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Terence Ball



ABRAHAM LINCOLN
*POLITICAL WRITINGS AND
SPEECHES*

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TERENCE BALL



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*For Mary Dietz
and
James Farr
In friendship*

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining be-

fore us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

The Gettysburg Address, Bancroft copy.

Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Preface

Abraham Lincoln is legendary among American presidents. And yet the Lincoln legend sometimes makes it difficult to find Lincoln the man, the politician – and the political thinker. My hope is that this addition to the vast literature on Lincoln aids that search in some small way.

Anyone who undertakes the task of selecting and annotating Lincoln's writings immediately faces several difficulties. First, Lincoln was a skilful politician who played his cards close to his vest. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to discern his "real" meaning. When he writes or says something that sounds despicably racist, for example, is he speaking from the heart or attempting to placate an audience of rabid racists? A second difficulty is that it is impossible to master the voluminous secondary literature on Lincoln, which continues to grow apace. This I know because when I agreed to edit this volume I tried – and finally failed – to master this massive *corpus*. But the attempt, although futile, was an education in itself.

On a happier note, I have gratefully incurred a number of debts to scholars and students who have helped me by commenting critically and constructively on my Introduction. I owe a special debt to Russell Hanson and James Read for their close and careful reading of and extensive comments on a first full draft. Randolph Clay Aldridge and Robert W.T. Martin supplied several suggestions and corrections. I owe a more unusual debt to several of my students. I issued a challenge to those taking my undergraduate course in American Political Thought. I asked them to comment critically on my draft Introduction, paying particular attention to obscure references or unclear prose and to passages that could be reduced or eliminated entirely. Three undaunted students –

Preface

Joseph Campa, David Moakley, and Shane Newlands – accepted that challenge, and this book is the better for their astute comments, criticisms, and suggestions. I would also like to thank my wife Judith for checking the typescript and for preparing the index.

Finally, though not least, I am indebted once again to Richard Fisher and to the editors of this series, Raymond Geuss and Quentin Skinner, for their patience and for commenting very helpfully on my Introduction.

T.B.

Madeline Island in Lake Superior

Introduction

Abraham Lincoln occupies a unique place in the American pantheon. Symbol, sage, myth, and martyr, he is an American icon and touchstone – Honest Abe and The Great Emancipator, a Janus-faced demigod sculpted in marble. But that is the post-assassination Lincoln. During his lifetime Lincoln elicited very different reactions. To the abolitionist agitator Wendell Phillips, he was “that slave-hound from Illinois.”¹ To the abolitionist author and orator Frederick Douglass Lincoln was “preeminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men.”² In the eyes of southern slave-holders and sympathizers Lincoln was a radical abolitionist turned tyrant, a view shared by John Wilkes Booth. “*Sic semper tyrannis!*” – thus always to tyrants – Booth shouted after shooting Lincoln.

My purpose here is to look at Lincoln as a political thinker. This is a more difficult task than might at first appear, for we cannot hope to understand Lincoln the thinker without understanding the constraints under which he thought and wrote and spoke. For Lincoln was, above all, a canny and shrewdly practical politician who had to win elections in order to accomplish anything at all. He was not an armchair philosopher who had the luxury of thinking and discoursing candidly (much less publicly) on the

¹ Wendell Phillips to WHH, n.d., in Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds, *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 704.

² Frederick Douglass, “Oration delivered on the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedman’s Monument in memory of Abraham Lincoln, April 14, 1876,” in Harold Holzer, ed., *The Lincoln Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Legacy* (New York: Library of America, 2009), p. 226.

great moral and political issues of the day – slavery in particular. As president he steered a complex course between the shoals of radical abolitionism and pro-slavery secessionism, southern sympathizers in the North and border-state loyalists. He was more on the abolitionists' side than they knew or acknowledged; but his actions were constrained by the Constitution, by his oath to uphold it, and by practical political necessity. If we are to understand Lincoln the political thinker, then we must put primary emphasis on the adjective "political," for his thought is embedded in his actions and the justifications he offers in their defense.

Early life and education

Little is known of Lincoln's early life, and much of what we think we know is mistaken. This much we can say for certain. Lincoln was born in 1809, in humble circumstances – and, yes, in a log cabin – on the rugged Kentucky frontier. That, however, did not distinguish him from most babies born in that hardscrabble region. His mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, died when he was nine, and Thomas Lincoln married the widow Sarah Bush Johnston shortly thereafter. Lincoln showed little affection for his hard driving father but he never ceased to sing the praises of his stepmother, who showed him the love and affection of a real mother. He had little formal education, and that was spotty and sporadic at best. He later tried to teach himself by reading every book he could lay his hands on, including the King James Bible and Shakespeare, whose lingering influence can be seen in the rolling periods of his later oratory. His illiterate father demeaned and discouraged Abraham's efforts at self-education and, with the notable exception of his stepmother, he received little or no encouragement from any other quarter. In an autobiographical sketch written for the 1860 presidential campaign Lincoln, describing himself in the third person, said that "the aggregate of his schooling did not amount to one year. He was never in a college or Academy as a student ... What he has in the way of education, he has picked up ... He regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply the want."³

And to that end he did quite a lot. A voracious reader throughout his life, he never ceased to marvel at the wonders of the written word. "*Writing* – the art of communicating thoughts to the mind, through the

³ AL, "Autobiographical Sketch," c. June, 1860 (see selection 1).

eye – is the great invention of the world.”⁴ His youngest stepsister recalled that “Abe was not energetic except in one thing – he was active & persistent in learning,” and she marveled at her brother’s practice of copying out, memorizing, and reciting long passages.⁵ Throughout his life Lincoln preferred to read aloud, to take words in through the ear as well as the eye. As Richard Hofstadter observes, “these are the reading habits of a man who is preparing for the platform.”⁶

The Lincoln family moved frequently. Abraham was seven when the Lincolns left Kentucky for Indiana. His youth there and later in Illinois was spent in hard physical labor, which ranged from splitting logs to make fence posts and rails, to plowing, planting, and harvesting, to working on a flatboat plying the waters of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Twice (in 1828 and 1831) he and a friend floated their produce-laden flatboat all the way to New Orleans, an experience that both broadened and darkened his horizons. In a New Orleans slave market he saw men, women, and children being sold at auction like cattle. On another trip, to Louisville, Kentucky, he saw “ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border.”⁷ Lincoln’s aversion to slavery was acquired early on.

So, apparently, was his fondness for politics. In 1832 the 23-year-old Lincoln announced his candidacy for the Illinois House of Representatives. He campaigned hard but lost decisively everywhere except in New Salem where he was well known and respected. When he volunteered to serve briefly in the militia during the Black Hawk War he was elected captain. He later joked that the only blood shed was his, drawn by hungry mosquitoes.⁸

Returning to New Salem, Lincoln worked by turns as hired hand, store clerk, mill hand, ferryman, surveyor, and other odd jobs. He longed for a less laborious and more genteel and respectable life. Frugal and hard-working, he invested his meager savings in a partner’s general store.

⁴ AL, “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” April 6, 1858, *SW* II, p. 7.

⁵ WHH interview with Matilda Johnston Moore, September 8, 1865, *Herndon’s Informants*, p. 109.

⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It*, 2nd edn (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 125.

⁷ AL to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855 (selection 5).

⁸ AL’s remarks ridiculing his part in the Black Hawk War take the form of a humorous aside in his otherwise serious “Speech on the Presidential Question,” July 27, 1848, *SW* I, pp. 205–21, at 214. Hofstadter ranks these remarks as “one of the classics of American frontier humor” (*American Political Tradition*, p. 159).

After his feckless partner drank up all the profits and died the store went bankrupt, leaving Lincoln with enormous debts. Although legally liable for his half only, Lincoln insisted on paying all creditors in full. His reputation as “honest Abe” would soon stand him in good stead.

Lincoln’s first campaign, although unsuccessful, had whetted his appetite for politics. In 1834 he ran again for the Illinois House of Representatives, as a Whig, and was elected. Whigs favored a protective tariff to encourage domestic manufacturing, and federal and state government expenditures on roads, railroads, bridges, and canals as a means of encouraging commerce within and between the states. The leading national Whig was Henry Clay of Kentucky, whom Lincoln called “my *beau ideal* of a statesman.”⁹ Closer to home, Lincoln was befriended by the prominent Illinois Whig, John Todd Stuart, the minority leader in the House. The two men roomed together at the state capital in Vandalia, and Stuart encouraged Lincoln to study the law in his spare time. Under Stuart’s tutelage he read Sir William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* and other works. Lincoln passed the Illinois bar examination and in September 1837 was licensed to practice law, which raised his standing among House colleagues and also helped secure his financial future. During his time in the Illinois House he also came to know another up-and-coming politician, the 21-year old Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, who was later to become Lincoln’s arch-rival and most formidable foe.

Lincoln’s career in the Illinois House of Representatives was undistinguished. He was instrumental in moving the state capital from Vandalia to Springfield, and in 1837 he and fellow representative Dan Stone sponsored a resolution opposing slavery and abolitionism alike – the former because “the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and on bad policy,” and the latter because “abolition doctrines” make matters worse by stirring the pot.¹⁰ Whether his rather conventional and conservative political views came from conviction or ambition we do not know. “He was always calculating and planning ahead,” his law partner later recalled. “His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.”¹¹ Lincoln longed for

⁹ AL, “A House Divided,” June 16, 1858 (selection 7). “Henry Clay was his favorite of all the great men of the nation[;] he all but worshiped his name”: J. Rowan Herndon to WHH, May 28, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, p. 8. See also AL’s eulogy for Henry Clay, July 6, 1852, *SW I*, pp 259–72.

¹⁰ “Protest in the Illinois Legislature on Slavery,” March 3, 1837, *SW I*, p. 18.

¹¹ WHH and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon’s Life of Lincoln*, ed. Paul M. Angle (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961), p. 304.

a larger stage, and to that end he cultivated friendships, campaigned for the Whig presidential candidate William Henry Harrison in 1840, married his social superior Mary Todd (of the slave-owning Kentucky Todds) in 1842, and sought (unsuccessfully) the Whig nomination for the US Congress in 1843. All the while he never refused an invitation to speak on topics ranging from temperance to the preservation of American political institutions.

Written and delivered not only to inform his audience but to impress them with his eloquence, Lincoln's early orations were rather conventional, and a far cry from the deft and self-assured speeches of the 1850s and early 1860s. But some, such as his 1838 speech to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, show the young lawyer-legislator to be a political thinker who had thought deeply about some serious questions. One of these is the question of the proper role of religion and remembrance in public life.

Little is known of Lincoln's religious beliefs. Critics claimed that he had none and was in fact a free-thinker or atheist. So widespread and persistent was this politically damning criticism that Lincoln felt it necessary to issue a public denial.¹² Although his denial was vague and apparently half-hearted, Lincoln wholeheartedly embraced and espoused an American *civil* religion. Like Machiavelli, Rousseau, and other republican thinkers he had probably never read, Lincoln believed that a shared civil religion was needed to cement the citizenry together from generation to generation. He spoke of the need for a "*political religion*" to bind Americans together.¹³ The English word "religion" derives from the Latin *ligare*, "to bind fast." A republican civil religion would tie citizens tightly to their origins, reminding them from where the republic came, and why. Thus a key feature of republican political thinking is its emphasis on *time* and *memory* or *remembrance*, especially of foundings and founders. The passage of time does what cannons cannot: It dims and even erases memory, most especially of the American Revolution and the Founding. "[What] invading foemen could *never* do, the silent artillery of time *has done*."¹⁴ Lincoln thought it imperative that citizens of the

¹² "Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity," July 31, 1846, in *SW I*, pp. 139–40.

¹³ "Address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," January 27, 1838 (selection 2); AL's italics.

¹⁴ Ibid. On the importance attached to time and memory by the republican tradition, see Bruce James Smith, *Politics and Remembrance* (Princeton University Press, 1985): A republic is "a type of regime erected upon the injunction: remember" (p. 7).

American republic should resist the ravages of time by commemorating – that is, remembering together – the origins of their republic, those who founded it, and the texts that serve as its secular scripture. As we shall see shortly, in the 1850s and finally and most memorably at Gettysburg in 1863, Lincoln elevated the Declaration of Independence to the status of American scripture.¹⁵

In addition to substantive speeches, Lincoln wrote letters to and satirical pieces for newspapers, and poetry that was nostalgic and sentimental, in the manner of the songs of Stephen Foster. And, not least, Lincoln presided over an increasingly successful law practice with his junior partner (and future biographer), William H. Herndon. For Lincoln the courtroom was a theater in which to practice and perfect his craft, not only as a lawyer but as a politician and orator. The tall, raw-boned, and physically powerful young attorney impressed clients and adversaries alike with his hard work, conscientious preparation, and capacity to build a convincing case backed by argument and evidence and illustrated with apt and often amusing anecdotes.

His increasingly lucrative law practice notwithstanding, Lincoln had lost none of his political ambition, and in 1846 he was nominated for and elected to the United States Congress. Determined to stand out and make a name for himself, Congressman Lincoln publicly and courageously questioned the constitutionality of President James K. Polk's decision to wage war with Mexico.¹⁶ But the Mexican-American War (1846–48) was wildly popular with most Americans – not least because it annexed Mexico's northern territories (most of present-day New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, California, and Nevada) to the United States – and Lincoln was not nominated for a second term.¹⁷ His first and only congressional term at an end, Lincoln returned to Illinois to practice law full time. The profitability of his law practice, along with his ever-growing family, seems to have quieted his political ambitions, at least for a time. He campaigned for other candidates but did not stand for office himself.

¹⁵ See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1997), especially pp. 197–215.

¹⁶ "Speech in the US House of Representatives on the War with Mexico," January 12, 1848, *SW* I, pp. 161–71. AL defends his speech in a letter to Herndon, February 15, 1848 (selection 3).

¹⁷ Lincoln's opposition to the war with Mexico continued to be used against him by political opponents. "While still in Congress," Senator Stephen A. Douglas said, "he distinguished himself by his opposition to the Mexican war, taking the side of the common enemy against his own country." First Lincoln–Douglas debate, August 21, 1858, *SW* I, pp. 500–501.

Then, in 1854, lightning struck. Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Democrat of Illinois, successfully sponsored the Kansas–Nebraska Act, which overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and allowed the extension of slavery into the western territories acquired in the Louisiana Purchase and the Cession following the war with Mexico. Written into the Act was Douglas’s doctrine of “popular sovereignty,” according to which white male settlers in the territories would decide democratically whether theirs was to be a free or a slave state. Outraged and unwilling to remain silent, Lincoln was determined to act.

Into the gathering storm

Writing of himself in the third person Lincoln recalled, “In 1854, his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before.”¹⁸ Although angry, he at first held his fire. He studied the language and the reasoning of the Act, looking for logical fallacies and historical inaccuracies. He made a careful study of the history of and justification offered for the Missouri Compromise. Like the lawyer he was, Lincoln constructed his case carefully and meticulously. After three months of preparation he was ready, and armed at all points.

With pro-slavery forces fighting “free soilers” in “bleeding Kansas,” and alarmed at the controversy he had helped to create, Senator Douglas returned to Illinois to defend his Act. Following Douglas all across the state, Lincoln took to the stump with the longest and best speech of his heretofore undistinguished career. His 17,000-word address took three hours to deliver and was fiery, learned, passionate and dispassionate by turns, and a *tour de force*. He tore into Douglas, his Kansas–Nebraska Act, and his doctrine of popular sovereignty in particular. How is it, Lincoln asked, that free men are entitled to decide, democratically, to enslave others?¹⁹ For his part, Douglas claimed to be indifferent to the spread of slavery and to be a democrat who would leave that decision to the will of the people (or rather, strictly speaking, to a majority of enfranchised white men). To this, Lincoln thundered:

¹⁸ “Autobiographical Sketch,” June 1860 (selection 1).

¹⁹ “Speech on the Kansas–Nebraska Act” (selection 4).

This *declared* indifference, but as I must think, covert *real* zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world – enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites – causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty – criticising the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but *self-interest*.²⁰

With the passage of the Kansas–Nebraska Act,

Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution ... Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it ... If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have saved it, as to make, and keep it, forever worthy of the saving.²¹

Fired up as never before, Lincoln reentered politics and won election to the state legislature. But when it became clear that anti-Nebraska Democrats and Whigs had gained control of the legislature, he resigned his seat to stand for the US Senate in 1855. (Under the original Constitution, and before the Seventeenth Amendment [1913], US senators were elected not by popular vote but by state legislatures.) Lincoln led in early balloting but began to lose ground. When it seemed certain that a Douglas ally and pro-Nebraska Democrat would win, Lincoln withdrew and threw his support to the anti-Nebraska Democrat Lyman Trumbull, who won on the tenth ballot. To say that Lincoln was disappointed would be an understatement. He had come close, but not close enough, to winning a seat in the United States Senate. He would have his turn again three years later.

The Kansas–Nebraska Act had set Kansas ablaze and divided the Democratic and Whig parties. The only party that was foursquare against the spread of slavery was the newly formed “free soil and free labor” Republican Party. Lincoln joined.

In Lincoln’s view the Kansas–Nebraska Act was nothing short of disastrous, but it was at least a disaster with the legislative remedy of repeal. And if the growing ranks of Republicans had their way, it would

²⁰ Ibid. ²¹ Ibid.

be remedied. But in 1857, three years after the Act, came another and even heavier blow in the form of a decision handed down by the United States Supreme Court.

Dred Scott was a slave whose master had taken him to the free state of Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory, and Scott argued that he was therefore free since slavery was not legal in any free state or territory. When the case reached the US Supreme Court, a majority (seven of nine Justices) ruled that Scott was not and could not be a citizen and so had no "standing" to bring a case; but, clearly contradicting itself, the Court took the case anyway, ruling against Scott. That tortured and lengthy majority opinion, written by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, is succinctly summarized by Lincoln:

The Constitution of the United States forbids Congress to deprive a man of his property, without due process of law; the right of property in slaves is distinctly and expressly affirmed in that Constitution; therefore, if Congress shall undertake to say that a man's slave is no longer his slave, when he crosses a certain line into a territory, that is depriving him of his property without due process of law, and is unconstitutional.²²

But the loss was not Scott's alone. The Dred Scott decision was radical and far-reaching. Indeed, it went much further than the Kansas-Nebraska Act, in that it declared the Missouri Compromise to have been unconstitutional and said that Congress could not exclude slavery anywhere, including already-existing free states and future states to be carved out of the Western territories.²³ The Court also declared that even free Negroes and mulattos were not and could never be citizens of the United States, adding that blacks are "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."²⁴

²² AL, "Speech at Columbus, Ohio," September 16, 1859, *SW* II, p. 52. The Dred Scott decision reads like an extended gloss of the argument advanced by South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun in his "Speech on the Oregon Bill" (June 27, 1848), in *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Ross M. Lence (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1992), especially p. 557.

²³ On the decision's impact see Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁴ *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), in Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History*, 2 vols, 7th edn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), vol. I, pp. 339-45, at 342.

The Dred Scott decision seemed to have dealt a decisive blow to the Republican Party's goal of stopping the spread of slavery.²⁵ Greatly alarmed at the prospect of slavery's further extension, Lincoln once again entered the fray with a measured but blistering attack on that decision and on Douglas, who had defended it. The core of Lincoln's critique was the error and absurdity of Taney's and Douglas's assertion that the Declaration of Independence's promise of equality applies only to whites, not to blacks. This, says Lincoln, is a blatant distortion of the plain words of the Declaration that "all men are created equal." The words "all men" mean "*all* men." Slavery tramples the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and sometimes the right to life itself. Once held sacred, the Declaration is now demeaned and defamed: "To aid in making the bondage of the negro universal and eternal, it is assailed, and sneered at, and construed, and hawked at, and torn, till, if its framers could rise from their graves, they could not at all recognize it."²⁶

To read the Declaration as Lincoln and the Republicans read it, Douglas claimed, not only would eventually destroy the institution of slavery but would allow blacks to associate with whites on equal terms. The unacceptable upshot will be that blacks will intermarry (or "amalgamate") with whites. Lincoln's reply was by turns humorous, acerbic, and principled. Douglas and other Democrats are "especially horrified at the thought of the mixing blood by the white and black races: agreed for once—a thousand times agreed. There are white men enough to marry all the white women, and black men enough to marry all the black women; and so let them be married."²⁷ And: "I protest against that counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a *slave* I must necessarily want her for a *wife*. I need not have her for either, I can just leave her alone." And then, anticipating an argument he would use against Douglas a year later, Lincoln added: "In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of anyone else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others."²⁸

In the wake of the Dred Scott decision American slavery had acquired a new lease on life. Having been both ardent and articulate in his opposition

²⁵ The Dred Scott decision could be countermanded in only one of two ways: Either the Court could reverse itself by rescinding its decision; or the Constitution could be amended (which is what happened in 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment). See selection 49.

²⁶ "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," June 26, 1857 (selection 6). ²⁷ Ibid. ²⁸ Ibid.