

Was Stephen A. Douglas Antislavery?

GRAHAM A. PECK

In 1947 Allan Nevins published the second volume of *Ordeal of the Union*, which included his scathing indictment of Stephen A. Douglas's willingness to repeal the antislavery provisions of the Missouri Compromise. Nevins especially condemned Douglas's "attitude toward free-soil opinion," which he called "curiously blind and callous, a mixture of incomprehension and indifference." According to Nevins, Douglas's attitude resulted from a lack of "moral repugnance to slavery," which rendered him unable to comprehend the force of northern antislavery convictions. In contrast to his fellow northerners, Douglas possessed a "ledger outlook" toward slavery, much like slaveholders: "When it paid it was good," wrote Nevins, "and when it did not pay it was bad." Nevins consequently judged that Douglas did not "regard a slaveholding society as one whit inferior to a free society." All in all, Nevins rather brutally assessed what he called Douglas's "dim moral perceptions."¹

Yet Nevins's forceful judgments have not been widely shared by Douglas scholars, who agree that Douglas personally opposed slavery. Acclaimed biographer Robert W. Johannsen has repeatedly claimed that Douglas was antislavery, and virtually all other Douglas scholars have come to the same conclusion, including Frank E. Stevens, George Fort Milton, Gerald Mortimer Capers, Damon Wells, and Jean H. Baker. Moreover, distinguished Civil War historians David Potter and David Herbert Donald have seconded their individual judgments. To be sure, none of these scholars developed an extensive argument to justify their conclusion; rather, each addressed the issue briefly in the middle of more general works. Nevertheless, they offered informed interpretations, and their cumulative opinion is significant. The unlikely capstone to this antislavery interpretation of Douglas is the work of Lincolnophile Harry V. Jaffa, whose *Crisis of the House Divided* examined Douglas's attitudes towards slavery at considerable

1. Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 107-8.

length. Jaffa contended that Douglas expected popular sovereignty to spread freedom “farther and faster” than would have been possible without repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and thus Jaffa concluded that Douglas’s apparent “condonation of slavery” and “propitiation of the slave interest” was a “pretended agreement with its prejudices, which would thus lull it into a false sense of security and thereby give it a kiss of death.” This assessment was generous praise indeed from a scholar whose book subsequently argued that Douglas represented perhaps the greatest threat to democracy and freedom in the nation’s history. Nevertheless, Jaffa’s perception that Douglas needed exoneration from the charge of propitiating the slave interest illustrates that the question of Douglas’s attitudes towards slavery is complex enough to require a more extended treatment than has yet been made.² That is the object of this essay.

Strikingly, despite the heavy preponderance of scholarly opinion, the case for Douglas’s personal antislavery beliefs is not compelling. Only four documents have been cited to illustrate Douglas’s antipathy

2. Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973; reprint, 1997), 419; Johannsen, ed., *The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), xxvi; Frank E. Stevens, “Life of Stephen Arnold Douglas,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 16 (October 1923–January 1924), 655–56, 668; George Fort Milton, *The Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and Needless War* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 121–22, 150; Gerald M. Capers, *Stephen A. Douglas: Defender of the Union* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), 98–99; Damon Wells, *Stephen Douglas: The Last Years, 1857–1861* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 21, 108–09; Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 190–92; David Potter, *The Impending Crisis: 1848–1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 171–72, 329; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 225; Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959; reprint, 1982), 47, 57. The recent work of Michael Morrison, Leonard Richards, and Jonathan Glickstein suggests that attitudes towards Douglas among historians are shifting. Morrison wrote that Douglas was “insensitive to the moral repugnance of slavery,” Richards portrayed him as a doughface politician who “developed a record as a staunch supporter of the South,” and Glickstein described him as one of the “Northern Democratic anti-free-soil and proslavery voices.” However, none of these historians specifically examined Douglas’s views on slavery or provided an extended rationale for their conclusions about him; instead, they treated him in passing while writing on broader subjects. Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 155; Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 182; Jonathan A. Glickstein, *American Exceptionalism, American Anxiety: Wages, Competition, and Degraded Labor in the Antebellum United States* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 253.

to slavery, and none make a convincing and reliable case. Nevertheless, the challenge of identifying Douglas's attitudes toward slavery is not simple. After all, like many Americans of the early national and antebellum periods, Douglas cannot be easily categorized as either antislavery or proslavery. Such categorization is difficult partly because he did not actively advocate slavery any more than he actively opposed it, and partly because his attitudes towards slavery were complex, not reducible to any one factor, moral or otherwise. Other facets of American social, cultural, and political life filtered his perceptions of slavery, such as abolitionism, racism, Unionism, regionalism, and partisanship. The difficulty of categorization follows even more fundamentally from the terminological problems created for historians by the words *proslavery* and *antislavery*. Abstractly, the two words define two poles of opinion, yet most antebellum Americans were on a continuum somewhere between the extreme positions. Even more problematically, the meaning of antislavery or proslavery ideas and actions in practice depended substantially on some specific historical context, such as a congressional debate over a constitutional issue, a court battle over a fugitive slave, a local abolitionist meeting, a burgeoning antislavery political party, or even a political speech by a figure like Douglas or Lincoln, to take a variety of possible examples. In each case, an individual responding to a specific issue could support, oppose, or ignore an antislavery or proslavery outcome. For instance, a person could join the antislavery party or could disrupt the abolitionist meeting. Such choices, and the ideas behind them, do much to clarify an individual's place on the continuum. Douglas's case, like that of many others, thus requires considerable caution on the part of historians. Assessing his attitudes towards slavery requires not only a close scrutiny of the documents that purportedly illustrate his personal opposition to slavery, but also a broader contextualization of both the antislavery and the anti-antislavery ideas he expressed. Such an approach provides little reason to endorse the antislavery interpretation of Douglas, and much reason to endorse Nevins.³

3. The significance of definitions of proslavery and antislavery for broader interpretations of the sectional crisis are well illustrated by the work of Larry Tise and John Ashworth, both of whose arguments rest on broad definitions of proslavery. Larry Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), xv; John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, vol. 1, Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 323–50. However, assessing the historiographic implications of the polarized terminology of proslavery and antislavery is beyond the scope of this essay, even though the subject merits attention from historians.

By far the most significant of the four primary sources cited by historians to demonstrate Douglas's personal antislavery convictions are recollections by George Murray McConnell, a twenty-one-year-old friend of Douglas in 1854. Every historian who considers Douglas to be antislavery cites this document, and many cite only this document. According to McConnell, the Illinois senator privately confided antislavery views to him after Massachusetts Senator Salmon Chase and other leading antislavery figures publicly denounced Douglas's Nebraska bill, which they claimed would open all the unorganized territories of the Union to the "ingress of slavery" by betraying the "sacred pledge" of the Missouri Compromise. Douglas angrily informed McConnell that "I am not pro slavery. I think it is a curse beyond computation, to both black and white." Moreover, he contended that the repeal of the Missouri Compromise would "work to the advancement of freedom," ensuring that slavery could "no longer crouch behind a line which Freedom is cut off from crossing." Therefore Douglas was extremely bitter that antislavery leaders had publicly called him a "traitor to liberty" whose purpose was "to open free territory to slavery." To the contrary, Douglas insisted to McConnell that he had "no shadow of doubt" that the Missouri Compromise repeal would open "the South to freedom." However, he confided to McConnell that he could "not say this openly, lest both sides distrust, and the end itself fail." Astonished at the time by this dramatic episode, which completely countered the indictment of Douglas by contemporary antislavery figures, McConnell claimed subsequently that most of Douglas's words had been "burned indelibly" into his memory.⁴

Notwithstanding his claim to accuracy, McConnell's recollections are highly questionable. In his entire life, Douglas made no equivalent recorded criticism of slavery, even in private correspondence. Moreover, McConnell wrote his recollections forty-six years after his conversation with Douglas, at the request of the Illinois State Historical Society, admitting that the essay could use a "higher finish of phrasing" due to "haste of preparation." Nevertheless, he rendered an embellished account, including facial expressions, dramatic gestures, emotions, and extended colorful quotations from Douglas. Lastly, McConnell was hardly a disinterested observer. He had idolized Douglas from earliest youth and explicitly sought to dispel the historical judgment that Douglas had been proslavery. McConnell credited Douglas with

4. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 418; George Murray McConnell, "Recollections of Stephen A. Douglas," *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1900), 48–49. The extra *l* in McConnell was apparently an editorial error.

saving the Union from southern fanatics, and he concluded that no unionist had been “more bitterly and unfairly assailed” by historians than Douglas.⁵

Many of the attitudes and words McConnel imputed to Douglas ring false. Crediting to Douglas the biblical phrase by which Lincoln attributed war to the sin of slavery, “woe to those by whom offenses come,” McConnel implied that Douglas predicted the Union’s destruction as divine punishment should northerners violate the Constitution to abolish slavery. “To ‘do evil that good may come’ is false morality, and worse policy,” Douglas reputedly stated, and he was “not willing to set fire to the ship in order to smoke out the rats.” Although Douglas certainly believed that antislavery activists imperiled the Union, he did not commonly cite biblical passages in political contexts, preferring to separate politics and religion. McConnel’s statement that Douglas believed that the repeal of the Missouri Compromise would open the South to freedom is equally hard to credit. The Compromise of 1850 had already pledged the territories of Utah and New Mexico to popular sovereignty, and no other territories remained to be organized. Douglas could not have referred to future territorial acquisitions south of the United States, because he knew that northern politicians would never have agreed to expand slavery by applying the Missouri Compromise principle to new territories in Central or South America. According to McConnel, Douglas apparently believed that his bill would erase a presumption in favor of slavery in territories south of the Missouri Compromise line, but this would have been a rather convoluted interpretation of a bill that actually repealed a prohibition of slavery in territories north of the Missouri Compromise line.⁶ Moreover, it would have been an almost willfully naive assessment of the politics of expansionism. Southern congressmen greatly

5. McConnel, “Recollections of Stephen A. Douglas,” 47, 50. A letter from J. S. McConnel to Douglas on June 30, 1848, which requested that Douglas “place my brother, George M. McConnel, in the Military Academy at West Point,” suggests the familiarity and friendship between Douglas and the McConnel family, as does McConnel’s own account. J. S. McConnel to Stephen A. Douglas, June 30, 1848, Box 1, Folder 9, Stephen Douglas Papers, University of Chicago.

6. *Ibid.*, 49. Most historians who consider Douglas to be antislavery have accepted McConnel’s account without explanation, so their rationale for doing so cannot be known. However, Jaffa’s brief discussion of the document concluded that the Missouri Compromise created an “implied presumption in favor of slavery south of the line” and that Douglas expected freedom to “spread faster and faster” once his bill repealed the Missouri Compromise’s antislavery prohibitions. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 47. I do not find this logic persuasive for the reasons enumerated above, but his argument does help explain why at least one historian accepted McConnel’s account.

desired to acquire new slave territory, and certainly they would not have overwhelmingly supported the measure—as they did—had they believed that it favored the interests of free states and freedom.⁷

McConnel's explanation of why Douglas consented to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise also appears unlikely. Fearful of being rendered politically impotent, Douglas reputedly stated that "I must either champion the policy the party has adopted or forfeit forever all that I have fought for—must throw away my whole life and not only cease to be a leader, but sink into a nobody," unable "to guide the party aright in some graver crisis" and "powerless for good forever after." Such melodrama was alien to Douglas, as was the self-deprecation, sanctimoniousness, and fatalism, not to mention the seemingly omniscient forecast of the secession crisis. Ironically, there was no necessary reason for Douglas to foresee a subsequent "graver crisis" in 1854, but if in fact he was so fearful, he presumably would not have deliberately pushed a measure through Congress that he knew would stir up sectional strife.

McConnel's account of the passage of the bill also does violence to Douglas's personality. It portrays him as a persecuted martyr to unionism, wounded by harsh words, instead of the pragmatic, aggressive, and self-confident politician who helped to repeal the Missouri Compromise in concert with his southern allies despite the revulsion of the northern public. Never craven or submissive, Douglas supported the repeal of the Missouri Compromise because it was consistent with his political philosophy and objectives. Yet, according to McConnel, Douglas felt shackled by the past. Rather than being "free to choose" his own path, he was instead "bound" by "loyalty [*sic*] to institutions fixed" as "an inheritance from the past." Consequently, he was unwilling to jeopardize the Union's integrity by promoting antislavery reform, and for this reason he had been "misinterpreted, misrepresented, vilified, [and] traduced." Indeed, "Adams, Webster, Clay, Wright, [and] others were victims," he maintained, "and I suppose I must be another." While Douglas's choices were certainly constrained by circumstances inherited from the past, including the existence of slavery, it would nevertheless have been singular for him to use such words to justify repeal of a thirty-four-year-old law that

7. For southerners' desire to expand slavery, see Robert May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854–1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973); and May, "A 'Southern Strategy' for the 1850s: Northern Democrats, the Tropics, and the Expansion of the National Domain," *Louisiana Studies* 14 (Winter 1975): 333–59.

had become, in his earlier inimitable phrase, “canonised in the hearts of the American people.”⁸

As these discrepancies suggest, McConnel probably did not recall Douglas’s words accurately. A series of factors likely jumbled his memory: inaccurate perceptions in 1854; adoration of Douglas; forty-six years of intervening time in which he accreted unrelated impressions to his remembrances; and the end of slavery, which encouraged a retrospective shading of Douglas’s legacy. As Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher have argued, recollections are not an imprint of the past, but “a constructive process in which bits and pieces of retrieved perception are fashioned into a satisfying whole.” They maintain that “quotation marks in reminiscence should not be taken very seriously” because verbatim recall “ordinarily fades quickly.” Yet the antislavery argument for Douglas rests largely on McConnel’s unique and precise words, and if those words are unreliable, then so is the case for Douglas’s antislavery.⁹

The three other sources used to demonstrate Douglas’s antislavery convictions are even less persuasive. The first source is a newspaper report written in 1859 by a correspondent of the *New York Tribune*. The author reported that Douglas considered illegally imported African slaves to be “miserable beings,” a statement most southerners probably would have agreed with and one that implied no intrinsic critique of slavery. Moreover, the quote is suspect, being written under a pseudonym by a political opponent of Douglas. The author published his communication in the nation’s leading antislavery newspaper after getting a secondhand scoop from a guest at a Douglas gala. Inaccurate on basic facts, the author later retracted his statement that the gathering was at Douglas’s home.¹⁰

8. McConnel, “Recollections of Stephen A. Douglas,” 48–49; *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), November 2, 1849. For an excellent analysis of Douglas’s decision to introduce the Nebraska bill and eventually to repeal the Missouri Compromise explicitly, see Johannsen, *Douglas*, 374–434.

9. Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher, eds., *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), xlvii. As a careful analysis of the recollections of a Revolutionary war hero illustrates, even the memories of individuals with truly extraordinary recall are not error-free. Certainly, far more errors would creep into the memories of the average person. Alfred F. Young, “George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742–1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 38 (October 1981): 561–623.

10. Wells, *Stephen Douglas*, 21, 108–09; “A Native Southerner,” *New York Tribune*, 23, August 27, 1859.

The second source is a letter that was written in 1908 by Douglas's son Robert, who claimed that his father's refusal to accept a wedding gift of slave property worth \$125,000 demonstrated antislavery convictions. This argument is also questionable. Douglas declined the slave property because it would have been a political liability, and he also expressed reservations about his ability to manage slave property. However, he suggested that his father-in-law dispose of the property in his will, which soon brought the assets under Douglas's control through his wife's inheritance. Although Douglas did not own the property, he received twenty percent of the income of his wife's plantation in return for managing it. He intended to sell the property after being criticized by the antislavery press, but he never did so, probably because of the windfall profits he and his family reaped from the plantation's cotton crops during the boom years of the 1850s. Indeed, when he was faced with declining profits on the original plantation, he moved the slaves to fresh land in 1857. Hardly the actions of an antislavery man, Douglas's plantation management suggests proslavery inclinations if anything at all.¹¹

The third source used to establish Douglas's antislavery convictions is an excerpt from the diary of Douglas's friend James Lemen Jr., an early resident of Illinois. Although historians typically prize diaries as sources, the authenticity of the Lemen family documents, of which the diary is a part, is widely questioned by scholars of Illinois history. Solon Buck, Roy Basler, and Robert Johannsen, for instance, have all declined to endorse the authenticity of different Lemen family documents, and James Edstrom's meticulous analysis has demonstrated that most of them are outright frauds. Buck asserted that the authenticity of "all the so-called 'Lemen family notes,' only transcripts of which appear to be in existence, is very doubtful," and Edstrom concluded that all of them completely lacked "provenance."¹²

11. Judge Robert M. Douglas to E. M. Bowman, October 14, 1908, reprinted in *Stephen A. Douglas's Attitude Towards Slavery* (n.p., n.d.); Johannsen, *Douglas*, 208–9, 211, 299–300, 337–38, 704, 870–71; Johannsen, "Douglas and the South," in *The Frontier, the Union, and Stephen A. Douglas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 189–90.

12. Solon J. Buck, *Illinois in 1818* (1917; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 318; Willard C. MacNaul, "Jefferson-Lemen Compact: The Relations of Thomas Jefferson and James Lemen in the Exclusion of Slavery from Illinois and Northwest Territory with Related Documents, 1781–1818," A Paper Read before the Chicago Historical Society February 16, 1915 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), 46–48, 50–51; James A. Edstrom, "'A Mighty Contest': The Jefferson-Lemen Compact Reevaluated," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 97 (Autumn 2004), 203–06. I thank James Edstrom for helping me identify secondary sources on the Jefferson-Lemen compact and discussing the doubtful authenticity of the Lemen family documents.

Yet, even if we take the Lemen source at face value, it does little to make a case for Douglas's antislavery. Lemen wrote that "Douglas told me that, like Jefferson, he believed slavery to be an evil, but that as long as the Constitution allowed it, he thought that people in our territories who wished it, should exercise the privilege." Later clarifying this point, Lemen wrote that Douglas maintained that "while the Constitution allowed the people in the states to hold slaves, if they would be of help to the people in the hardships of reclaiming a territory, and they wanted them, they should have them." Precisely how and why Douglas thought slavery was evil is unclear, but it hardly seems to be the sort of attitude that historians would normally associate with antislavery convictions. Not only justifying slavery's expansion on a dollars and cents basis, Douglas willingly ceded the disputed right to slave property in the territories. He would let the "evil" expand. These facts make the comparison to Jefferson especially telling, because it is hardly clear that Jefferson was the antislavery paladin that historians once thought him to be, and Douglas's record is not exactly graced with any of Jefferson's more liberal sentiments towards slavery. Contra Lemen, there is little reason for historians to credit Douglas with antislavery views.¹³

Yet historians must also pause before labeling Douglas proslavery. Just as Lincoln rejected Douglas's antislavery credentials, so too did Jefferson Davis repudiate the idea that Douglas supported slavery. Both Lincoln and Davis had good reason for their distrust of Douglas. After all, Douglas repeatedly made overtures to the South throughout his career and steadfastly refused to criticize slavery publicly, yet he also occasionally made public statements indicating a preference for freedom. For instance, Douglas insisted that northern Democrats be permitted to defend the constitutional rights of southerners without having to defend slavery. If northerners agreed that slavery was a positive good, he said, "it would be a very pertinent inquiry, Why do you not adopt this institution?" Reminding southern senators that we have "moulded our institutions at the North as we have thought proper," he obliquely informed them of his preference for freedom without condemning slavery.¹⁴

Douglas also revealed his preference for freedom in an 1850 speech denouncing a controversial constitutional amendment introduced by John C. Calhoun. The South Carolinian proposed to keep the number of free and slave states equal in order to preserve the power and rights

13. Stevens, "Life of Stephen Arnold Douglas," 655-56.

14. *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., *Appendix*, 507.

of the South in the federal government. In response, Douglas emphatically rejected the feasibility of preserving equilibrium between freedom and slavery. He asserted that freedom had been on the march since the American Revolution and that the border states eventually would adopt gradual emancipation. Moreover, he argued that the existing territories would produce an enormous crop of free states. The territories annexed from Mexico were too mountainous for slave labor, he said, and Mexican antislavery law prevailed in the territories until repealed. Even Mexico's annexation, he hypothesized, would result in twenty free states and only two more slave states. Douglas thus considered Calhoun's proposal a "retrograde movement in an age of progress that would astonish the world." Acknowledging that his sentiments were "unpalatable truths to some gentlemen," Douglas insisted that we must "talk plainly and frankly one to another about them." If these statements in favor of freedom are juxtaposed with Douglas's consistent support of the South throughout virtually his entire career, Lincoln's and Davis's unwillingness to consider him an ally is understandable.¹⁵

The difficulty of pinning down Douglas on slavery is exemplified by Johannsen, who stated that Douglas "did not regard slavery as a moral question; at least, he never condemned the institution in moral terms either publicly or privately." Two pages later, in the same essay, Johannsen argued that although Douglas "privately deplored slavery and was opposed to its expansion (and, indeed, in 1860 was widely regarded in both North and South as an antislavery candidate), he felt that its discussion as a moral question would place it on a dangerous level of abstraction." How Douglas could have "privately deplored slavery" without having rendered a moral judgment is difficult to say. Perhaps Johannsen meant that Douglas deplored slavery for putatively non-moral reasons, such as economic or political ones. The point, however, is not to parse Johannsen's words, but to highlight the difficulty of ascribing views on slavery to Douglas. The fact that Douglas occupied part of the vast middle ground on both the political and philosophical controversies over slavery, as indicated by the contradictory record he amassed, renders the polarized terminology of proslavery and antislavery quite challenging for historians.¹⁶

Yet Douglas is far from the only person putting historians in this predicament. Many other Americans of the time are difficult to categorize. Consider for a moment the cases of Abraham Lincoln, Henry Clay, and Henry Carey. How should we describe Abraham Lincoln in the 1830s and 1840s, when he opposed both slavery and abolitionism?

15. *Ibid.*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., *Appendix*, 371.

16. Johannsen, "Douglas and the South," 191, 193.

Lincoln was definitely in the forefront of respectable antislavery opinion at the time, but he was far from taking the ground of abolitionist Owen Lovejoy. Indeed, if forced to choose between Lovejoy's active participation in the underground railroad and northern Democrats' suppression of abolitionist petitions, Lincoln might have been hard pressed to decide. In the early 1840s, the political implications of his antislavery sentiments were not yet clear. Like Lincoln, Henry Clay also occupied something of a middle ground on slavery. Clay strongly opposed slavery's expansion, yet he did not free his own slaves, and like many slaveholders he believed that colonization was the only satisfactory solution to the potential problem of emancipation. Moreover, when pressed by the threat of disunionism in 1850, Clay endorsed Douglas's popular sovereignty policy, albeit under the conviction that existing Mexican antislavery law would discourage the migration of slaveholders into the southwestern territories acquired from Mexico in 1848. The prominent northeastern Whig political economist Henry Carey also had ambivalent attitudes toward slavery. Despite his antislavery beliefs, Carey opposed antislavery politics in 1848 because he was certain that economic laws would compel slaveholders to emancipate their chattel in due time. From his perspective, there was no reason to act precipitously in the political sphere when economic considerations were sure to convert southerners into advocates of freedom. In his ideal world, antislavery sentiment need never mutate into antislavery politics. A notable fact for all three of these men is that their antislavery attitudes did not easily translate into political antislavery. Rather, their attitudes towards slavery shifted over time and according to context, and in some cases their value systems subordinated slavery to other concerns.

As these examples demonstrate, and as corollary quandaries over defining proslavery figures could easily show, historians must be explicit in defining their criteria when using the words *antislavery* or *proslavery* to describe the viewpoints of individuals or groups in society. In addition, they must remain sensitive to context in order to establish the shades of difference that are easily obscured by the polarizing terminology.

Consider what might be called the various "types" or "categories" of antislavery. One could be antislavery in the abstract, possessing what might be called antislavery sentiment, for a wide variety of not necessarily congruent reasons. The most prominent abolitionist argument was that slavery was a sin against God, and conjoined to that indictment was the claim that slavery brutalized black people. In addition to these explicitly moralistic abolitionist rationales, political critiques of slavery also proved potent, such as the idea that slave-

holders were a class of aristocrats who leveraged their antidemocratic control of southern society and politics to dominate the federal government at the expense of northern free men. Many northerners, such as Lincoln, also expressed alarm that slavery violated the nation's creed of freedom and made a mockery out of national ideas. Significantly, advocates of these political antislavery arguments did not need to subscribe to northern evangelical tenets, consider blacks equal, or even have sympathy for the plight of slaves. They simply had to desire that the idea of freedom and the interests of free states predominate in the national government. Economic concerns also generated antislavery sentiment, as illustrated by the Republicans' free labor ideology. The Republicans castigated slavery for limiting the opportunities of poor whites in the South, curtailing the economic aspirations of non-slaveholders in the western territories, and stunting the growth of the northern economy. More generally, Republicans insisted that southern opposition to high tariffs, free homesteads, and internal improvements inhibited both individual mobility and its concomitant, social progress. As with the moral and political arguments, economic antislavery ideas possessed their own inner logic and were not dependent on any other antislavery claim. Thus, to take one example, many inveterate racists avidly supported prohibitions on territorial slavery in order to preserve the western territories exclusively for whites.¹⁷

17. William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, vol. 1, Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976); Richards, *The Slave Power*; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Men, Free Labor: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); William M. Wiecek, *The Sources of Antislavery Constitutionalism in America, 1760–1848* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977); James Rawley, *Race and Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967; reprint, 2002). To be sure, the various antislavery arguments were not mutually exclusive. Republican concern for the fate of free labor, for instance, synchronized perfectly with the Republicans' fear of southern political power. More subtly, as Amy Dru Stanley has shown, northern middle-class ideals of domesticity created cultural attitudes about the sanctity of the family that abolitionists exploited through tales of violated slave women and separated slave families. Nevertheless, the antislavery arguments were distinct enough so that historians can identify with considerable precision what types of antislavery ideas an individual or group articulated and how those ideas changed over time. Moreover, historians can establish under what circumstances, if any, an individual or group's antislavery sentiment developed into antislavery politics. Amy Dru Stanley, "Home Life and the Morality of the Market," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 74–96.

The application of these categories to Lincoln and Douglas in the late 1850s is quite revealing. Although some historians have claimed that not much separated the two candidates on slavery, in fact Lincoln opposed slavery for all of the reasons listed above excepting probably its sinfulness, while Douglas opposed slavery, if he did at all, only due to its economic consequences, and even on this subject his beliefs were not unambiguous. For instance, Douglas argued in Congress in 1853 that American mechanics in armories should not be placed under military control because their exceptional skill and ingenuity resulted from their "right to think freely and boldly." He thought that placing mechanics under military discipline humbled and degraded them, and he did not wish to "put restraints upon the mind, upon the actions, upon the feelings of our mechanics." Doing so was "at war with the spirit of our institutions," he said, and would inhibit "the rapid progress we are making in all that gives us superiority over other nations." Even though he was not speaking about slavery, a sharp contrast between the productivity of free and slave labor was implicit in his words. But, unlike antislavery activists, Douglas did not believe that slave labor, whatever its faults, impeded the development of southern or American society. In a speech at the New York state agricultural fair in 1851, Douglas applauded the contributions of the slave economy to a burgeoning national and international marketplace. He contended that cotton served vital economic roles by breaking down foreign tariff barriers to American products, generating export monies to offset the cost of foreign imports, fueling northeastern textile production, and raising global living standards by enabling the production of cheap clothing. He maintained that other southern products, such as tobacco, sugar, and rice, likewise enhanced the export economy and enlivened domestic trade. In toto, he asserted that Americans benefited from their nation's diverse and complementary productions.¹⁸ Whether Douglas actually opposed black slavery for any reason, economics included, is therefore entirely questionable.¹⁹

18. William O. Lynch, "The Convergence of Lincoln and Douglas," *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* 32 (1925): 155–73; J. G. Randall, *Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg*, vol. 1 (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1945), 104–28; Wells, *Stephen Douglas*, 107–12; Donald, *Lincoln*, 225–27; *Congressional Globe*, 32nd Cong., 2nd Sess., 870; *Address of the Hon. Stephen A. Douglas at the Annual Fair of the New-York State Agricultural Society, held at Rochester, September, 1851* (Washington, D.C.: Jno. T. Towers, 1852), 7–14, 24.

19. Significantly, Douglas did oppose white slavery. Terming peon slavery in the territories annexed from Mexico a "revolting system," he lambasted its potential to condemn whites to everlasting servitude merely on account of debt. Finding this abhorrent and intolerable, Douglas unsuccessfully sought to prohibit it by congressional fiat under territorial law. Yet he was perfectly willing that the profit motive determine

By contrast, Douglas's hostility to antislavery activism cannot be doubted. Consider the various reasons for antebellum northerners to resist or ignore antislavery activism. One reason, cited by political economists like Henry Carey, was that economic progress would end slavery peacefully by leading southerners to embrace emancipation. Other northerners thought that slavery was unlikely to spread much further, whether due to climatic factors or to the superior productivity of free labor. Both ideas discouraged adherents from participation in antislavery politics, which seemed unnecessary at best and politically dangerous at worst. Other arguments, usually promoted by acknowledged opponents of the antislavery movement, focused on the potential costs of antislavery agitation. For instance, northern Democrats claimed that southerners would destroy the Union rather than submit to antislavery politics. Democrats also preyed on the fears of northern laborers by insisting that emancipated slaves would flock to the North looking for work. Lastly, northern Democrats warned that antislavery agitation might result in a slave insurrection, a possibility they played up in the wake of John Brown's raid. Democrats also tended to challenge the idea that slavery was morally wrong by inferring from black racial inferiority that slavery was only a limited injury to blacks, and perhaps no injury at all. Although seemingly counterintuitive today, this was hardly a preposterous argument at the time given the widespread contempt for blacks and the well-publicized southern contention that blacks benefited from paternal white supervision. The idea of black inferiority also gave rise to intensified assaults on black rights, such as Chief Justice Roger D. Taney's argument in the Dred Scott decision that blacks had no constitutional rights that whites were bound to respect.²⁰ Both of these racial arguments undercut the antislavery movement. One last factor inhibiting antislavery politics—common among northern Whigs and Democrats of

the fate of blacks. Although believing that humanist and Christian principles encouraged the extension of limited rights to blacks, he nevertheless conceded that whites found "virtue in slave labor" when it was profitable, and organized society accordingly. Douglas's vehement rejection of peon slavery strongly suggests that he did not consider black slavery immoral or unjust, and indicates that race was the fulcrum upon which the moral issue turned. *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 1143–44; *Kansas, Utah, and the Dred Scott Decision: Remarks of the Hon. S. A. Douglas, delivered in the Statehouse of Springfield, Ill., on the 12th of June, 1857* (n.p., 1857), 5. *Speeches of Senator S. A. Douglas, on the Occasion of His Public Receptions by the Citizens of New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Baltimore* (Washington, D.C.: Lemuel Towers, 1859), 5–6.

20. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 346–48.

southern extraction in the Ohio River Valley states—was a fondness for the South that caused adherents to shy from sectional conflict over slavery. In sharp contrast to the paucity of his antislavery sentiments, Douglas advanced every one of these anti-antislavery arguments.

Even more significantly, Douglas became arguably the North's most formidable intellectual opponent of antislavery politics. He did not merely lead northern political opposition to the Republican Party in the 1850s; he also was at the forefront of developing ideas to counteract the antislavery movement. A comparison to Lincoln is again instructive. Whereas Lincoln abandoned his reservations about antislavery politics in the 1850s and instead developed an extremely powerful moral and nationalistic critique of slavery, Douglas intensified his resistance to antislavery politics, becoming a leading proselytizer of the idea of black racial inferiority and probably the most zealous northern critic of the idea of black rights. As he frequently stated in the latter half of the 1850s, echoing Taney, blacks enjoyed only those rights whites deemed "consistent with the good and safety of society." Even more portentously, Douglas attempted to erase the incompatibility between slavery and national ideals of equality and freedom. He was well aware that the antislavery movement drew inspiration from the Declaration of Independence and that the doctrine of human equality was a stumbling block for anyone, such as himself, who needed to justify the possibility of slavery's expansion. Thus he forcefully and repeatedly denied that the Declaration of Independence applied to blacks. His argument was no mere political maneuvering; it was also a profound reinterpretation of American political thought designed to vitiate the moral critique of slavery and to justify slavery's perpetuity. Douglas's advocacy of this position placed him at the ideological as well as the political head of the northern opposition to the antislavery movement.²¹

In Douglas's defense, he repeatedly stated his expectation that popular sovereignty would yield free states. One could therefore argue, as Jaffa has, that Douglas covertly promoted freedom through popular sovereignty despite his public expressions of "pretended agreement" with the "prejudices" of slavery. However, Jaffa's argument is problematic. Most fundamentally, it presumes the falsity of Douglas's many statements sanctioning slavery where it was profitable, such as his 1858 declaration to audiences in New Orleans and Baltimore that had Illinoisans lived in the South's black belt districts, "we would have seen just as much virtue in slave labor as you do," and would

21. *Kansas, Utah, and the Dred Scott Decision*, 5.

have adhered to it “with the same tenacity.” Meanwhile, it credits Douglas with antislavery objectives that he may never have held. After all, popular sovereignty was not a free-soil policy. Instead, it was an alternative to antislavery extension policy from its inception in the late 1840s, designed not to produce free states but to preserve the Union from potentially cataclysmic sectional strife. Douglas’s objectives with popular sovereignty were primarily Unionist and expansionist. He intended to expand the Union safely despite radically different sectional perspectives on the desirability of slavery’s expansion. Antislavery objectives were, at best, distinctly secondary concerns to him, which was logical for an advocate of a policy designed to permit both slavery and freedom the chance to take root in federal territories. Free-soil expectations notwithstanding, popular sovereignty required him to approve of the expansion of slavery into formerly free territories if it actually occurred.²²

In this connection, it bears observing that Douglas had good reason to paint an overly rosy portrait of popular sovereignty’s antislavery consequences in his public addresses until the mid-1850s. As Don Fehrenbacher has contended, federal nonintervention with territorial slavery, later called popular sovereignty, had historically been a pro-slavery rather than a free-soil policy. Congress used nonintervention policy as an alternative to the antislavery Northwest Ordinance when organizing territories south of the Ohio River and later Louisiana Territory. Nonintervention uniformly led to the spread of slavery because slaveholders always carried slavery into new territories. Thus, by advocating nonintervention policy instead of the Wilmot Proviso in the late 1840s, Douglas was asking northerners to relinquish a policy excluding slavery from the national domain in favor of one that had consistently spread slavery. Understandably, he put a free-soil cast on nonintervention from the outset in order to build support among antislavery northerners. Indeed, his most antislavery interpretation of nonintervention came in an 1849 speech in Springfield, when he was trying to drum up support among his constituents for an alter-

22. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 57; *Speeches of Senator S. A. Douglas*, 6, 14. Notably, Jaffa did not accept that antislavery objectives were “secondary” to Douglas. Instead, he contended that Douglas’s “dominating purpose” was “simultaneously to open the floodgates of free-soil expansion and to avert civil war.” Thus Jaffa judged that popular sovereignty represented a perfect fusion of Unionism, expansionism, and free-soilism in Douglas’s thought. In contrast, I think that Douglas’s political record from the 1840s onward abundantly illustrates a trenchant support of both Unionism and national expansion, and a corresponding and predictable flexibility on slavery’s expansion. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 47–48, 62.

native to congressional exclusion of slavery from the Mexican Cession territories. That speech was the only time that Douglas could be considered to have expressed antislavery objectives, as opposed to free-soil expectations.²³

Strikingly, Douglas began deemphasizing the free-soil cast he had once given to nonintervention when southern anxieties about antislavery politics intensified in the mid-1850s. Culminating this changed emphasis in an 1860 Senate speech, Douglas documented the proslavery consequences of popular sovereignty and expressed support for the slave codes that had been established by the New Mexico territorial legislature. "Under this doctrine," he asserted, New Mexicans "have introduced and protected slavery in the whole of that Territory," converting "a tract of free territory into slave territory, more than five times the size of the State of New York." He observed that no other free territory had been turned into slave territory since the Revolution, and he asked southerners, "will not the same principle protect you in the northern States of Mexico when they are acquired, since they are now surrounded by slave territory; are several hundred miles further south; have many degrees of greater heat; and have a climate and soil adapted to southern products?" Given this rhetorical shift, understandable as it may have been, historians have as much reason to believe that Douglas deceived northerners with his earlier public statements of popular sovereignty's free-soil consequences as they have to believe that Douglas deceived the South with his later statements about the virtues of slavery. In both cases, he tailored his message to a specific audience in order to achieve a specific political outcome.²⁴

But Douglas should not be credited with antislavery credentials even if his free-soil expectations are conceded to have been genuine. After all, there is a significant difference between an expectation of primarily free-soil outcomes and a desire for exclusively free-soil outcomes, and there is an even larger difference between an expectation of and a commitment to free-soil outcomes. This is no small point. As a number of historians have observed, including Jaffa, popular sovereignty would not necessarily have resulted in free states if south-

23. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Sectional Crisis and Southern Constitutionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 28, 38–39; *Illinois State Register*, November 6, 1849. Douglas's unusually strong language was, "As a question of policy, therefore, on the part of those who desired to prevent the extension of slavery, non-interference was the true doctrine."

24. *Congressional Globe* (May 15, 16, 1860), 36th Cong., 1st Sess., *Appendix*, 314.

ern settlers predominated in a territory, if the United States acquired land to its south, if extensive use other than cotton were found for slave labor, if the Supreme Court under Roger Taney struck down antislavery territorial laws, or if southerners successfully exerted their political power to support proslavery advocates in the territories, as they attempted to do in Kansas. Given Douglas's unswerving commitment to preserve the Union, and southerners' unswerving commitment to protecting slavery, popular sovereignty might well have taken on a proslavery coloring had Douglas been elected president in 1860. Indeed, the 1860 Douglas Democratic platform indicated the potential for such a shift by advocating the acquisition of Cuba and by pledging to enforce future Supreme Court decisions on slavery in the territories. Douglas made these pledges in order to remain a viable presidential candidate for the entire nation. They were not the pledges of a free-soiler.²⁵

The paucity of Douglas's antislavery sentiments, in conjunction with his unyielding opposition to antislavery politics, thus profoundly undermines the argument that he was antislavery. By my definition, an antislavery figure must at minimum have expressed some kind of opposition to slavery, even if that person did not participate in an antislavery reform movement. But as we have seen, Douglas made virtually no criticism of slavery aside from the questionable statements McConnel attributed to him. Although he did express a preference for free institutions, his desire for freedom in the North did not imply opposition to southern slavery. On the contrary, he indicated indirectly on numerous occasions that he had no objection to the enslavement of blacks, which explains the congruence between his preference for northern freedom and his tolerance of southern slavery. Given the existing evidence, making an antislavery case for Douglas requires pervasive and unwarranted interpretive generosity on the part of historians.

Specifically, historians need to accept all of the following criteria in order to conclude that Douglas was antislavery. First, they must believe that George McConnel recalled Douglas's words with exceptional accuracy forty-six years after the fact. Second, they must believe that in 1854 Douglas expected popular sovereignty to result exclusively in free territories despite his knowledge that southern politicians overwhelmingly desired and implacably supported slavery's expansion.

25. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 387–99, 405–9; Donald Bruce Johnson, comp., *National Party Platforms, vol. 1, 1840–1956* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 31.

If he thought otherwise, he deliberately enabled slavery's possible expansion by helping to strike down the antislavery prohibition in the Missouri Compromise. Third, they must believe that Douglas's endorsement of popular sovereignty did not reflect a philosophical tolerance for black slavery and its possible expansion, but rather represented his adherence to a philosophical perspective that led him to define as moral virtually any outcome that was the product of a legal, democratic process, such as popular sovereignty. Meanwhile, they must define antislavery in such a way so as to include such views.²⁶ Fourth, they must believe that Douglas deliberately lied to southerners in the late 1850s about both the virtues of slavery and popular sovereignty's proslavery implications. Fifth, they must believe that Douglas expected popular sovereignty to result in free territories even after the Dred Scott decision indicated that the southern-dominated Supreme Court believed that slaveowners could not be deprived of their property in federal territories legally. If he thought otherwise, then his efforts to maintain the viability of popular sovereignty after the Court's ruling in 1857 effectively sought to win the allegiance of northerners to a policy that he knew might evolve into a proslavery policy. And sixth, given that Douglas attempted to extend the Missouri Compromise line west in order to preserve the Union during the secession crisis, historians would have to define antislavery to include men whose Unionism effectively effaced their antislavery values. As these criteria suggest, Douglas was not likely antislavery; and if he was, his antislavery was so modest that upon inspection it recedes virtually into invisibility.

Douglas should in fact be considered moderately proslavery. By my definition, a proslavery figure must have expressed some kind of support for slavery, even if that person did not advocate slavery's expansion. Douglas's record meets this criterion. The available evidence indicates that he considered black slavery to be moral and just. Moreover, and not incidentally, he predicated his popular sovereignty policy on the right of whites to enslave blacks. His advocacy of popular sovereignty did not merely reflect his faith in majoritarian democracy, as some historians have claimed, because he would not have sanctioned white slavery under any circumstances. To Douglas, as to

26. David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 167–91; James L. Huston, "Democracy by Scripture versus Democracy by Process: A Reflection on Stephen A. Douglas and Popular Sovereignty," *Civil War History* 63 (September 1997), 189–200. Both Zarefsky and Huston make a case for what Zarefsky calls Douglas's "procedural" morality. However, neither scholar claimed that Douglas was antislavery.

most southerners, black slavery was unobjectionable. In addition to this philosophical support of slavery, Douglas also defended slavery against antislavery attacks throughout his career. Not all northern Democrats made this choice. A significant minority refused to do so, eventually breaking with their party and joining the Republicans. In contrast to such men, Douglas became increasingly identified in the North with southern interests as the sectional crisis intensified, and he did as much as was realistically possible to preserve the Democratic Party from disruption. In the end, southerners rejected Douglas, not vice-versa, and only because their uncompromisingly proslavery politics left no room for more moderate defenders of the existing order, such as Douglas. They condemned as antislavery anything short of proslavery advocacy. Indeed, many of them denounced him as an abolitionist because of his unwillingness to endorse an unqualified proslavery interpretation of popular sovereignty. But we should not confuse their judgment with ours. Douglas's refusal to sanction the extreme demands of slavery's imperious advocates, however notable and consequential it may have been, was not the antebellum marker of antislavery conviction.²⁷

In the absence of new evidence, the default historical judgment that Douglas was antislavery should be reversed. To be sure, establishing Douglas's attitudes towards slavery is difficult, and no interpretation is beyond critique. This is partly due to the veil that he drew over the issue when he was alive, which is especially evident in his personal papers, and partly due to the contradictory evidence that he bequeathed in public statements. Nevertheless, with the exception of McConnel's recollections, the predominance of evidence strongly suggests that he was no opponent of slavery. Given that McConnel's forty-six-year-old memories are atypical, unverifiable, and questionable, we should not privilege them over a much larger and more trustworthy body of sources.

A proslavery interpretation of Douglas suggests some rethinking of antebellum northern politics. After all, Douglas was the leading spokesperson for well over one million northern Democratic voters, receiving approximately forty percent of the northern popular vote in the 1860 presidential election. If many of those voters shared his ideas on slavery, which is not an unreasonable assumption, then more support for slavery likely existed in the North by the late 1850s than

27. Leonards, *The Slave Power*, 134–215, and Sean Wilentz, "Slavery, Antislavery, and Jacksonian Democracy," in *The Market Revolution in America*, 202–23, are recent treatments of northern Democrats who broke with the South.

most historians have heretofore acknowledged. Although a growing body of work contends persuasively that northern Democratic politicians played a critical role in sustaining the political supremacy of slavery during most of the antebellum period, historians generally have portrayed the northern electorate as essentially antislavery. However, tolerance for slavery may have been growing during the late antebellum period among northerners who feared for the perpetuity of the Union and who did not perceive any necessary conflict between slavery and freedom. For such individuals, Stephen A. Douglas must have offered a congenial alternative to Abraham Lincoln.