



## Excerpt, Lincoln's Electric Cord Speech (1858)

### Historical Background

Abraham Lincoln gave the speech excerpted here, which came to be known as the "Electric Cord Speech," as celebrations of the nation's 82nd Independence Day were underway in 1858. The speech was part of Lincoln's challenge to [Stephen A. Douglas](#) for the Illinois Senate seat. This speech set the stage for the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, which began a few weeks later, between August 21 and October 15. Although Lincoln did not win the Senate seat, the campaign established him as the undisputed leader of the newly founded Republican Party and propelled him to the Presidency in 1860.

In just over 80 years, the population of the U.S. had decupled (grown 10X)! As Lincoln stated, much of this growth was due to immigration, a right the Founders complained King George III was clipping when they declared independence. As the 1840s and 1850s saw massive European immigration, anti-immigrant (especially anti-Catholic) sentiment and riots broke out, creating a national tension over who was truly "American." The debate over slavery was also fracturing the nation, forcing a re-examination of the Declaration of Independence's promise of equality.

In the speech, the future President and victorious Commander-in-Chief of the Civil War, set out his view of what defined an American, based on the principles of the Declaration of Independence. This definition continues to be under debate today.

### Consider these questions as you read the document

1. What does Lincoln mean by the "electric cord" in the Declaration of Independence, and why does he believe it is more powerful than shared blood or ancestry? Use specific phrases from the excerpt to support your answer.
2. How does Lincoln define what it means to be an American in this speech? According to Lincoln, what matters more: where a person comes from, or what principles they believe in?
3. Do you think Lincoln's idea that shared ideals can unite people from different backgrounds is still relevant today? Why or why not?

### Original Text

. . . Now, it happens that we meet together once every year, sometime about the 4th of July, for some reason or other. These 4th of July gatherings I suppose have their uses. If you will indulge me, I will state what I suppose to be some of them.

We are now a mighty nation, we are thirty—or about thirty millions of people, and we own and inhabit about one-fifteenth part of the dry land of the whole earth. We run our memory back over the pages of history for about eighty-two years and we discover that we were then a very small people in point of numbers, vastly inferior to what we are now, with a vastly less extent of country,—with vastly less of everything we deem desirable among men.

[W]e look upon the change as exceedingly advantageous to us and to our posterity, and we fix upon something that happened away back, as in some way or other being connected with this rise of prosperity. We find a race of men living in that day whom we claim as our fathers and grandfathers; they were iron men, they fought for the principle that they were contending for; and we understood that by what they then did it has followed that the degree of prosperity that we now enjoy has come to us. We hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the good done in this process of time of how it was done and who did it, and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves—we feel more attached the one to the other and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit. In every way we are better men in the age, and race, and country in which we live for these celebrations.

But after we have done all this we have not yet reached the whole. There is something else connected with it. We have besides these men—descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, they are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French and Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us.

[B]ut when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, (loud and long continued applause) and so they are.

That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world. [Applause.]