

# The Chasm

In June 1858, following James Hammond's departure from Washington, Abraham Lincoln captured attention at the Republican Illinois State Convention by securing the nomination for the U.S. Senate. Aged forty-nine, Lincoln was set to face the younger Democratic incumbent, Stephen Douglas. Their competition fostered significant interest, especially given their contrasting physical presences—Lincoln's height of six-foot-four surpassing Douglas's stature significantly.

During the convention closing, Lincoln delivered a powerful, albeit potentially politically detrimental, address positioning himself firmly against slavery. His law partner, William Herndon, acknowledged the speech's moral validity but questioned its political prudence. In this address, Lincoln criticized Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, claiming it escalated the discord concerning slavery that the Missouri Compromise had temporarily quelled. He declared that a major crisis loomed, alluding to the biblical adage, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Lincoln argued that the government could not endure as half slave and half free.

Expressing his hopes, Lincoln articulated a desire to halt slavery's expansion rather than abolish it outright. He envisioned a future where public sentiment would lean towards its gradual extinction—however, he asserted that Douglas's legislation made this increasingly unattainable. He concluded his speech with a spirited confidence in the Republican Party's strength, fortifying belief in their eventual triumph against the proponents of slavery.

Despite ultimately losing the election, Lincoln's national profile surged, and the "house divided" phrase became a prophetic echo of the divisions to come in the nation.

In the months that followed, another prominent figure, Senator William H. Seward, spoke powerfully against slavery. In an October speech in Rochester, New York, he echoed Lincoln's warnings but went further, suggesting that the systems of slavery and free labor were fundamentally incompatible. He framed the struggle as an "irrepressible conflict," arguing that the United States would eventually become either entirely slaveholding or entirely committed to free labor. Asserting that the Democratic Party was fundamentally aligned with slaveholders, Seward emphasized the ongoing revolution against slavery in the United States. His address introduced pivotal phrases that would shape the political debate in the years ahead, solidifying the concept of an "irrepressible conflict" in the national consciousness.