Introduction

Did she pay any attention to what the president actually said? On March 4, 1865, Cara Kasson, the wife of a Republican congressman from Iowa, made her way to the Capitol through Washington's muddy streets, as rain poured down, to witness the second inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. Later, when reporting her impressions of the day to a Des Moines, Iowa, paper, Mrs. Kasson was more effusive about the sun's appearance as Lincoln took his oath than his inaugural thoughts. Observing that the president delivered "his few clear sentences" modestly, she suggested that the timely breaking out of sunshine might be an omen that God was prepared to let Lincoln lead the nation to final victory in the Civil War.

Perhaps Lincoln's text sped by her too quickly to be absorbed. A mere 703 words, it was several times briefer than the inaugural in 1857 of his immediate predecessor, James Buchanan. Yet, within it, Lincoln boiled down to a few sentences what had caused the horrific conflict that had already taken hundreds of thousands of American lives. Asserting that everybody understood that "somehow" slavery was the problem, Lincoln explained why it so divided Americans: "To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend" slavery had been the purpose of southern disunionists, he contended, while he and fellow Republicans "claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it." The issue of slavery expansion, in other words, brought on the Civil War, not the actual situation of slaves already in the southern states.[1]

[1] "Miriam" (Caroline Kasson) to the (Des Moines) *Iowa State Register*, Mar. 6, 1865, "Source Material of Iowa History: An Iowa Woman in Washington, DC, 1861–1865," *Iowa Journal of History* 52 (Jan. 1954): 89; Ernest B. Ferguson, *Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War* (New York, 2004), 138; AL, Second Inaugural Address,

Lincoln's remarks did not specify the western frontier as the locus for this dispute, yet most accounts of Lincoln, his famous rivalry with the U.S. senator from Illinois Stephen A. Douglas, and the beginning of the Civil War treat the heated territorial controversy of the 1840s and 1850s as if it was *only* about the U.S. West. Neither Lincoln nor Douglas, however, nor their political parties, saw matters that way. As Lincoln put it at Peoria, Illinois, in October 1854 in one of his first outbursts against Douglas's controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act, Douglas's law not only extended slavery to Kansas and Nebraska but allowed its "spread to every other part of the wide world, where men can be found inclined to take it."[2] Lincoln's warning hardly had points north in mind; southerners never seriously entertained illusions of taking slaves to the cold climes of Russian Alaska or Britain's provinces in Canada. Rather, slavery expansionists had been trying to spread their labor system southward toward the Tropics, and from Lincoln's perspective and that of fellow Republicans, Douglas had been the South's accomplice in these efforts.

Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics is hardly the first book about arguably the most famous political rivalry in the history of the United States. Recent works such as Allen C. Guezlo's *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America* and Douglas R. Egerton's *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War* are symptomatic of the fascination of historians, publishers, and the American reading public with not only the Lincoln–Douglas debates but also the decades-long rivalry itself.[3] It is almost impossible to conceive of Lincoln ever becoming president had not Douglas been his foil. Lincoln honed his policies and defined his ideals in response to Douglas's stance on the day's issues, especially slavery in Kansas. This book, however, is the first to explore the rivals' dramatically different ideas about the future of Latin America and why their competing visions help explain not only their bitter feud over slavery in

JRMP, 6: 276–77; Ronald C. White Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (2002; rpt., New York, 2006), 29, 31, 48, 52.

[2] Lincoln speech of Oct. 16, 1854, CWAL, 2: 255.

[3] Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America* (New York, 2008); Douglas R. Egerton, *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War* (New York, 2010); John Burt, *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge, MA, 2013); Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America* (Washington, DC, 2008). The publication of a near-definitive edition of the debates further indicates continuing fascination with the rivalry: Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Urbana, 2008).

the U.S. West but also the breakdown of North-South comity that led to the Civil War.

The dispute began in the mid-1840s, when the positions of Lincoln and Douglas on slavery's expansion southward diverged in ways that became more pronounced as years passed. Prior to 1844, neither Lincoln nor Douglas said much of anything about foreign affairs, much less Latin America and slavery's expansion. The Texas annexation controversy and subsequent war with Mexico, however, changed everything.

Apathetic about the annexation of Texas and opposed to war with Mexico, Lincoln was dubious about the popular expansionist ideology of "Manifest Destiny," which celebrated U.S. territorial growth as a means of fulfilling the nation's promise. Rather than support U.S. diplomatic and military initiatives for new tropical acquisitions, Lincoln wished to foster democracy to the south by making the United States a model of progress and republican institutions – the "last best, hope of earth" as he put it in his second annual message to Congress in December 1862. In contrast, Douglas gained notoriety as Washington's most aggressive apostle of Manifest Destiny. An ardent champion of projects to extend the United States' territorial and commercial sway in Latin America, Douglas promoted the annexation of Texas, the absorption of the entire Mexican nation, U.S. acquisition of Spain's colony in Cuba, and territorial extension into Central America. At times he seemed to crave the whole hemisphere.

It would be simplistic to imply that Lincoln and Douglas invariably disagreed regarding Latin American issues. Both men critiqued Latin Americans for failing to achieve political stability in the decades after achieving their independence from Spanish and Portuguese rule. Both endorsed the Monroe Doctrine's strictures against new European colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Both favored growing U.S. trade with Latin America. If Douglas was more willing than Lincoln to use military muscle abroad, he nonetheless espoused the rhetoric of peaceful expansion, often dissembling that the United States had acquired its entire continental empire through honorable means. Douglas even shared an interest in colonization with Lincoln. Had he lived through the Civil War, he likely would have rallied to Lincoln's programs for voluntary black resettlement in Latin America as a means of resolving America's turmoil over slavery and race.

Still, Lincoln and Douglas differed fundamentally on Latin America's future, and their divergent perspectives became a subtext for their angry disputes over the West. Both men realized by the 1850s that the

Tropics were inextricably linked to the outcome of the slavery expansion controversy within the United States. When Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas argued passionately about whether or not slavery should extend westward, they did so partly because Latin America lurked in the West's shadow.

Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics reveals a "Latin beat" modulating the rhythms of Lincoln's battle with his great rival Douglas over slavery in the West. Behind Kansas's curtain lay vistas of slave plantations in the Tropics.

1

A "Spot" for Manifest Destiny

Ambitious congressmen needed little prodding to join the army when war erupted with Mexico in the spring of 1846. Since the earliest days of the Republic, Americans had promoted war heroes to their highest office. Generals George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and William Henry Harrison all won election as the nation's chief executive primarily because of their military luster, and many other presidential contenders positioned themselves for presidential bids with martial exploits. No wonder, then, that a mere three days after Congress voted for war with Mexico on May 13 an observer in Washington reported some fifty congressmen had applied to the U.S. president, James K. Polk, for army commissions, in some instances on behalf of relatives, but many of them for themselves.[1]

Caught up in this *rage militaire*, Stephen A. Douglas joined the ranks of U.S. congressmen clamoring for a commission. Just before the war, Douglas had established a military record by participating in a volunteer militia campaign to pacify Hancock County (in west central Illinois), where disorder had erupted between Mormons and their neighbors. Douglas served there as aide-de-camp at the rank of major to his recent fellow Illinois congressman, the militia general John J. Hardin. When warfare erupted with Mexico, Douglas considered military service again, perhaps partly from a sense of personal responsibility. As chairman of the House of Representatives' Committee on Territories he had

[1] "Oliver Oldschool" to J. R. Chandler, May 16, 1846, in (Philadelphia) *United States Gazette*, May 18, 1846.

helped enact legislation annexing the independent Republic of Texas to the Union, a cause of the fighting since Mexico had never recognized the Lone Star Republic's independence and still claimed it. Already known as a strident expansionist, Douglas emerged as the war progressed as one of the country's most fervent apostles of Manifest Destiny – the new creed that God intended the United States, because of its superior democratic institutions, to possess the entire North American continent. Rather than campaigning with the army, however, Douglas remained in Congress, an arrangement that worked out to his political advantage. In midwar, Douglas gained advancement to the U.S. Senate, a decision then made by balloting of state legislatures, not by popular vote. Shifting to the more prestigious upper chamber in December 1847, Douglas became prominent in the "all-Mexico" movement, which sought to capitalize on U.S. defeats of enemy forces by completely absorbing America's southern neighbor. As the war wound down, Douglas supported an effort to amend the peace treaty so that his country would gain more of Mexico than it allowed.

The same month Douglas assumed his Senate seat, Abraham Lincoln arrived on the Potomac as a freshman congressman. Less outspoken on Texas than Douglas, Lincoln was ambivalent about adding it to the Union. Although southerners might now emigrate there with their human property, he reasoned, adding Texas would do nothing to increase the overall number of U.S. slaves. Still, he opposed slavery's spread, saying that the North should never allow its expansion if doing so would prevent slavery from coming to a natural end. Consistent with this belief, Lincoln supported banning slavery from territory that was gained by the United States as a result of the fighting in Mexico. Indeed, he felt the war should never have begun in the first place. Lincoln used his congressional seat to attack President Polk for starting an unnecessary war. Though he did not take as strong a position against Manifest Destiny as Douglas assumed for it, Lincoln argued that it would be a mistake for the nation to grow further. By the end of the Mexican-American War, Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln had staked out different approaches to U.S. expansion and slavery's southward spread.

Had the young Stephen Douglas enjoyed carpentry and menial labor, perhaps he would have never become a leading apostle of Manifest Destiny. Douglas's work experiences, however, nudged him into the Democratic Party, America's most stridently expansionist national party, before the Civil War. Born in 1813 in Brandon, Vermont, not far from Lake

Champlain, Stephen Arnold Douglass[2] descended from Puritan New Englanders and was the son of a doctor who died the year Stephen was born. After her husband's death, Stephen's mother, Sarah, moved with him and his younger brother to a small family farm nearby that adjoined the place of her brother Edward. A studious child during the months he attended the local school, Stephen resented unpaid work required of him by his uncle the rest of the year. At fifteen, in 1828, he left for Middlebury to begin an apprenticeship in cabinet making, which also proved unsatisfying. He disliked being assigned menial jobs around the house in addition to his skilled work on washstands, bedsteads, and other furniture.

As Douglas told the story, while learning his trade he socialized with fellow apprentices and they initiated him into politics, encouraging him to pass many hours in political reading. He arrived in Middlebury during a presidential election, and his new comrades all strongly backed General Andrew Jackson of Tennessee in his successful campaign against the incumbent John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts. When Douglas moved in 1830 to Canandaigua in western New York, he remained politically active and defended Jackson in the debating club of the academy he attended. Douglas remembered how his initial political experiences "fixed" his party affiliation for life, meaning that he became devoutly loyal to the Jacksonian clique in U.S. politics, which morphed within a few years into the Democratic Party of today.[3]

What did it mean for Douglas to become a Democrat? In domestic policy, the party championed egalitarianism and political democracy for white males, adherence to states' rights, and suspicion of federal domestic programs such as national banks, protective tariffs, and federally funded transportation improvements, which Democrats feared might be manipulated by special interests at the expense of America's farmers and working classes. If Democrats were restrained when it came to government activism in the domestic sphere, however, they tended toward an expansive and often militarily aggressive approach to foreign challenges. In world affairs, Democrats inherited the traditions of the men they considered their party's founding fathers – Old Hickory (as Jackson was known) and Thomas Jefferson. These southern slaveholders not only

[2] This is not a misspelling of Douglass's name. He used this spelling until 1846, when he dropped the second "s." Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (1973; rpt., Urbana, 1997), 876n. I use the "Douglas" spelling throughout this book, except when the original appears in quotations.

[3] "Autobiography of Stephen A. Douglas," ed. Frank E. Stevens, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 5 (Oct. 1913): 328–30, 342; Johannsen, *Douglas*, 5–13.

helped make the United States a continental nation by the late 1840s; they also articulated an ideology of American empire, a philosophy of national growth that had ramifications long after the nation completed its land acquisitions.

Jefferson held a mystical belief in the U.S. experiment in republican governance. His America, a bastion of human rights, would enlighten "other regions of the earth" with its traditions of "freedom and self-government." The "most expansion-minded president in American history" in the opinion of one historian, Jefferson believed Americans could launch an "empire of liberty." Eventually, the "rapid multiplication" of America's population would overrun all of North America and possibly South America too, so that the hemisphere would be dominated by English-speaking people and their democratic forms of government. Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase of 1803 spent more than $15 million (more than the year's federal budget) to double the nation. It acquired from France some 828,000 square miles of land including much of the terrain between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. Jefferson's administration also claimed a sizable swatch of Spain's North American holdings along the Gulf Coast from the Pensacola area in Florida's Panhandle to the Rio Grande River in the West, while extinguishing Native American title to vast land tracts in the South and today's Midwest.[4]

The year Jefferson purchased Louisiana, Jackson, at the time U.S. senator from Tennessee, told his colleagues that God and nature intended America's "natural bounds" to extend to the Gulf of Mexico and that the entire world could not keep "this great and rising empire" from its geographical destiny. In 1812, he predicted that war with England would result in U.S. "conquest of all the British dominions upon the continent of north America." Toward the end of his life, Jackson affirmed that

[4] Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (1990; rpt., New York, 1992), 3, 7; Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (New York, 2009); Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Chicago, 1960), 81, 88; Frank Lawrence Owsley Jr. and Gene A. Smith, *Filibusters and Expansionists: Jeffersonian Manifest Destiny, 1800–1821* (University, AL, 1997), 26–27; Alexander DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1976), 181–87, 213–35; Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (New York, 1973), 4, 8, 17–20, 42–43, 122, 125, 245–48; Robert V. Haynes, *The Mississippi Territory and the Southwest Frontier, 1795–1817* (Lexington, 2010), 94–96; Reginald Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783–1812* (1967; rpt., Norman, OK, 1992), 137–38, 123, 143–57; David E. Narrett, "Geopolitics and Intrigue: James Wilkinson, the Spanish Borderlands, and Mexican Independence," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 69 (Jan. 2012): 116–20, 128.

peacefully enlarging the nation's boundaries would grow "the area of freedom."[5] By then he had an expansionist résumé rivaling Jefferson's. Aptly characterized as the "tribune of democratic imperialism,"[6] he conducted military campaigns that further dispossessed native tribes in the U.S. Southeast, consolidated U.S. control over Spanish West Florida, and laid the groundwork for U.S. acquisition of what remained of Spanish Florida in the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819. In the Creek War of September 1813–March 1814, Jackson led Tennessee militia and U.S. infantrymen against the hostile Red Stick faction of the Creek nation, crushing their resistance at Horseshoe Bend on the Coosa River in today's Alabama. Promoted to major general in the U.S. Army, Jackson induced dispirited Creeks to sign away the largest cession yet achieved from the southeastern tribes – some twenty-three million acres constituting about a third of today's Georgia and approximately two-thirds of modern Alabama, in the Treaty of Fort Jackson. After the War of 1812, Jackson negotiated new land cessions from Choctaws, Cherokees, and Chickasaws.[7]

Jackson's invasion of Spanish Florida in 1818 exemplified his dramatic aggressiveness. He captured several Spanish outposts and eventually Pensacola, the capital of Spain's province of West Florida, without express authorization from President James Monroe. Not only did Jackson tell Monroe he believed U.S. possession of all Florida essential for frontier peace and "the future welfare of our country;" he deemed the Spanish island colony of Cuba essential to secure America's "southern frontier" and boldly asserted that with more troops and a larger war vessel he could take that island "in a few days." As president (1829–37), Jackson instructed U.S. diplomat Joel Poinsett to try to buy Texas from Mexico. Although the initiative failed, Jackson supported the Texas Revolution of 1836 and recognized Texan independence on his last day of office, a step toward U.S. annexation less than a decade later. Jackson's administration displaced thousands of Native Americans from ancestral lands by removing them across the Mississippi River to reservations. In some seventy

[5] *Annals of Congress*, 7 Cong., 2 Sess., 150; Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500–2000* (New York, 2005), 222; Andrew Jackson to A. V. Brown, Feb. 12, 1843, in James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York, 1861), 3: 658.

[6] Anderson and Cayton, *Dominion of War*, 209.

[7] Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York, 2001), 130–62; Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York, 2008), 118–20.

treaties, Jackson's negotiators gained approximately 100 million acres of tribal lands in the East for some 32 million acres in the West.[8]

If the young Stephen Douglas found Democratic Party doctrine especially attractive, it was surely in no small part because of the expansionist accomplishments of the party's iconic figures. Douglas later claimed that from his youngest days he had "indulged an enthusiasm" for the "growth, expansion, and destiny of this republic," devoting careful study to the topography and geography of the continental stretch between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean. Eventually, he familiarized himself with each western "mountain and valley, plain and river" as well as the landscape of the older states. Even if this remembrance, which he voiced at a public celebration in 1851, was hyperbole, it hints at what made the Democratic Party especially appealing to him, why he would say that the "best days" of his party occurred when it was "under a Jefferson or a Jackson." Douglas found inspiration in his party's expansionist roots, and his first major speech as U.S. congressman defended a measure to refund a $1,000 fine on Jackson during the War of 1812. It was characteristic of him to exclaim in 1844, when the United States and Britain were engaged in a serious dispute over their competing claims to Oregon, "Let us rather act upon the maxim of Old Hickory – 'Ask nothing but what is right, and submit to nothing that is wrong.'"[9]

Like Douglas, Abraham Lincoln may have drifted into politics as relief from demanding physical labor. The second child of Thomas Lincoln and the former Nancy Hanks, Abraham was born on February 12, 1809, in his family's one-room log cabin on a farmstead in northern Kentucky. He spent his early childhood in Kentucky, receiving meager schooling, until December 1816, when the family moved to southern Indiana at Little Pigeon Creek in Spencer County. In October 1818 Lincoln's mother died from milk sickness, a disease caused by drinking milk from cows that grazed on white snakeroot, a poisonous plant. A little more than a year after her death, Thomas Lincoln convinced Sarah Bush Johnston, a Kentucky widow with three children, to marry him and help keep his Indiana household and raise Abraham and his older sister, also named Sarah. Young Lincoln seemed built for manual labor, and he did plenty of it on his father's successive tracts in northern Kentucky, southern Indiana,

[8] Nugent, *Habits of Empire*, 122–27; Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York, 1990), 111.
[9] *Springfield* (IL) *Daily Register*, Apr. 8, 1851; *Alexandria* (VA) *Gazette*, June 11, 1852; Johannsen, *Douglas*, 129 CG, 28 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 600.