The Other Lincoln-Douglas Debate
The Race Issue in a Comparative Context

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On Independence Day 1860, two thousand people gathered in Framingham, Massachusetts, at the behest of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Among the speakers who addressed the crowd was H. Ford Douglas, a young African American abolitionist who made a stirring oration in which he lambasted the four major party candidates who were seeking the presidency. In surveying the policies of the Republican, Democratic, and Constitutional Union parties, Douglas concluded that they were “barren and unfruitful” when it came to “the principles of freedom and the hopes of the black man.” “Anti-slavery men,” said Douglas, should only support a party that was “willing to extend to the black man all the rights of a citizen.” Though some in the antislavery movement favored Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party, Douglas cautioned his audience against the candidate: “I know Abraham Lincoln, and I know something about his anti-slavery.” Lincoln was not a genuine opponent of slavery, declared Douglas, because his views on slavery and racial equality marked him as nothing more than an ally of the “Slave Power.”

Why would Douglas level such a strong indictment against the Republican nominee? In the summer of 1858, as Lincoln garnered national attention for his debates with another Douglas—Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas—in their contest for the U.S. Senate, H. Ford Douglas was residing in Illinois. He followed the campaign, and like other abolitionists, he determined that there was little, if any, difference between Lincoln and his Democratic adversary. Douglas was so pessimistic regarding the future prospects of African Americans that he believed emigration “to some spot on this continent where we shall

1. A version of this paper was delivered at the Conference on Illinois History, Springfield, Illinois, October 30, 2008.
constitute a political element” was the only way, aside from revolution, that persons of color would become truly free of oppression. Lincoln’s candidacy did nothing to change Douglas’s outlook for, as he pointed out, Lincoln was not committed to ending slavery in the states where it already existed and was seemingly willing to admit new slave states into the Union. Furthermore, Lincoln favored enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, a draconian measure that Douglas denounced as one that “not only strikes down the liberty of every black man in the United States, but virtually the liberty of every white man as well.” If this were not sufficient evidence of Lincoln’s lack of true antislavery convictions, Douglas delivered a final blow to the Republican candidate that was based on his own personal experience.3

While Douglas was quite familiar with the issues and speeches of the Illinois 1858 U.S. Senate campaign, he also had a brief encounter with Lincoln during the canvass that convinced him that Lincoln and the Republicans in Illinois were “against the rights of the negro.” When Douglas first moved to Illinois in the mid-1850s, he encountered a series of laws that denied basic civil rights to African Americans, and he resolved to make his adopted state “a fit place for a decent man to live in.” As Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas engaged in their Senate contest, H. Ford Douglas traveled throughout Illinois with a petition that urged the state legislature to repeal the law that prohibited persons of color from testifying in court against whites. H. Ford Douglas made speeches in behalf of his cause and approached “prominent Republicans” with his petition, including candidate Lincoln and U.S. Senator Lyman Trumbull. Both refused to sign. Douglas complained that the state of Illinois “lays its iron hand upon the negro” with laws that “would disgrace any Barbary State, or any uncivilized people,” yet neither Lincoln nor Trumbull had been willing to affix their names to a petition that merely sought to allow African Americans an opportunity to have their testimony accepted in a court of law. Douglas also noted that while Illinois African Americans were compelled to support public education with their tax dollars, racial prejudice prevented their children from attending public schools. If African Americans tried to send their children to school, Douglas predicted that “Abraham Lincoln would kick them out, in the name of Republicanism and anti-slavery.” In his July 4 oration Douglas

3. “Meeting of the Colored Persons in Chicago,” Daily Missouri Republican (St. Louis), August 19, 1858; “Speech of H. Ford Douglass.” After studying the debates between Lincoln and Douglas, an abolitionist newspaper in Ohio concluded that “Lincoln proves himself as pro-slavery as Douglas; and Douglas proves that he is as anti-slavery as Lincoln.” See “What is the Difference Between Them?” Anti-Slavery Bugle (Salem, Ohio), September 11, 1858.
devoted little attention to the other presidential candidate from Illinois who had been Lincoln’s adversary in 1858 and also shared his surname. Douglas assured his listeners that he had no connections whatsoever to Senator Douglas “either by blood or politically” and observed that the name “Douglass” had a proud historical association with liberty and resistance to tyranny in Scotland. For H. Ford Douglas, the only way to possibly explain Stephen Douglas’s political views was that “bastard blood” coursed through his veins.4

Was H. Ford Douglas merely engaging in hyperbole when he imagined Abraham Lincoln forcibly preventing African American children from attending schools with white students? Given the benefit of hindsight it is easy to dismiss Douglas’s harsh indictment of Lincoln since it was made prior to the Civil War and emancipation. Douglas himself was so encouraged by the Emancipation Proclamation that he wrote to Frederick Douglass in early 1863 and expressed an optimistic view that the war was compelling Lincoln to alter his racial policies and attitudes to such an extent that he anticipated African Americans being “lifted to a higher and nobler life.” Douglas was also eager for African Americans to prove themselves in battle, since Lincoln was finally willing to officially accept them into the army. Douglas had enlisted in an Illinois regiment in 1862, and he had urged Frederick Douglass to raise a regiment and thereby settle the issue of whether or not black men would fight. When African American men in Illinois held a state convention in 1866, they drafted an address to the American people that invoked the memory of the martyred Lincoln in order to support their demand for equal rights. Yet H. Ford Douglas’s view of Lincoln as an unflinching proponent of white supremacy in 1860 has also persisted, attracting a wide variety of adherents ranging from ardent defenders of segregation such as Thomas Dixon and James K. Vardaman to Malcolm X. There was no consensus during Lincoln’s lifetime on

his views on race, and they have remained a subject of much interest and controversy more than 150 years later. H. Ford Douglas and other abolitionists came away from the 1858 campaign convinced that there was little that distinguished Lincoln from his opponent, but Democrats certainly did not see it that way.\(^5\)

The *Chicago Daily Press & Tribune*, a Republican newspaper that supported Lincoln, accurately observed that the charge that Lincoln was a proponent of complete racial equality, including intermarriage, was “the most trenchant weapon” employed by Douglas and his supporters during the campaign. Lincoln’s attempts to clarify his stance resulted in some of his most frequently quoted and now infamous remarks. In order to gain further insight into what Lincoln said, why he said it, and what he meant, his position on race in the senatorial campaign must be placed in comparative contexts. What was the racial climate of 1850s Illinois? How did Lincoln’s position compare to that of others within the Republican ranks in Illinois? Were there “two Lincolns” as his critics charged? Was Lincoln a white supremacist, as Lerone Bennett famously suggested more than forty years ago? What was it about Lincoln that has enabled so many diverse conclusions to be drawn about his views on race?\(^6\)

One of the speakers who followed H. Ford Douglas at the July 4 meeting was Charles L. Remond, a prominent African American abolitionist from Boston. Remond expressed his wish that Douglas relocate from “that negro hating and disfranchising state” of Illinois and move to Massachusetts. Illinois had a very poor reputation among proponents of equal rights, for in addition to being prohibited


from testifying against whites in court, African Americans were also legally prevented from voting, holding office, serving in the militia, and intermarrying with whites. An 1845 statute required residents of color to file a certificate of freedom with the county court and post a bond for as much as $1,000 as a surety of good behavior. Persons who did not have a certificate of freedom were to be considered fugitives from slavery and treated as such. If the sheriff apprehended someone who did not possess the requisite papers, he was required to advertise the person in the newspaper and could hire him/her out for one year. If the alleged fugitive remained unclaimed at end of the year, he/she was issued a provisional certificate of freedom.7

The most egregious of the so-called “black laws” had been approved by the state legislature in 1853 and prompted Frederick Douglass to ask: “What kind of people are the people of Illinois? Were they born and nursed of women as other people are? Or are they the offspring of wolves and tigers, and only taught to prey upon all flesh pleasing to their bloody taste? If they are members of the human family, by what spirit are they animated? Is it from heaven or is it from hell?”8 The new law that so upset Douglass was designed to prevent the further settlement of African Americans in Illinois. Anyone who brought a person of color into the state could be fined and imprisoned for up to one year. African Americans who attempted to settle in Illinois were subject to a fine of $50, and if the fine could not be paid, the person was to be auctioned off into a temporary form of slavery. An authority on nineteenth-century racial prejudice in the West has referred to this 1853 statute as “the most severe anti-Negro measure passed by a free state.” Douglass editorialized that a “nation of savages,” bereft of any belief in God, “could not be guilty of more inhuman and barbarous legislation.” Other abolitionists joined in condemning the law and sarcastically welcomed Illinois as the newest slave state in the Union.9

While abolitionists condemned Illinois’ codified system of white supremacy as more befitting a slave state, the Chicago Times, a Democratic newspaper that firmly advocated Stephen A. Douglas’s bid for

reelection to the U.S. Senate in 1858, took pride that Illinois was “known all over the Union as a State where white people are absolute and supreme” and had enacted measures to insure “that the State shall for all time to come remain exclusively the home of the white race.” The Times fully endorsed Illinois’ policy of reserving “her broad prairies for her white citizens, her white farmers, laborers and mechanics.” By discouraging blacks from settling in the state, white residents would not be “crowded and inconvenienced by an inferior and deteriorated race.” All of this was in jeopardy, however, because Douglas’s Republican challenger was, in the opinion of the Times, an “advocate of negro equality and negro citizenship.” If Lincoln prevailed in the election, the Times warned that blacks would overrun the state, “crowd all our cities” and “stifl[e] free white labor.” A vote for the Republicans would therefore be an act of “self-destruction,” and Illinois would become known as “the negro State” of the Northwest.10

How could H. Ford Douglas and the Chicago Times reach such different conclusions about Lincoln’s views on equal rights for African Americans? There is no evidence that Lincoln ever advocated the repeal of any of the black laws, and he had refused to sign H. Ford Douglas’s petition. The restrictions upon African Americans were popular with Illinoisans, as evidenced by the overwhelming majorities that approved articles for such purposes in constitutional referenda that were held in 1848 and 1862. Activists within the African American community and a few white abolitionist allies were the lone voices of protest. As African Americans in Illinois attempted to ameliorate their status by organizing efforts to have the black laws repealed, Lincoln condemned radical abolitionism as a threat to the Union and praised the American Colonization Society’s objective to return members of the “African race” to “their long-lost father-land.” Despite Lincoln’s disavowal of abolitionists and support for colonization, Democrats interpreted the speeches he made during the 1858 campaign, particularly the House Divided speech and his July 10 speech at Chicago, as conclusive evidence that he was a proponent of “ultra abolitionism” who sought to “elevate negroes to an equality with native-born American citizens.”11

Beginning in 1854, when he had first taken the stump to campaign against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln argued that popular sovereignty was an insidious attempt to subvert the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Since that time, events in Kansas and especially the Dred Scott decision only confirmed Lincoln’s belief that Democratic policies, if not thwarted, would result in the nationalization of slavery. While Stephen A. Douglas and the Democrats asserted that the Declaration was meant only for men of Anglo-Saxon descent, Lincoln believed that the Declaration represented a set of principles that transcended time, space, and ethnicity. His expansive reading of the Declaration held that the Founding Fathers intended for the proposition that “all men are created equal” to apply to all men, including those of African descent. As Lincoln stated in his July 10 speech at Chicago, this assertion of equality was “the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.” The Declaration had established a moral standard for the republic that should be color-blind, as Lincoln urged his audience in Chicago to “discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man—this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position—discarding our standard that we have left us. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring all men are created equal.”

Lincoln’s claim that the Declaration applied to all men was an argument that abolitionists had been making for years. Like the abolitionists, Lincoln saw no logical or moral justification for slavery based on either racial differences or mere self-interest. For Lincoln, the argument that African Americans were not included in the Declaration represented a calculated strategy to dehumanize persons of color and thereby pave the way for slavery to become acceptable throughout the country. His inclusive interpretation of the Declaration, when combined with statements he made in the House Divided speech, made him vulnerable to attacks from his opponents. In the House Divided address Lincoln asserted that the country could not endure permanently divided into free states and slaves states. For Lincoln, there were only two choices: “Either the opponents of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, and

12. Fehrenbacher, *Speeches and Writings*, 456, 458. For Lincoln’s earliest and most detailed assault upon the Kansas-Nebraska Act and popular sovereignty, see his October 16, 1854, speech at Peoria in ibid., 307–48.
place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is 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—North as well as South.”

For Democrats, the implications of Lincoln’s rhetoric were clear. He was a radical who wanted to abolish slavery everywhere and elevate former slaves to a position of complete equality. After all, was there really a difference between extinction and abolition? In a July 16, 1858, appearance at Bloomington, Senator Douglas devoted a considerable portion of his speech to Lincoln’s interpretation of the Declaration of Independence. If, as Lincoln asserted, God endowed all races of men with equal rights, then according to that line of reasoning, concluded Douglas, “no human law or constitution can deprive the negro of that equality with the white man to which he is entitled by divine law.” While Douglas did not question the sincerity of Lincoln’s beliefs, he invited his audience to imagine a future with Lincoln in power, and the picture he painted for his listeners was intended to terrify them. Given Lincoln’s beliefs, Douglas claimed that the new senator’s first order of business would be to repeal the measure that prohibited African Americans from settling in Illinois. The state would thus be transformed into an “African colony,” and the “charming prairies” would “look black as night” during the middle of the day. Douglas speculated that once Lincoln had gathered “all his colored brethren around him,” he would proceed to remove all legal restrictions that had been placed upon them and it would only be a matter of time before they were voting, holding office, sitting on juries, and perhaps most troubling of all, “marry[ing] whom they please, provided they marry their equals.” The comment about intermarriage was met with laughter from the audience, and while Douglas’s mocking tone amused many of his listeners, there was also a hard edge to such a line of attack, for Douglas was playing to the fears of his constituents. He reassured them that he was “utterly opposed” to such a “system of abolition philosophy.” Douglas not only associated Lincoln’s interpretation of the Declaration with radical abolitionism and racial amalgamation, but he also deemed Lincoln’s reading of the document as utterly preposterous. Douglas was certain that the Founding Fathers did not intend for the Declaration to apply to persons of African descent, “Chinese or Coolies, the Indians, the Japanese, or any other inferior races.” Instead, the Founders “were speaking only of the white race, and never dreamed that their language would be construed to

13. Fehrenbacher, Speeches and Writings, 426.
include the negro. ” The Illinois State Register shared Douglas’s views and claimed that Lincoln’s “Garrisonian theories may do for village lyceums, and he-woman and she-man abstractionists, but the people of Illinois—the white men of the prairie state—who deal in facts, and take the world as it is, will never submit to the amalgamation theories which the black republican aspirant for senator bases upon his construction of the declaration of independence—that the negro is the white man’s equal—that he is entitled to political privileges equal with the white man.”

Throughout the campaign Lincoln denied that he was in favor of elevating African Americans to a position of social and political equality. Instead, he drew a distinction between natural rights and civil rights. Though African Americans were entitled to natural rights, such as the rights to life and liberty enumerated in the Declaration, Lincoln reasoned that it did not necessarily follow that they should be allowed to vote, hold office, or intermarry with white persons. As he claimed on numerous occasions, “I protest, now and forever, against the counterfeit logic which presumes that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave, I do necessarily want her for a wife.” Such a nuanced position was not particularly well suited to the stump, and the Democrats certainly were not willing to grant that there was a difference between natural and civil rights. As Douglas stated in the fifth joint debate with Lincoln at Galesburg: “I tell you that this Chicago doctrine of Lincoln’s—declaring that the negro and the white man are made equal by the Declaration of Independence . . . is a monstrous heresy. The signers of the Declaration of Independence never dreamed of the negro when they were writing that document. . . . I say to you, frankly, that in my opinion this government was made by our fathers on the white basis. It was made by the white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever and was intended to be administered by white men in all time to come.” Douglas also argued that while persons of color could never be accorded citizenship, it did not mean that they should all be enslaved. The question of how these “inferior” and “dependent being[s]” would be treated was for each state to decide for itself, and Douglas fully endorsed the limitations Illinois had placed upon African Americans.

Despite Lincoln’s denials, the Democrats kept up their charges that


15. Fehrenbacher, Speeches and Writings, 454–55; Davis and Wilson, Lincoln-Douglas Debates, 184–85.
he was in favor of racial equality. The *Chicago Press & Tribune* observed that the race issue had become so prominent in the canvass because Douglas and his followers made it “the beginning, middle, and end of all their harangues.” In reporting Douglas’s speech at Bloomington, William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* commented that the Senator “rode the ‘negro hobby’ to death.” Lincoln’s supporters feared that these constant allegations were resonating with voters, particularly those in the central and southern portions of the state. The *Press & Tribune* estimated that as many as four out of five Douglas supporters located south of Bloomington were in favor of the Little Giant due to the stigma of racial equality that had been attached to the Republicans.

Lincoln received a great deal of advice, much of it unsolicited, that urged him to make his position on the race issue clearer. One correspondent advised that “less of the favouring of negro equality will satisfy your friends in the extreme.” Another took it upon himself to inform Lincoln, “That as for Negro equality in the sense in which the expression is used you neither beleive (sic) in it nor desire it. You desire to offer no temptations to negroes to come among us or remain with us, and therefore you do not propose to confer upon them any further social or political rights than they are now entitled.”

David Davis, a trusted advisor, realized the impact of the Democratic accusations and believed all Republican speakers should be instructed to “distinctly & emphatically disavow negro suffrage – negro[es] holding office, serving on juries, & the like.” A Republican from Greenville informed Lincoln that when he campaigned in southern Illinois he needed to leave no doubt in the minds of his listeners that he was opposed to making blacks the social and political equals of whites. This would require Lincoln to devote more time to discussing the issue than he had in the northern part of the state, because as his correspondent explained, “some folks are so hard of understanding, and like to hear a good thing repeated.”

To further their charge that Lincoln was a radical abolitionist who favored racial equality, Democrats resorted to the tactic of guilt by association. The Republican Party was, to borrow a phrase from a letter sent to Lincoln in 1858, “a composite one and ha[d] diverse elements.” In addition to former Whigs such as Lincoln, the party

also consisted of former Democrats and a smattering of abolitionists, including Ichabod Coddin and Owen Lovejoy, the brother of abolitionist martyr Elijah Lovejoy. As a member of the Illinois state legislature in 1855, Lovejoy had advocated the repeal of the law that prohibited African Americans from testifying against whites—the very law that H. Ford Douglas circulated his petition against in 1858. While Lovejoy’s progressive attitude on race won him praise from the African American community, Senator Douglas and the Democratic press made great sport that Lincoln and Lovejoy were members of the same party. According to the Illinois State Register, such an alliance was proof that Lovejoy had successfully “inoculated” the Republican Party with abolitionism. Lincoln’s rhetoric on the slavery issue was also compared to that of such prominent abolitionists outside of Illinois as William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Parker. Readers of the Chicago Times were reminded that Massachusetts abolitionists had led a successful campaign to repeal that state’s law prohibiting intermarriage. A victory for Lincoln would therefore also be a victory for the “crazy fanatical abolitionists” who would immediately attempt to foist their radical and dangerous theories of racial equality upon the people. The Chicago Times claimed that those with “respect for the ascendant races, and solicitude for purity in the State” would vote Democratic, while the State Register warned that one of the first items on this “republican-abolition party” agenda was “to fill up our school houses with an equal number of black and white children.”

The campaign attracted attention from outside of Illinois, and Democrats were quick to exploit an address made by Frederick Douglass in which he criticized Senator Douglas and praised Lincoln. Under the headline “Another Ally of Lincoln—The Nigger Chief Out for Him,” the State Register reported that Frederick Douglass had quoted from the House Divided speech at length and thanked Lincoln and Republicans in Illinois for upholding the principles of their party. The State Register seized upon the portion of Douglass’s speech where he said that he would leave the senator “in the hands of Mr. Lincoln,” for the Register imagined that at this point, Douglass’s “negro audience spread their gills, rolled their eyes, and clapped their hands with

joy that their leader had left their work in such zealous charge as Mr. Abraham Lincoln.” Clearly, this was further evidence that the “black republican” party favored racial equality and was cooperating with a “negro agitator” in order to bring it about. The Chicago Times discussed Douglass’s use of Lincoln’s speech and asked its readers: “Will you elect a man your Senator whose words fit so well the mouth of a negro?” During the fourth debate at Charleston, Douglas claimed he had a copy of Frederick Douglass’s speech and would like to read from it if he had more time. Instead, Douglas offered a summary of the address by stating that it “conjures all the friends of negro equality and negro citizenship to rally as one man around Abraham Lincoln, the perfect embodiment of their principles.” Time may have been a factor in Douglas’s decision not to read from the speech, but it was more likely because there was little resemblance between what Frederick Douglass said and the senator’s characterization of the speech.

Some of the bitterest Democratic vitriol in the campaign poured forth as a result of H. Ford Douglas’s speaking tour of the northern and central portions of the state. No complete text of any of his speeches from his traveling petition campaign has been located, but accounts from the Galesburg and Rock Island newspapers indicate that he was critical of Democrats and Republicans alike. Douglas advocated the emigration of African Americans to Canada because he believed that it was impossible for them to attain full equality in the United States. The refusal of Lincoln and Trumbull to sign his petition certainly did nothing to alter that belief—Trumbull even told him that if he did not like the laws in Illinois he should leave the state and live somewhere else. Despite Douglas’s Garrisonian and emigrationist sensibilities, the State Register referred to him as a “genuine black republican” who was a “particular friend” of Lincoln. According to the State Register, Douglas was delighting his audiences of “abolition republican brethren” because they were willing to “swallow every greasy nigger that comes along.” Such a spectacle represented the “practical realization” of the principles Lincoln had espoused in his House Divided speech, and considering Lincoln’s “rapidly declining prospects,” it was appropriate for him “to take a nigger to his bosom.” The State Register believed Republicans had “a perfect right to employ darkey lecturers,” and despite Republican denials, H. Ford Douglas was a vivid example

that “they are all right on the great question of wool.” Senator Douglas reminded the crowd gathered for the second debate at Freeport that when he last spoke there, Frederick Douglass had been in the audience, sitting in a carriage with a white woman. He then referred to H. Ford Douglas’s speaking tour by noting that “one of Fred Douglass’s kinsmen, another rich black negro, is now traveling in this part of the state making speeches for his friend Lincoln as the champion of black men.” A member of the audience then shouted: “What have you got to say against it?” Douglas replied: “All I have to say on that subject is that those of you who believe that the nigger is your equal and ought to be on an equality with you socially, politically, and legally, have a right to entertain those opinions, and of course will vote for Mr. Lincoln.”

Such attempts to associate Lincoln with black abolitionists provoked a blunt and highly suggestive response from Lincoln’s hometown Republican newspaper, the *Illinois State Journal*. That newspaper deemed it a “very significant fact” that Frederick Douglass and H. Ford Douglas had the same surname as Senator Douglas and urged the local Democratic newspaper to try and explain this to its readers. The *Chicago Press & Tribune* was confident that a dozen black men could be found in the city who would be able to explain the Declaration of Independence to Senator Douglas. If such a meeting were to take place, the *Press & Tribune* imagined that one of the African Americans would point out to Douglas that he would have a much different view of the Declaration and natural rights if he had been born a slave to an Arab in North Africa. The *Press & Tribune* snidely suggested that Douglas could try and make his case that persons of color were not included in the Declaration by pointing to the slaves who worked on his own plantation in the South. There were also attempts to turn the tables on the Democrats and their charge that Republicans were proponents of racial amalgamation. The *State Journal* made a rather prolonged fuss when James C. Robinson, a pro-Douglas candidate for Congress, gave a speech in which he reportedly said that he “would rather sleep with a nigger than with a Republican.” In its commentary on the Robinson story, the *Quincy Daily Whig & Republican* expressed the hope that “the nigger-loving Democracy” would provide Robinson with “a nigger to sleep with throughout

the campaign.” According to the Whig & Republican, Senator Douglas was a “demagogue” for constantly accusing the Republicans of seeking to bring about racial equality. The Republicans favored no such thing, and the Whig & Republican argued that the “curse” of amalgamation was instead “exclusively confined to the Southern States.” While Africans constituted an “inferior race,” the Whig & Republican believed that contrary to the Democratic Party and the Supreme Court’s ruling in Dred Scott, these persons possessed “rights” which white men “ought to respect.” Republicans discovered further evidence of Democratic hypocrisy in an editorial from a Democratic newspaper in DeKalb County that advocated racial equality. The item was reprinted and scrutinized in the Republican press and was also read and commented upon by Lincoln at the Jonesboro debate. With these pieces of evidence, the State Journal concluded that it was not Lincoln but Douglas who was “in league and fellowship with all the practical abolitionists, amalgamationists and free blacks of the north.”

Republicans on the stump also made concerted efforts to deflect charges of amalgamation back onto their opponents. John M. Palmer was one of Lincoln’s correspondents who warned him that the Democratic tactic of equating Republicans with racial equality was jeopardizing their prospects with undecided voters. In a speech Palmer made in Macoupin County, he attempted to undo some of the damage by asserting that the true supporters of amalgamation were slaveholders and their allies in the “sham Democracy.” Palmer claimed that slavery produced 95 percent of the racial mixing that occurred. Just as Democrats had warned of integrated schools and the state being overrun with African Americans should Republicans prevail, Palmer cautioned that the “philosophy and the law which carry niggers into Nebraska and drive white men out” was “equally potent” to bring slaves into Illinois and “crowd the free laborer from his own home here.” A clear distinction existed between the conservative principles of Republicans and the “nigger-driving dogmas” of Democrats. Palmer concluded that

Douglas’s campaign had been reduced to three words: “Liar, Abolitionist, Amalgamationist,” for whenever anyone exposed the true nature of Democratic policies, Douglas’s only response was to resort to these epithets.21

Senator Lyman Trumbull also discussed amalgamation in a highly publicized address that he delivered in Chicago on August 7. Trumbull’s speech was most noted at the time for his claim that as chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories Douglas had defeated a proposal in 1856 that would have enabled the people of Kansas to hold a referendum on a state constitution. If Trumbull’s characterization of the episode was accurate, then Douglas’s opposition to the Lecompton Constitution and championing of popular sovereignty were hypocritical acts bereft of genuine principle. However, Trumbull also made some comments on race in his Chicago speech that merit consideration. During his discussion of the Dred Scott case, a member of the audience heckled Trumbull by shouting: “That’s a nigger up there, too.” Trumbull responded with a tirade against what he termed the “African Democracy.” He ridiculed the habit of a Democrat “calling out ‘Nigger’ to everybody else while he is hugging a nigger under each arm.” Trumbull then took the opportunity the interruption provided to “expose the hypocrisy” of Douglas’s supporters who endorsed both popular sovereignty and the Supreme Court’s ruling that slavery could not be prohibited in the territories. Though Democrats accused Republicans of being “wooly heads” and “nigger worshippers” for opposing slavery in the territories, Trumbull observed that a wide variety of “breeds” of slaves existed “with every kind of blood in their veins.” Some were “as black as the African, with flat noses, thick lips and woolly heads, and some are a little whiter and some are mulattoes, and some of them are so white you can hardly distinguish the negro blood in them.” This only could have occurred through amalgamation, so Trumbull concluded that the “real negro worshippers” were slaveholders and those opposed to restricting the extension of slavery into the territories. Trumbull stated that it was better for both races that they not “mingle together,” and he then sought to make the Republican position on race as clear as possible: “We, the Republican party, are the white man’s party. We are for free white men, and for making white labor honorable and respectable, which it never can be when negro slave labor is brought into competition with it. We wish to settle the Territories with free white men, and we are willing that this

negro race should go anywhere that it can better its condition. . . . We believe it is better for us that they should not be among us. I believe it will be better for them to go elsewhere.”

Trumbull’s speech received praise from Republicans, was printed in newspapers, and circulated as a pamphlet. Further evidence of the potency of Trumbull’s line of attack against Douglas was apparent in the fourth Lincoln-Douglas debate at Charleston when Lincoln devoted much of his speech to a detailed repetition of Trumbull’s allegation. Before Lincoln turned his attention to the Trumbull-Douglas dispute, he commenced his speech with a statement that attempted to clarify his position on race. This statement, according to Don E. Fehrenbacher, “is fast becoming the most quoted passage in all of Lincoln’s writings, outstripping even the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural.”

In his opening remarks, Lincoln reiterated his opposition to “bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races.” He endorsed the prohibitions on African Americans in Illinois and then added, “There is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.” He did not elaborate on what he meant by “physical difference,” but he presumably meant simply the difference in skin color. Lincoln went on to assert that since this physical difference made equality impossible, one race had to be superior and he was in favor of the white race holding that position. Lincoln had made a statement very similar to this in the first debate at Ottawa, only he had said that conditions would “probably” prevent the races from ever living together on terms of complete equality. At Charleston, he qualified his assertion of white superiority by stating that “I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position, the negro should be denied everything.” This was a much milder qualification than he had given at Ottawa, where he made the case that blacks were entitled to natural rights under the Declaration and therefore “the equal of every living man” in their right to enjoy the fruits of their own labor. Lincoln proceeded to undercut the serious tone of his opening at Charleston by making light of the amalgamation charge. He claimed that no law was required to prevent either him or his friends from intermarrying, but given the Democrats’ anxiety over the issue, they obviously felt that a law was necessary to prohibit them from doing so. Lincoln also reminded his audience that an “alteration of the social and political relations of the negro and

the white man” was the responsibility of the state legislature, not the national government, and since Douglas appeared to be “in constant horror” that change was in the offing, Lincoln recommended that Douglas “be kept at home” so that he could “fight the measure.”

By no means should Lincoln be excused for his remarks at Charleston or for some of his other comments on race, but if his rhetoric is placed within the larger context of the campaign, some mitigating factors emerge. A comparison of Lincoln’s speeches with Trumbull’s speech at Chicago is particularly revealing. Trumbull’s speech is significant for both what he said and what he did not say, as he was able to launch a very effective assault upon Douglas by emphasizing the Toombs Bill, Democratic corruption in Washington, and the threat posed by slave labor to white settlers in the territories. Trumbull’s speech illustrates that a devastating attack could be made against Douglas without discussing the natural rights of African Americans or slavery as a moral issue. Clearly, it was not necessary for Lincoln to make a case for the natural rights of African Americans in order to combat Douglas’s doctrine of popular sovereignty, especially since, like Trumbull, he claimed he was only in favor of restricting the spread of slavery into the territories. But despite unrelenting attacks, Lincoln did not abandon his position that African Americans were entitled to natural rights. Following the Charleston debate he placed an even greater emphasis upon the moral issue than he had earlier in the campaign. During the fifth debate at Galesburg, Lincoln argued that the Founding Fathers meant to include all men, regardless of race, in the Declaration, and he challenged Douglas to provide evidence that any Founding Father had indicated otherwise. Lincoln devoted a substantial portion of his opening speech in the sixth debate at Quincy to Douglas’s accusation that his statement on race at the Charleston debate was inconsistent with his other statements on the Declaration. Again, Lincoln argued that there was a distinction between the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration and civil rights. In the seventh and final debate at Alton, Lincoln asserted that the “real issue” in the campaign was that one side viewed slavery as a wrong and the other did not. Douglas claimed there was no real distinction between a slave and any other form of property, such as a hog or cranberries, and if that were true, then why should anyone care whether slavery was voted up or down in territories? Lincoln denounced this “philosophy or statesmanship” as both naïve and

dangerous, for he feared that if Douglas’s point of view prevailed, people would accept the nationalization of slavery. 24

Given the prevailing attitudes regarding African Americans in Illinois and the way in which Lincoln’s reading of the Declaration opened him up to the charge that he favored the complete equality of the races, why did he persist in making such a nuanced and principled argument for the natural rights of all races of men in the midst of a bitter political campaign? The Chicago Times concluded that Republicans were engaged in a carefully orchestrated campaign that sought to curry favor with all sections of the state by taking a “double position” on the race issue. According to the Times, “Black Republicans” in northern counties were taking an “ultra” abolitionist position, while in the southern portion of the state Trumbull was campaigning on a “violently anti-negro” platform. The tone in the partisan press, the accusations made by Senator Douglas and the way in which Republicans responded to these charges provide substantial evidence of the extent to which many sought to exploit the racial prejudices and fears of Illinoisans. The advice Lincoln received from correspondents and the extensive coverage that the race issue received in the newspapers indicate that such pandering resonated with much of the electorate.

The Chicago Press & Tribune’s account of Trumbull’s August 7 address at Chicago contains evidence that undermines the Times’s charge that Republicans adopted a variety of positions on race that were catered to particular regions of the state. In the Tribune’s report of Trumbull’s speech, his comments on “wooly heads” and the “various breeds of negroes” were met with laughter and cheers from the audience. Similarly, Lincoln’s now-infamous opening at Charleston was interrupted several times by laughter, cheers, and applause. Lincoln could have taken the path of least resistance and made matters much easier for himself and his supporters if he had followed a strategy similar to that of Trumbull. Instead he took a risk by claiming that African Americans were included in the Declaration, and despite his efforts and those of the Republican press to make his stance clear, he became exasperated when he still found himself having to clarify his position on racial equality weeks after he had made his comments at Charleston. As Lincoln wrote to James N. Brown on October 18, “I do not perceive how I can express myself more plainly. . . . I have expressly disclaimed all intention to bring about social and political equality between the white and black races. . . . I have made it equally plain that I think

the negro is included in the word ‘men’ used in the Declaration of Independence.”

As election day approached, Democratic newspapers ran short notices warning readers that “Lincoln says that the negro is your equal,” and “A vote for the republican candidate is a vote to crowd white laborers out of, and bring negroes into the city.” The Republican press responded by printing selections from Lincoln’s statements on race and slavery alongside those of Henry Clay in an effort to prove that Lincoln’s views were grounded in conservative Whig principles. In advertisements for the last great Republican rally of the campaign that was held in Springfield, the State Journal informed readers that: “NIGGER EQUALITY IS AS FALSE AGAINST LINCOLN AS THE CHARGE OF TORYISM & ABOLITIONISM WAS AGAINST CLAY.” On Election Day, the State Journal urged voters to remember that Douglas was “in favor of slavery extension and negro equality, because he does not care whether slavery is voted up or down in Kansas—does not care if white men do have to work with and compete with niggers in Kansas.”

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The Chicago Times, H. Ford Douglas, and many others in the intervening years have been perplexed by Lincoln’s position on the issue


of race. In 1858 he made a nuanced distinction between natural rights and civil rights, but his critics at the time and many since have been unwilling to acknowledge the legitimacy of that position. Lincoln admitted that he was in favor of the superiority of the white race, yet when compared to his opponent, the partisan press, and some members within his own party, his views were a carefully measured combination of genuine moral conviction and political realism. Rather than exploit the pervasive antipathy that existed towards African Americans, Lincoln argued that they were fellow human beings and entitled to natural rights. His remarks at Charleston and other similar statements on race are regrettable and indefensible today, but his inclusive interpretation of the Declaration raised a variety of possibilities for change. There were not two Lincolns in 1858, but there was a clear difference between the Lincoln of 1858 and the Lincoln of 1864 or 1865. The Civil War changed Lincoln, and his belief in the natural equality of all men helped make that change possible. The war also changed H. Ford Douglas. He was one of the few African Americans to become a commissioned officer during the war, and he took great pride in his service. After the war ended, he seemingly abandoned his belief that African Americans were best served by emigrating from the United States. He attempted the restaurant business in Kansas, and shortly before his untimely death in November 1865 he participated in a ceremony that welcomed the First Kansas Colored Infantry upon its return to Leavenworth. When discussion of equal suffrage became heated between one of the regiment’s white officers and Charles H. Langston, Douglas counseled moderation and praised the contribution that white officers had made to both the war and the abolition movement. Five years earlier, when few could have conceived how events were to unfold and make such a scene in Leavenworth possible, H. Ford Douglas gave a speech near the conclusion of the presidential campaign in which he grudgingly recognized that the Republican Party could serve as an agent of progress, even though its presidential nominee opposed equal rights for persons of color. Lincoln undoubtedly would have disputed Douglas’s claim that his opposition to civil rights for persons of color and his refusal to sign Douglas’s petition in effect also made himself a slave. However, Lincoln and Douglas agreed that as long as slavery existed, no man’s liberty was truly secure. Lincoln, like Douglas, believed slavery was wrong and could not be justified for any reason, including race. In 1858, when Lincoln had refused to sign Douglas’s petition, he viewed the question of equal social and