

By the Kansas Historical Society

Stephen Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act

Stephen Douglas was a democratic senator from Illinois. He believed in manifest destiny. He wanted to see the United States expand west. Douglas knew the country was split over the issue of slavery. When Congress reached the Compromise of 1850, he was the one who suggested the idea of popular sovereignty for Utah and New Mexico territories.



When it was time to organize the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, Stephen Douglas once again proposed the idea of popular sovereignty. He became well known as the man behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The act was very unpopular among those people who did not want slavery to expand. In reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Republican Party was formed.

In 1858, after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Douglas found himself in a fight to keep his senate seat. Abraham Lincoln ran against him as a member of the newly-formed Republican Party. The two candidates participated in seven political debates. Both candidates were excellent speakers and their debates gained a great deal of attention. Abraham Lincoln spoke against the expansion of slavery into the territories, including Kansas. Stephen Douglas spoke in favor of popular sovereignty.

Lincoln lost the senate seat to Stephen Douglas. But his debate with Douglas made him famous. Lincoln was elected two years later as the sixteenth president of the United States.

Stephen Douglas' defense of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was recorded in the Congressional Globe in 1854. From 1833-1873 the Globe provided transcripts of the debates in Congress. A portion of Douglas' defense is provided here.

THE CONGRESSIONAL GLOBE

The Senate, as in Committee of the Whole, proceeded to the consideration of the bill to organize the Territory of Nebraska.

MR. DOUGLAS. Mr. President, when I proposed on Tuesday last, that the Senate should proceed to the consideration of the bill to organize the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas, it was my purpose only to occupy ten or fifteen minutes in explanation of its provisions. ...

Upon the other point – that pertaining to the question of slavery in the Territories – it was the intention of the committee to be equally explicit. We took the principles established by the compromise act of 1850 as our guide, and intended to make each and every provision of the bill accord with those principles.

Those measures established and rest upon the great principle of self-government – that the people should be allowed to decide the questions of their domestic institutions for themselves, subject only to such limitations and restrictions as are imposed by the Constitution of the United States, instead of having them determined by an arbitrary or geographical line.

The original bill reported by the committee, as a substitute for the bill introduced by the Senator from Iowa, [Mr. Dodge,] was believed to have accomplished this object. The amendment which was subsequently reported by us was only designed to render that clear and specific which seemed, in the minds of some, to admit of doubt and misconstruction. In some parts of the country the original substitute was deemed and construed to be an annulment or a repeal of what has been known as the Missouri compromise, while in other parts it was otherwise construed. As the object of the committee was to conform to the principles established by the compromise measures of 1850, and to carry those principles into effect in the Territories, we thought it was better to recite in the bill precisely what we understood to have been accomplished by those measures, viz: That the Missouri compromise, having been superseded by the legislation of 1850, has become inoperative, and hence we propose to leave the question to the people of the States and the Territories, subject only to the limitations and provisions of the Constitution. ...

