

Abraham Lincoln's Views on Slavery

Abraham Lincoln was anti-slavery even though he was not an abolitionist. Prior to the Civil War, abolitionists believed that not only should slavery be ended, but done so immediately, and without a gradual plan for its removal. The entire Southern economy was based upon slavery, and the immediate ending of slavery would have undoubtedly crashed the American economy. Lincoln believed that slavery should be ended gradually by preventing it from spreading into new territories, and letting it wear out in the southern states. The following writing from Lincoln, believed to have been written sometime in the 1850s, explains Lincoln's views on slavery as morally wrong.

“If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B.—why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A?—

You say A. is white, and B. is black. It is *color*, then; the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own.

You do not mean *color* exactly?—You mean the whites are *intellectually* the superiors of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own.

But, say you, it is a question of *interest*; and, if you can make it your *interest*, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.”

(excerpted from Don E. Fehrenbacher, Abraham Lincoln; A Documentary Portrait Through His Speeches and Writings (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964).

Questions

1. How does Abraham Lincoln feel about slavery?
2. Why does Lincoln feel this way?
3. Looking for clues in Lincoln's writing, what do you think are some of the arguments Southerners are making in support of slavery before the Civil War?
4. How might an abolitionist respond to this view on slavery?
5. Do you believe Lincoln successfully argues his point against slavery? Why or why not?