

Making an Antislavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom

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Review

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In the 1860 presidential election, the two candidates from the North, Republican Abraham Lincoln and Democrat Stephen Douglas, were Illinoisans transplanted from other states and both had staked out clear positions on slavery, the central issue of the time. Lincoln, originally from the slave state of Kentucky, deemed it a moral wrong whose spread should be stopped; Douglas, a native of antislavery Vermont, believed true democracy demanded that the people decide whether to extend slavery and professed not to care personally whether it was voted up or down. How they wound up with competing nominations and positions, and why a pair of Illinoisans would be their parties' nominees, become clearer after reading Graham A. Peck's thoughtful and valuable new contribution to the unending debate about the coming of the Civil War and the transformation of American politics that preceded and contributed to it.

What makes Peck's work especially valuable is its examination of the political conflict over slavery through two different but related prisms: Illinois and the country at large. In *Making an Antislavery Nation*, Peck addresses both Illinois and the broader story, and thus makes the emergence first of Douglas and then of Lincoln much clearer and more understandable. By the end, Lincoln staked out the idea of "antislavery nationalism," while Douglas campaigned against the universal human rights in which Lincoln believed and, it turned out, for which the North ultimately was willing to fight.

That attitude culminated a process of evolution. Peck makes his point by going back to the Constitution's origins, which most studies of the coming of the Civil War at best do in a cursory fashion, or simply explain as important to the issue and then move on. The North and South had made numerous compromises, and Illinois provided a meeting ground for these agreements and those who lived with them as part of the "middle border" analyzed by Christopher Phillips and other historians. Even before statehood in 1818, Illinoisans wrangled over slavery, dividing by their region of origin and region of settlement: those from slave states tended to settle in southern Illinois, with predictable differences from the northern tier. They, too, were part of the Second Party System in all of its manifestations: Democrats and Whigs, third parties, choosing between federal and state power, arguing over canals and banks, avoiding issues related to slavery as much as possible. When slavery did come to the fore as an issue—and Peck differs little on the particulars from the other historians who focus on such turning points as the rise of Manifest Destiny, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act—it came with a vengeance.

But the problem had been percolating from the country's beginnings. As Peck explains, the South's increasing commitment to and dependence on slavery, and eventual support for it, created a dilemma for northerners who professed to believe, as southerners did, in freedom. With the expansion of slavery and support for it, their definitions diverged, and the concept of an antislavery nation or "freedom national" flowed from abolitionists. Obviously, those who believed in immediate emancipation were a distinct minority, but Peck notes that as Illinoisans had to confront questions about fugitive slaves, free speech, and where slavery itself could be legal, they began to shift toward what Lincoln ultimately laid out in his Cooper Union speech in February 1860. To say that Lincoln described the founding fathers as anti-slavery, in thought if not always in action, is hardly new and remains historically debatable. But Peck details how Lincoln posited the antislavery position as the reasonable, conservative means of defending the Union against the radical southerners who had turned against the original intent of the framers.

How Lincoln reached the point of receiving that kind of attention is a key element of Peck's narrative and analysis. Nationally and in Illinois, he was still the tail to Douglas's kite. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories and a presidential contender, the Little Giant was nationally significant long before Lincoln was. Douglas claimed to believe in popular sovereignty, but ended up hoisted on the petard of his own inconsistency and ambition. Not only did Lincoln enjoy pointing out that Douglas would allow territorial residents in Kansas to vote on slavery but not those in Utah to vote on plural marriage, but Douglas increasingly adopted a pro-slavery position. In *The Impending Crisis*, the classic title of David Potter's chapter on the Kansas-Nebraska Act was "A Railroad Promotion and Its Sequel," and Douglas did indeed want to bring governance to the Great Plains for the sake of building a railroad that would benefit his constituents, especially in northern Illinois. As Peck notes, that area's growth and development exemplified the benefits of a free labor society; to promote it further, Douglas was willing to expand slavery, and he continued to try to conciliate the South. Eventually, he argued, even in defending popular sovereignty, that the founding fathers were pro-slavery—the opposite both of Lincoln's argument and of what northerners increasingly believed. And when he stood up to James Buchanan over his fellow Democrat's corruption of popular sovereignty—accepting the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution—the support that Douglas received actually meant that his fellow northerners had decided to stand up to the South. Douglas preferred not to do that, because of his commitment to the Union and his presidential ambitions. As a presidential candidate, Douglas continued to emphasize popular sovereignty above all else even as Lincoln and his party spent the 1860 campaign promoting not only limits on slavery, but also such legislation as a homestead law and a transcontinental railroad.

Douglas and his fellow Democrats still might have succeeded, Peck notes, if Republicans had been unable to coalesce around those issues and especially around the concept of antislavery nationalism. He explains the difficulties that Republicans faced in coming together amid numerous potential deal-breakers—nativism, regional distinctions, and old rivalries between Democrats and Whigs, to name only a few. But Republicans stuck together thanks to compromise and adroit management, sometimes from Lincoln. "To Lincoln, universal liberty represented the nation's guiding principle; self-government represented its greatest achievement; free labor represented its prodigious strength; and northern society represented its true characteristics," Peck writes. "Imbued with these convictions, Lincoln considered slavery unjust, slave society antiprogressive, and proslavery politics antagonistic to the idea of liberty and the

existence of free society. Consequently, his radical opposition to slavery took the cast of national preservation from the inception of the anti-Nebraska movement” (179).

The strengths of Peck’s book and its arguments certainly outweigh its weaknesses. While the focus on the U.S. generally and Illinois particularly works well, at times one submerges the other for a little too long. Given what he is discussing and trends in recent scholarship, the few references to black colonization were a surprise, especially since Lincoln and other Illinoisans showed interest in it as a possibility. But these minor issues do not detract from the overall importance of this achievement: to bring together Lincoln and Douglas, their state, and their ideas into a fair-minded, logical narrative and analysis of how America evolved and devolved from the bundle of compromises that created the Constitution to the differences over slavery that prompted the Civil War.

Michael Green is an associate professor of history at UNLV and the author of Lincoln and the Election of 1860, and the forthcoming Lincoln and Native Americans.