

Stephen Douglas

1813–1861



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Stephen Douglas was best known for his series of debates with opponent Abraham Lincoln.



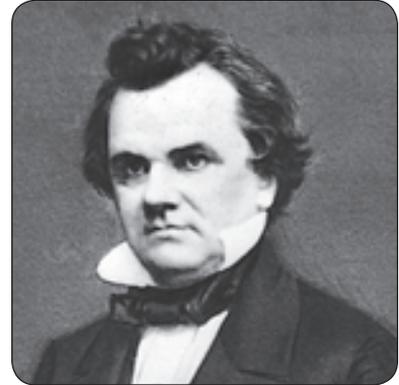
As you read the biography below, think about the strength and energy Stephen Douglas must have had to earn the nickname “Little Giant.”

Stephen Douglas became interested in politics as a young man. When he was 20, Douglas traveled from Vermont to Illinois, where he was elected as a prosecuting attorney. He was elected to Illinois State Legislature in 1836.

During the next 10 years, Douglas was elected to the Supreme Court of Illinois, the U.S. House of Representatives, and finally the U.S. Senate. Douglas was a short man, but he had a large head and broad shoulders. His fellow senators respected Douglas’s energy and strength, and gave him the nickname “Little Giant.”

The most divisive issue of the era was slavery. Douglas tried to bridge the gap between the pro-slavery faction and abolitionists. He was instrumental in the passage of the Compromise of 1850, which attempted to ease tensions over the slavery issue. In 1854 Douglas was largely responsible for the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would allow new states to determine whether they would be free or allow slavery. Douglas called this idea **popular sovereignty**. Douglas hoped the Kansas-Nebraska Act would appease both sides of the slavery issue, but it actually inflated the conflict.

In 1858 Douglas was seeking reelection to the Senate. Abraham Lincoln, a man who was not



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VOCABULARY

popular sovereignty rule by the people

widely known at that time, was running against him. Douglas and Lincoln engaged in a series of public meetings, where they debated on various issues.

The main issue of the Lincoln-Douglas debates was slavery. Douglas still advocated popular sovereignty. Lincoln opposed this idea. Lincoln said that there could be no harmony in a nation that was half-slave and half-free.

Douglas was reelected to the Senate, but some of his statements during the Lincoln-Douglas debates had angered many Southern Democrats. In 1860 Douglas received the Democratic nomination to run for president against the Republican candidate Lincoln. But Southern Democrats refused to back Douglas and nominated their own candidate, John C. Breckinridge. Douglas lost the election, and Lincoln was elected president.

By the time of the Civil War, Douglas was fully in support of President Lincoln and the Union. He was quoted as saying, “There can be no neutrals in this war: only patriots—or traitors.” Stephen Douglas died in 1861.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What was Stephen Douglas’s view on slavery?

2. **Evaluation** Why do you think Douglas lost the presidential election to Abraham Lincoln? Explain your answer.

ACTIVITY

3. Imagine that you were able to watch the Lincoln-Douglas debates as they occurred. Write a creative journal entry about what you may have witnessed or learned at these public meetings.