



Stephen Douglas: The Last Years, 1857-1861

Damon Wells

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Stephen Douglas and the old Union lived out their last years together. It was the most critical time in the life of both the Illinois senator and his country. During most of the period 1857–1861 the American nation could still choose between adjustment of its sectional differences and civil war, and the man they called the Little Giant seemed the one statesman most likely to lead the country onto a course of compromise and reconciliation.

But Douglas' intense involvement with the American political scene—his great accomplishments in enacting the Compromises of 1850 and 1854, and his victory in the senatorial campaign of 1858—tended at times to disguise a growing alienation from the mainstream of American political life. By 1857 that alienation had reached acute proportions. In part, Douglas fell victim to his own virtues. He sought to be a nationalist in an age of sectionalism; he preached the value of compromise when most Americans questioned its worth.

In other respects, Douglas' political failures are less excusable. His attempt to convert an apparently amoral attitude toward slavery into a principle—popular sovereignty—found him dismissed by antislavery citizens as immoral and by proslavery citizens as unreliable. For too long, Douglas, professing to "care not" about the future of slavery, overlooked how much Americans could care once their consciences had been aroused or their way of life supposedly threatened.

Douglas failed to win the presidential campaign of 1860 largely because he could satisfy neither the proponents nor the enemies of slavery. Yet if the last years of Douglas' life were marred by failure, he was not ultimately the tragic figure some historians have suggested. During the campaign of 1860 a profound change began to take place in Stephen Douglas. The outmoded nationalism he had preached for so long began to give way to Unionism. In his eventual support of Lincoln and his defense of the Union, Douglas at last found a policy worthy of his great talents.

Damon Wells first became interested in Stephen Douglas in 1959 after seeing a Broadway dramatization of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Later, his studies convinced him that playwright and historian alike were often unfair to Douglas. If Lincoln was to be a hero, then Douglas had to be cast as a villain.

This study fills the need for a fresh and dispassionate look at Douglas and provides a fairer assessment than can be reached by simply endorsing contradictory views of apologists and critics. It places particular emphasis on the Little Giant's struggle with President James Buchanan, the debates with Lincoln, the presidential campaign of 1860, Douglas' complex relationship with the South, and a careful analysis of the elusive and at times exasperating principle of popular sovereignty.

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