

Lincoln Essay Competition, 2011

First Place

By Nathan Treadway, Edmunds Middle School

"The man does not live who is more devoted to peace than I am. None who would do more to preserve it." This quote from Abraham Lincoln's 1861 New Jersey General Assembly address reveals that he wanted peace more than anything. Three years earlier, Lincoln had proclaimed that *"A House divided against itself cannot stand."* This quote, along with many others from his famous "House Divided" speech, declared that the Union could not be "divided" as part pro-slavery and part anti-slavery without resulting in conflict. It also tells us that Abraham Lincoln would do whatever was in his power to unify the Union and the American people on the topic of slavery so that the upcoming conflict could be avoided.

As *"A House Divided"* suggests, the Union must be united on the topic of slavery. Abraham Lincoln believed that slavery was morally wrong and that "all men are created equal" as the Founding Fathers had stated. Furthermore, Lincoln wanted to instill the belief that it was the responsibility of American citizens to support what they believed was right and to do all in their power to unify the nation on the matter of slavery as long as they were part of the Union. He hoped that if action was taken and slavery was not allowed to expand into the territories, slave owners would gradually lose power, the slave trade business would suffer, and slavery would die a "natural death", thus ending the division of the Union. This belief was supported by the Missouri Compromise which prohibited slavery in all of the Louisiana territory north of the 36, 30 parallel except for the state of Missouri. Although this would give some new pro-slave land, it created a restriction that Lincoln hoped would limit the expansion of slavery in the future. Then, in 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed which nullified the effect of the Missouri Compromise by allowing each new state to come into the Union for or against slavery. This prompted Lincoln to reenter politics which proves that he was strongly against any sort of expansion of slavery, but was accepting whenever it was confined.

We can now see that Lincoln tolerated slavery in the existing states because of his belief that slavery would die a "natural death" if it was not allowed to expand. It's because of his desire for peace, best said in his own, timeless words, *"A House divided against itself cannot stand"* that he was so persistent on the abolition of slavery in the territories. Perhaps Lincoln knew that his dream of a unified anti-slavery country achieved peacefully was unlikely, yet he still did all that was in his power to achieve this dream. Summarily, it was for the peace and preservation of the Union, Lincoln's personal stance as a responsible citizen of the Union, and his belief that all men are created equal, that Lincoln was opposed to slavery's expansion into the territories.

Second Place

By Jesse Keel, Arlington Memorial High School/Middle School

“If Lincoln was willing to tolerate slavery in the southern states, why was he so vehemently opposed to its extension into the territories?”

Lincoln understood that to abolish slavery would be unreasonable; therefore, he chose to tolerate it in the South. However, he was strongly opposed to its expansion as he believed slavery was fundamentally wrong and its extension would cast a shadow of hypocrisy upon the U.S.

Unlike William Lloyd Garrison who believed slavery “admits no compromise,” Lincoln understood that it “is very difficult to get rid of it, in any satisfactory way.” Ironically, he argued it would not be humane to free the slaves in the South as it would be counter-productive in achieving a better life for them. They could not be sent back to Africa, nor would some people be willing to consider as equals those once held in slavery. Lincoln understood that by not doing away with slavery, it may have saved those in slavery from something worse.

Additionally, as Lincoln believed the preservation of the Union to be a priority, he chose not to pursue emancipation in the South. He knew southerners would become resentful and may secede from the Union. Therefore, by tolerating slavery, Lincoln preserved the Union for a bit longer.

Nonetheless, he strongly opposed the extension of slavery into the territories. Lincoln believed the nation knew slavery was fundamentally wrong. Even southerners themselves knew it was wrong; otherwise, they would not have sided with the North “in declaring the African slave trade piracy.” Extending something as immoral as slavery is similar to letting an infection spread throughout the body. Lincoln wanted to try to contain the infection in one area of the body, or nation, and eventually “cure” the infected area.

Furthermore, Lincoln believed, unlike Senator Douglas, that slavery in the territories was contrary to the ideal of self-government. Although Douglas believed the ideal of self-government should be put above all else, he was blinded by the hypocrisy and inconsistencies of his position; whereas Lincoln saw that allowing the states to choose slavery would take away the right of self-government from those who would be slaves.

Pivotal to Lincoln’s passionate opinion on the extension of slavery was his claim that if slaves are men and “all men are created equal” then “there can be no moral right in connection

with one man's making a slave of another." America was founded upon the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the most basic one being all men are equal. Lincoln also knew permitting slavery in a country where freedom is and should be above all else would not leave other countries with a very high regard of the U.S. Therefore, Lincoln urged that, unless we wish to be known for our great hypocrisy, we must not allow the extension of slavery.

In conclusion, it can be argued that Lincoln tolerated slavery in the South out of a strong desire to preserve the Union and also out of a sense of practicality with roots in humanity. His opposition of the extension of slavery did not rest on an aversion to self-government. Neither was Lincoln in favor of ending the dispute through war; rather he believed isolation could cure a disease that threatened our country.

Third Place

By Loriston Fennell, Home Study Student

Abraham Lincoln, statesman and visionary, believed firmly in the principle of justice. Therefore, when Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas introduced his *Kansas/Nebraska Act* in 1854, Lincoln re-entered politics and launched a six-year debate with him. Although Lincoln tolerated slavery in the Southern states because he realized it was a necessary evil which was too deeply rooted in the society to abolish easily, he resolutely believed that slavery was wrong based on moral principles regarding equality.

Lincoln's perception of the South's economic reality and public sentiment enabled him to accept slavery where it already existed. Without slaves, substantially less money would be made and the South's economy would be ruined. Lincoln did not blame the South for having slaves, and stated in his Peoria speech which defended the *Missouri Compromise*, "They (the South) are just what we would be in their situation" (5). Lincoln understood the importance of public sentiment and knew that if the slaves were freed, they would be severely discriminated against. Unlike the abolitionists, Lincoln knew the issue wasn't as simple as whether having slaves was right or wrong. Slavery had been such a part of Southern life for so long that it was accepted by masses of people. Since people's feelings cannot be changed by legislation, Lincoln realized that slaves should be freed gradually and that the existing institution should be tolerated.

However, Lincoln made it no secret that he was opposed to slavery spreading into the territories and asserted many people had forgotten equality and the will of the Founders in lieu of personal gain. Guided by principle and not practicality, Lincoln expressed his moral opposition to

slavery by stating, "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself" (5). Lincoln had many adversaries who viewed slavery as a moral right and supported Douglas' *Kansas-Nebraska Act* which assumed there "can be moral right in the enslaving of one man by another"(18). It assumed that personal gain was more important than liberty. Therefore, liberty ceased to be a sacred right since popular sovereignty allowed for the possibility of slavery in the territories. Lincoln felt an allegiance to the *Declaration of Independence* and to the Founders whom he maintained had provided a safe-guard against the spread of slavery with *The Northwest Ordinance*. Lincoln voiced his concern that this "ancient faith" was being disregarded in his Peoria speech and in his debate with Douglas. The acceptance of popular sovereignty opposed the idea of freedom and would destroy the Republican example of government.

Lincoln wasn't just another politician motivated by self-interest. His ability to comprehend the significance of a problem and convey a principled solution changed the nation's political landscape and refocused the slavery issue. He brought to light the fact that Americans were not being respectful of the *Declaration of Independence* and were not being true to what they claimed to hold dear. Lincoln's ability to influence the populace by effectively communicating his ideas guided the nation toward liberty and justice for all.