

## 11. LINCOLN INTERPRETS THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

*The discussion stage of the great controversy over slavery reached its climax on the speaker's platform, in the formulation of political philosophy, and in Court decisions during the 1850's. The Dred Scott Decision was announced by the Supreme Court on March 7, 1857. Lincoln held that the Court had made a bad decision and had wrongly interpreted the law of the land. In a great speech a few months after the Dred Scott Decision had been handed down he appealed to the Declaration of Independence and inquired into the intentions of the framers and the meaning of some of the stirring clauses of that famous document in support of his view.*

I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include *all* men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects*. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal with “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This they said, and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit.

They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered

by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere. The assertion that “all men are created equal” was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration not for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be—as, thank God, it is now proving itself—a stumbling-block to all those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism. They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should reappear in this fair land and commence their vocation, they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack.

LINCOLN SPRINGFIELD SPEECH, JUNE 26, 1857.

## 12. “A HOUSE DIVIDED”

*On June 16, 1858, Lincoln took one of the most fateful steps of his career. The occasion was a speech delivered at the close of the Republican State Convention of Illinois which had just nominated him as the Republican Party's candidate for United States Senator. Before delivering his speech, Lincoln, on one of the rare occasions when he asked advice, called together a small group of party leaders and close friends and read to them the opening paragraph. Should he deliver it as written? With only one exception they all advised against it. They said to do so would bring ruin to him and the party in the forthcoming election. The one exception was William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner. He urged him to deliver it as written and declared that if he did so it would make him President. Lincoln gave the speech unchanged. As was foreseen by the shrewd party leaders, the advanced view caused alarm, and in the ensuing campaign Douglas made political capital of this fact. Lincoln was defeated; but the speech, and those that followed almost immediately in the famous debate with Douglas, marked Lincoln as a national figure.*