

## KARMIC THEMES: LINCOLN AND DOUGLAS

Illinois reunited some dense karmic threads in the time leading to the Civil War. Lincoln's early legal career brought him into connection with Stephen T. Logan. In his office worked four future US senators and three governors of states.<sup>1</sup> The 1836–37 Illinois legislature included one future president of the United States, one presidential contender, five future federal senators, seven future federal representatives, one governor, and three generals.<sup>2</sup>

Both lawyer/politicians adopted Illinois as their home state after immigrating there. Lincoln came from Kentucky, a slave state. Stephen Douglas who came from Vermont had not known slavery; he came closer to it, however, through marriage and political choices. The two present one stark contrast after the other; a leitmotif of polarities piles up at every possible level.

Douglas was the son of a physician of a long-established Vermont family with links to Revolutionary days. His paternal grandfather had served five terms in the Vermont General Assembly. His father died when Douglas was two, and the family fell from fortune. Douglas apprenticed with a Vermont cabinetmaker, but quit after eight months. He first moved to Cleveland, then to St. Louis, and finally west-central Illinois, where Lincoln had arrived four years earlier.

Like Lincoln Douglas soon became interested in the political debate, siding with the Jackson Democrats from age fifteen. As Lincoln fixed his allegiance to Whig politics immediately, so Douglas recalls, "From this moment [fixing his attention on Jackson], my politics became fixed, and all subsequent reading, reflection and observation have but confirmed my early attachment to the cause of Democracy."<sup>3</sup>

The two rivals contrasted in more than one way. Lincoln was detached and rational, moreover, abstemious; Douglas loved alcohol, women, and cigars. He was an impulsive fighter. And nothing could contrast more than the physical appearance of the two lawyers.

As Lincoln was tall and lanky, so was Douglas unusually short with a massive head. His abundant dark hair and flashing eyes, his aggressive, combative, defiant attitude was accompanied with great resources of energy, self-confidence, and audacity. Always impeccably dressed, he was a renowned and feared orator with great ease in language, attacking with force and vehemence his opponents. He could be evasive when convenient, but able to charm or please his audience, knowing what their prejudices were and willing

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<sup>1</sup> Albert A. Woldman, *Lawyer Lincoln*, 39

<sup>2</sup> Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit*, 10.

to exploit them. All of these qualities earned him the moniker "little giant." Already in the early 1830s, his personal impulsiveness drove Douglas to extremes, such as the caning of the journalist Simeon Francis for something he had said that had incensed Douglas's pride.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that Lincoln and Douglas first met in 1834, but nothing worth noting emerged from the early days. Douglas was working on behalf of John Wyatt, a Democratic legislator. Like Lincoln he was an itinerant attorney, for the First Judicial District covering eight counties, among which Lincoln's Sangamon. The two started gaining a reputation, though in different ways. An apparently popular judgment in Illinois was that "With a good case, Lincoln is the best lawyer in the State, but in a bad case, Douglas is the best lawyer the State can produce."<sup>5</sup>

Already Douglas's ambition was aiming much higher. He found an outlet in organizing what was practically the first American political convention for the Democrats in December of 1835. With the popularity and reputation he gained, he easily was elected to office in his district in 1836, at age twenty-three. In the same year Douglas had also been awarded the appointment of registrar of the Springfield Land Office, a political reward for helping the election of president Van Buren. From this he derived an additional income of three thousand dollars in interests and fees.

Thanks to his political organizing skills, Douglas was nominated for Congress to replace the Democrat William L May, who had fallen in political disgrace. Interestingly Douglas and Lincoln confronted each other in court on a murder case, which had links to Douglas's nomination for Congress, the deposition of William May from Congress having been the motivation for the murder. Lincoln won the case that led to the acquittal of the presumed murderer, and Douglas was defeated by a narrow margin.<sup>6</sup>

The paths of the political contenders started intertwining more and more. Having become the leaders of Whigs and Democratic youths respectively, they debated each other in 1839 for three days, especially around the issue of the national bank, opposed by the Van Buren Democrats. Lincoln was keenly aware of having been defeated by his rival and of failing to promote the view of the national bank.

Douglas continued to ascend the political ladder at vertiginous speed. After the Democrat Harrison's victory for the presidency, the young politician became the Illinois Secretary of State at the unprecedented age of twenty-seven. Not content with this achievement, he also filled a vacant seat on the Illinois Supreme Court, to which Lincoln had opportunity to present cases. Two years later Douglas was elected to the US Senate, while Lincoln lost his

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<sup>4</sup> Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Albert A. Woldman, *Lawyer Lincoln*, 257.

<sup>6</sup> Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit*, 21.

congressional seat and returned to the practice of the law and to his new wife Mary Todd, another interesting mutual connection and rivalry of the two ambitious politicians.

It is true that Douglas faced the handicap of Mary's entrenched personal and family Whig loyalties. Douglas and Mary flirted publicly for a while, but Mary later told a friend that she had turned down his offer for marriage. In a striking manner, while still in Kentucky, Mary had often joked that "she intended to marry a man who would some day become President of the United States."<sup>7</sup> The lucky choice rewarded her between the two contenders.

Douglas married instead Martha Martin of South Carolina, soon inheriting a 20% commission on all profits of a 2,500-acre cotton plantation in Mississippi with some one hundred and fifty slaves as part of it. This caused him no doubt some political embarrassment, but earned him political capital with the South.

By the end of the 1850s Douglas's career had been one of success after success; that of Lincoln alternated some success with many failures. In the winter of 1855–56 Lincoln reminisced in writing: "We were both young men; he a trifle younger than me [Lincoln was 4 years older]. Even then we were very ambitious; I, perhaps, quite as much as he. With me the race of ambition has been a failure—a flat failure; with him it has been a splendid success. His name fills the nation; and is not unknown, even, in foreign lands."<sup>8</sup> While Lincoln had returned to anonymity in Illinois, Douglas was becoming the most powerful member of the US Senate.

Even though retired from public office, and maybe unbeknownst to himself, Lincoln had accumulated considerable political and human capital, which offers us indications, however vague, of his karmic connections. In his profession he gained the reputation that led to his nickname "Honest Abe" or "Honest Old Abe." Here the "old" did not carry a direct relationship to age. Later on people in his White House entourage called him "the Ancient One" because of his seasoned wisdom. This aura of respect was also tenderly reflected by Lincoln's associate of twenty-three years, Bill Herndon, who could never depart from calling his elder Mr. Lincoln. It seems unconscious inklings pointed to Lincoln's hidden and deeper stature, his seasoned karmic being.

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<sup>7</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Roy Morris Jr., *The Long Pursuit*, 1.