



Lincoln's Speech at Cincinnati, September 17, 1859

"The issue between you and me, understand, is that I think Slavery is wrong, and ought not to be outspread, and you that it is right and ought to be extended and perpetuated."

--Abraham Lincoln, addressing Kentuckians, September 17, 1859

Though losing the Illinois senate race of 1858 to the Democratic candidate, Stephen A. Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, who had proved a capable challenger to the Little Giant, emerged as a national leader during 1859. By summer, editors and many Republicans had already begun to speculate about Lincoln as a possible candidate for the 1860 presidential election. Between August and December, Lincoln would deliver speeches in Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Kansas. Throughout 1859, Lincoln focused his political energy on buttressing an increasingly fragile Republican coalition.

When in September Douglas sought to make inroads among Ohio Republicans—now vulnerable due to the adoption of a Radical platform—conservative Republicans in the state called on Lincoln, who trailed Douglas, literally, delivering speeches at Columbus, Dayton, Cincinnati, and Indianapolis. In each city, Lincoln offered a "slashing rebuttal" of Douglas's recent statements—published in *Harper's*—which rejected congressional authority over slavery anywhere, and nearly equated "popular sovereignty" with a "state's right" to decide the matter of slavery.

At Cincinnati, Lincoln met large cheering crowds, buoyed by music and cannon. This was a far warmer reception than in Columbus, where radical Republicans perceived Lincoln as a threat to their favorite, Salmon P. Chase. Following the advice of local organizers, Lincoln sprinkled humor throughout his speech, and he appears to have dropped a passage on the threat of slavery to white labor. But he did not back down from his core antislavery message. Framing his speech as an opportunity to speak directly to Kentuckians, "to shoot across the line," as he put it, his real target remained Douglas and any Republican willing to truck with him. Point by point, Lincoln countered Douglas's ideas on slavery extension, on racial slavery, and on racial hierarchy. He blasted Douglas's brand of compromise. But this was also a speech directed to Kentuckians and the South—to whom Lincoln spelled out his position clearly and forcefully. Despite his essentially conservative arguments, Democrats in the audience were not amused. With Lincoln's help, the Republican coalition in Ohio held, and swept the October elections.

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), by T.P. Pearson, August 27, 1858

Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Museum of Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee