17. SLAVERY AND THE SOUTH

Lincoln's position on the question of the institution of slavery in the Southern States was greatly misunderstood by many people during the period when the extension of slavery was violently agitated. His political enemies repeatedly accused him of being an abolitionist. He always denied this and made constant attempts to state his position clearly and to be correctly understood on this point. There is no evidence that he ever changed his position on this subject. All his speeches and public statements after the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill to the time of his death show an undeviating consistency on this point. He fully understood the social complexities and ramifications of the slavery system in southern economy, and he sympathized with the people of the South in their problems concerning it. In the first of the series of memorable debates with Douglas, Lincoln, at Ottawa, read an excerpt from his great speech at Peoria in 1854, 4 years earlier, in which he had stated his position regarding the South and the race question. He said his views on that subject remained unchanged. Douglas in the course of the debates repeatedly tried to place Lincoln in a bad light in regard to this matter. Here are Lincoln's words:

Before proceeding, let me say I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist among them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses North and South. Doubtless there are individuals on both sides who would not hold slaves under any circumstances; and others who would gladly introduce slavery anew, if it were out of existence. We know that some Southern men do free their slaves, go North, and become tip-top Abolitionists; while some Northern ones go South, and become most cruel slave-masters.

When Southern people tell us they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery than we, I acknowledge the fact. When it is said that the institution exists, and that it is very difficult to get rid of it in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself. If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia—to their own native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me that whatever of high hope (as I think there is) there may be in this in the long run, its sudden execution is im-

possible. If they were all landed there in a day, they would all perish in the next ten days; and there are not surplus shipping and surplus money enough in the world to carry them there in many times ten days. What then? Free them all, and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain that this betters their condition? I think I would not hold one in slavery at any rate; yet the point is not clear enough to me to denounce people upon. What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment is not the sole question, if, indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, cannot be safely disregarded. We cannot make them equals. It does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted; but for their tardiness in this, I will not undertake to judge our brethren of the South.

When they remind us of their constitutional rights, I acknowledge them, not grudgingly, but fully and fairly; and I would give them any legislation for the reclaiming of their fugitives, which should not, in its stringency, be more likely to carry a free man into slavery, than our ordinary criminal laws are to hang an innocent one.

LINCOLN REPLY IN OTTAWA JOINT DEBATE,
AUGUST 21, 1858.