he was so naïve and unreflective that he did not realize the consequences of his own

actions! And, of course, either view would be sufficient to discredit Greeley's position that Illinois Republicans should give Douglas a pass in the upcoming election.

If supporting Douglas was not the way to stop the slave power conspiracy, then how to do it? Here Lincoln was straightforward in saying that the cause should be entrusted to Republicans—and, implicitly, to him, since he was the convention's "first and only choice."

In the last paragraphs of the speech (73-78), Lincoln performed the fundamental role of the keynote speaker at a political convention: to rally supporters for the fall campaign by holding out the promise of success. He did so by reminding listeners of how much the Republican Party already had achieved in its two short years of life. If we did all that, Lincoln suggested, surely we can succeed now, in a campaign in which the incumbent was in such a compromised position. This is an *a fortiori* argument, an argument about "more and less."⁴³ It holds that what is true in the greater case (the 1856 Presidential election) will be even more likely to be true in the lesser case (the 1858 U.S. Senate race). Left unsaid, of course, was that Republicans *lost* Illinois in 1856 and that Douglas retained a strong base of support in his home state.

Lincoln followed his rhetorical question with a confident prediction of victory. He said that if Republicans stood firm, they would prevail. The result could be hastened by "wise councils" or delayed by "mistakes" (78), but the triumph of the Republican cause was inevitable.

Outcomes of the Speech

Lincoln was pleased with the "House Divided" speech and thought his performance was a success. He took his manuscript to the offices of the *Illinois State Journal*, marked words that he wanted set in italics (as shown in the excerpts quoted here), and reviewed the typescript to make sure that it was exactly what he wanted to say.

Most of his advisers disagreed.⁴⁴ Except for William Herndon, they had urged him not to make the speech, thinking that doing so would hurt him politically. Their fear was that the speech was too easily open to the misinterpretation that Lincoln was calling for the abolition of slavery, not just its ultimate extinction through the natural course of events. For a politician seeking to be elected and needing the support of those in the middle of the political spectrum, to cast oneself as an abolitionist would be political suicide. The speech was particularly problematic because, as Fehrenbacher notes, it "seemed likely to alienate the very votes that Lincoln needed in order to defeat Douglas," the old Whigs of central Illinois.⁴⁵

When Stephen Douglas read the "House Divided" speech, he must have thought that he had been given a great gift. With Lincoln's own words, he believed, he could convict him of abolitionism. Without regard to the nuances of Lincoln's position, Douglas brought up the "House Divided" speech at every opportunity. For example, it is mentioned in 20 of the 21 speeches in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, either because Douglas brought it up or because Lincoln responded to his allegations.

Douglas attacked the speech in three different ways. First, replying to his challenger's assertion that a house divided against itself could not stand, Douglas asked, why not? Why could the American house not remain divided into free and slave states, each free to regulate its domestic institutions, just as the founding fathers made it?⁴⁶ His reply implied that Lincoln

was violating the legacy of the founders and adopting an extreme position—the very charge that Lincoln made against Douglas.

Second, Douglas turned Lincoln's metaphor against him, claiming that the Republican Party itself was a house divided, since it used different appeals and even different names in different parts of the state. This meant that it could not be trusted. In contrast, he boasted that he could proclaim his popular sovereignty principles anywhere.

Third, and most seriously, Douglas took the statement that the country must become all one thing or all the other as the essence of Lincoln's position, thereby magnifying its importance—just as Lincoln had done with Douglas's proclamation that he "don't care" whether slavery was voted down or up. Correctly observing that Lincoln did not want the country to become all slave, he concluded that he therefore must want it to become all free—and that made him an abolitionist. Not only that, but Douglas went on to maintain (with no evidence or by quoting his opponent out of context) that Lincoln favored social and political equality between the races. These charges could do considerable damage to the Republican challenger's campaign—and they did.⁴⁷

Lincoln spent much of the Senate campaign backtracking from the radical implications of the "House Divided" speech. He went so far as to assert in one of the debates that he did not favor social and political equality between the races, that he thought the superior position should be assigned to the white race, and that he did not favor allowing blacks to vote, to sit on juries, or to intermarry with whites.⁴⁸ These statements, which would prove embarrassing in the eyes of history, were attempts at political damage control in 1858. They had at best limited success. Lincoln found himself frequently on the defensive. Douglas carried about two-thirds of the critical counties in central Illinois, and with them enough legislative seats to assure his reelection to the Senate, even though Republican legislative candidates received the greater popular vote. It appears that Lincoln's inability to shake the charge that he was a dangerous radical (a charge for which the "House Divided" speech seemingly offered support) was a key factor in this outcome.

Despite the fact that it was a short-term political liability for Lincoln, the "House Divided" speech had a far more positive long-term legacy. First, Lincoln gained national attention, and with it the invitations to speak at Cooper Union and elsewhere, because of the drama of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Here was a relatively obscure lawyer holding his own with perhaps the most powerful Democrat in the land. Those debates came about because Douglas persistently attacked Lincoln for the "House Divided" speech and Lincoln defended himself by following Douglas around the state, inheriting his crowds, until the incumbent agreed to debate.

Second, by channeling the conspiracy argument into mainstream politics, the "House Divided" speech contributed the sense of urgency that made the Republican ideology compelling. The centerpiece of the Republican platform was opposition to the spread of slavery into new territories. What Lincoln insisted was that this stance was necessary not only for its own sake but also to prevent the spread of slavery into all the states. That prospect threatened even those who might otherwise be willing to compromise. Moreover, there was no time to lose, because Douglas already was insinuating into the public mind the belief that one should not care whether slavery were voted down or up.⁴⁹

Third, the nuance in Lincoln's explication of the "house divided" thesis helped to make Lincoln's national career possible. Here the obvious comparison is to William Henry Seward, who later in 1858 delivered a speech warning of an "irrepressible conflict" between slavery and freedom. Whereas the "house divided" hurt Lincoln in the short run, the "irrepressible conflict" ultimately doomed Seward's presidential prospects because it led him to be perceived as more radical than the Republicans could afford (or than he actually was). There is not much difference between the "house divided" and the "irrepressible conflict" except in the manner of their explanation, but that difference was critical. Lincoln saw a political split that could undermine "this government"; Seward saw a moral and cultural split that could destroy American society. In Lincoln's view, the threat, once understood, could be met by the containment of slavery, whereas Seward's view seemed to call for abolition. For Lincoln, the moment of crisis would be an electoral decision, whereas Seward appeared to be predicting a cataclysm. In the Cooper Union speech, Lincoln was able to demonstrate that he was as firm in his antislavery convictions as Seward, yet moderate enough to attract the support of the former Whigs whom the Republicans had lost in 1856 and would need to win in 1860. The subtlety that would permit Lincoln to occupy this position was first articulated, though not immediately understood, in the "House Divided" speech.

Conclusion

With the passage of time and changes in prevailing attitudes about race, the "House Divided" speech is not seen so much as a liability for Lincoln today. It often is remembered mistakenly for Lincoln's prescience in foreseeing civil war, rather than for its rhetorical artistry. It reflects a carefully constructed argument that made plausible a charge for which there was scant external evidence. It thereby brought the conspiracy argument into the political mainstream, gave Republicans of diverse persuasions a common enemy against which to rally, and brought to an end the talk about Douglas's becoming a Republican or furthering the Republicans' cause. In these ways it contributed to the political realignment after a demise of traditional party allegiances, and it showed that hope was not yet lost for a political solution to the crisis posed by the possible extension of slavery into new territories.

The slavery question has long been settled, but the "House Divided" speech remains instructive. The political system today must grapple with moral questions as divisive as slavery was in Lincoln's time, ranging from abortion to end-of-life decisions, to the nature of our environmental responsibilities, to questions of balance between privacy and security, between the individual and the commons, between the appeal of national and global considerations, and between our present comforts and our economic legacy. These are subjects on which it is difficult to persuade those not already committed to one's own view, because the premises of the competing arguments often are irreconcilable. The result is that advocates often speak only to those already of the same view, public discourse becomes increasingly shrill, and politics becomes increasingly polarized. Although not a complete success, the "House Divided" speech suggests another way an advocate might try to gain adherents to a cause: through a careful assembling of circumstantial evidence and a compelling narrative leading to a seemingly logical decision. Lincoln's approach will not work in every case; arguably it did not work in his own.

Yet it is so much more promising than the alternative of rhetorical standoff that it deserves to be remembered and, sometimes, emulated.

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Notes

1 For a general overview of Lincoln's biography, see, for example: Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); and Ronald C. White, Jr. *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009).

2 For sources that cover the historical context of the period, see, for example: Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 2010); and David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

3 On the demise of the Whigs, see Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). The course of the Democratic Party is covered in Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005). The effect of the slavery issue on the party system is also covered in David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), esp. 225-266.

4 "Popular sovereignty," or rule by the people, was the most general ideology of the Democratic Party before the Civil War. Beginning with the 1848 election, this doctrine was applied to the issue of the possible extension of slavery to the territories. See Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*; Walter A. McDougall, *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); Jules Witcover, *Party of the People: A History of the Democrats* (New York: Random House, 2003).

5 This and all remaining references to the text of Lincoln's "House Divided" speech are cited with parenthetical references to paragraph numbers in the speech text that accompanies this essay.

6 See Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). This central tenet held people of different ideologies under the Republican banner.

7 The best treatment of the meaning and significance of the decision is Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law & Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). See also Mark A. Graber, *Dred Scott and the Problem of Constitutional Evil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Douglas did not acknowledge that the decision necessarily applied to the actions of the territorial legislature.

8 Douglas took this position in a June, 1857 speech, "Kansas, Utah, and the *Dred Scott* Decision," and repeated it frequently thereafter. See Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, 38.

9 Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln: Douglas, Buchanan, and Party Chaos, 1857-1859* (New York: Scribners, 1950), 261; and Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 585, 593, 607.

10 Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 586, 634; and William C. Harris, *Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 89.

11 Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 458.

12 At the state convention, the motion to nominate Lincoln was offered by Charles L. Wilson, editor of the *Chicago Journal*. Burlingame reports that it was unexpected. See Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 458.

13 Robert W. Johannsen, *Lincoln, the South, and Slavery: The Political Dimension* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 73. This judgment is consistent with Wilentz's argument that Lincoln was first and foremost a politician. See Sean Wilentz, "Who Lincoln Was," *The New Republic*, July 15, 2009, 24-47.

14 Johannsen, *Lincoln, the South, and Slavery*, 76. See also Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 462.

15 John Channing Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005 (citing its use in the "Lost Speech")). For accounts of the history of the "house divided" metaphor, see White Jr., *A. Lincoln*, 252; Michael William Pfau, "The House That Abe Built: The 'House Divided' Speech and Republican Party Politics," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 2 (Winter, 1999): 628 (both citing its use in an 1843 campaign circular); Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 84-91 (citing its use in speeches and documents from 1854); Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 461 (citing Lincoln's acknowledgment of Fitzhugh); "Fragment of a Speech, c. May 18, 1858," *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 2: 448-454. Fehrenbacher argues, however, that this fragment was more likely written in December, 1857, and his reasoning is persuasive. See Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 89-91.

16 Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 70-95. The quotation is on page 71.

17 Michael Leff, "Rhetorical Timing in Lincoln's 'House Divided' Speech," *The Van Zelst Lecture in Communication* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1983).

18 Leff, "Rhetorical Timing," 17-18.

19 Pfau, "The House That Abe Built," 625-651; Michael William Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy: Chase, Sumner, and Lincoln* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2005), 121-152.

20 Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*, 164-183.

21 The phrase, a warning given by Jesus to his disciples, can be found in three of the gospels: Matthew 12:25, Mark 3:25, and Luke 11:17.

22 Lincoln made this commitment explicit in the first debate with Douglas, when he said, "In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed." *The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*, ed. Paul M. Angle (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 128.

23 For example, the argument had been advanced by Benjamin Lundy, an antislavery Quaker, in opposition to the annexation of Texas. See Joel H. Silbey, *Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005),

117; and Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1790-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 24-25.

24 David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 208. Earlier, Allan Nevins had dismissed the charge as an "absurd bogey." Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln*, 362.

25 Stephen A. Douglas, Speech in the Senate, December 9, 1857, *Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 1st sess., 27, pt. 1:16.

26 Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy*, 132.

27 Trudy Govier, *A Practical Study of Argument* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997), 388-390; Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, and Francisca Snoeck Henkemans, *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation, Presentation* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002), 65.

28 See Douglas Walton, *Abductive Reasoning* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004). Walton attributes the concept of abductive reasoning to the nineteenth-century pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

29 See Leff, "Rhetorical Timing," esp. 9-11, 14.

30 See Pfau, "The House That Abe Built," 641.

31 Pfau, "The House That Abe Built," 642.

32 Donald, *Lincoln*, 208.

33 Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy*, 123, citing M. E. Bradford.

34 "Fragment: Notes for Speeches, c. August 21, 1858," *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 2:548-549.

35 Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Wiley, 1978), 191.

36 Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case*, 444. See also Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 98. For further discussion of the potential impact of the *Lemmon* case, see Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, 86, 130.

37 Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*, 181.

38 These features of conspiracy arguments are discussed in Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, 103-107.

39 David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 55.

40 This insight is developed in Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*, 172.

41 The contrast between these approaches to the conspiracy argument—alleging a political mistake vs. alleging an apocalyptic threat—is the major theme of Pfau, *The Political Style of Conspiracy*.

42 Leff, "Rhetorical Timing," 17-18.

43 On the argument *a fortiori*, see Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 343-344.

44 White, A. *Lincoln*, 257; and Harris, *Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency*, 95. One adviser, Leonard Swett, believed that the speech cost Lincoln the election.

45 Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 71. Fehrenbacher considers but rejects as myth the idea that Lincoln in 1858 had set his sights on the presidency and that this speech, like the

subsequent Freeport interrogatory, was a gamble showing his willingness to risk the Senate seat for the sake of the larger prize. See Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, 73.

46 For example, he argued in the Ottawa debate, "Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton, Madison, Jay, and the great men of that day, made this government divided into free states and slave states, and left each state perfectly free to do as it pleased on the subject of slavery." *The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 110.

47 See Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, 205.

48 On Lincoln's tendency to backtrack from the "House Divided" doctrine, see Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, 45-47; and Johannsen, *Lincoln, the South, and Slavery*, 82. Lincoln's opening statement from the Charleston debate, referred to here, can be found in *The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 235-236.

49 On the idea that Douglas was "coaching" public opinion, see David Zarefsky, "'Public Sentiment is Everything': Lincoln's View of Political Persuasion," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 15 (Summer, 1994): 23-40. On the idea that the transformation of public sentiment toward accepting national slavery was already underway, see Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*, 173.