Synopsis

In the 1858 campaign for the Senate, Lincoln's opponent, Stephen A. Douglas, engaged in shameless race baiting, falsely denouncing Illinois Republicans for championing black citizenship rights. Douglas repeatedly quoted a speech that Lincoln made at Chicago early in the canvass: “let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man – this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position . . . . Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal.” In response to Douglas's demagoguery, Lincoln felt compelled to state later in the campaign: “I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes.”

Seven years thereafter, Lincoln reversed himself, publicly endorsing limited black suffrage while defending a new state constitution adopted in Louisiana: “It is . . . unsatisfactory to some that the elective franchise is not given to the colored man [in the Louisiana constitution]. I would myself prefer that it were now conferred on the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers.”

Lincoln changed his mind largely because blacks had joined the Union army and navy in large numbers and thus helped the North win the war. In addition, he came to know and admire articulate black leaders like Frederick Douglass.