

Structured Academic Controversy: Was Lincoln Racist?

Directions: Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, freeing the slaves. Your job is to determine whether you think he was racist. During today's class, you will work in teams to discuss arguments convicting and defending Abraham Lincoln. Your goals for today should include looking at all the issues, seeing both sides, and finding common ground. Read the documents. Answer the questions and prepare with your partner for the debate. At the end both sides will attempt to come to an agreement.

Document A

If you desire Negro citizenship, if you desire to allow them to come into the State and settle with the White man, if you desire them to vote on an equality with yourselves, and to make them eligible to office, to serve on juries, and to judge your rights, then support Mr. Lincoln and the Black Republican party, who are in favor of the citizenship of the Negro. For one, I am opposed to Negro citizenship in any and every form. I believe this government was made . . . by White men, for the benefit of White men and their posterity forever. . .

Mr. Lincoln believes that the Negro was born his equal and yours, and that he was endowed with equality by the Almighty, and that no human law can deprive him of these rights.

Source: In 1858, Abraham Lincoln ran against Stephen A. Douglas for the Illinois seat in the U.S. Senate. The two engaged in a series of seven public debates, known as the Lincoln-Douglas debates, which attracted national attention. Although Lincoln lost the election, he became widely known for his views on slavery. This is part of Douglas' speech in their first debate at Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858

Document B

I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together in perfect equality, and. . .I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary, but there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the natural rights in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the White man. I agree that the Negro is not my equal in many respects--certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread. . . which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of every living man.

Source: Abraham [Lincoln's reply to Stephen A. Douglas](#) at Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858.

Document C

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing" as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution... My paramount [most important] object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union... I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause...

Yours, A. Lincoln.

Source: This comes from a response Lincoln wrote addressing a newspaper article by Horace Greeley. Greeley, editor of the influential *New York Tribune*, had just addressed an editorial to Lincoln called "The Prayer of Twenty Millions," making demands and implying that Lincoln's administration lacked direction. August 22, 1862.

Document D

How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings [an anti-immigrant movement] get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating [moving] to some country where they make no pretense [claim] of loving liberty — to Russia, for instance, where despotism [cruel and oppressive leadership under a ruler] can be take pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy [sic].

Source: *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy P. Basler. In this letter, Lincoln expresses his thinking about slavery, which contrasted with Speed, who grew up on a plantation and owned slaves.

Document A:

1. What are two things that Douglas warns will happen if Lincoln is elected?
2. Based on this document, what do you think Douglas's views were on African Americans?

Document B:

3. Try to picture an outdoor debate in 1858. These debates lasted 3 hours, with each candidate speaking non-stop for at least an hour. Do you completely trust what either candidate will say in this setting? Why or why not?
4. Carefully read Lincoln's response to Douglas. On what points is Lincoln willing to agree with Douglas? On what points does he differ from Douglas?

Document C:

5. What does this document say about Lincoln's views on ending slavery?

Document D:

6. How does Lincoln compare the US and Russia in this document?

ORGANIZING THE EVIDENCE

Use this space to write your main points and the main points made by the other side.

Abraham Lincoln was racist: List the main points/evidence that support this side.

Abraham Lincoln was not racist: List the main points/evidence that support this side.

COMING TO CONSENSUS

YOU MAY ABANDON YOUR ASSIGNED POSITION AND ARGUE FOR EITHER SIDE.

Try to find consensus and agreement. Your agreement should address evidence and arguments from both sides.