

Dred Scott v. Sandford / Abraham Lincoln Speech Analysis—Answer Key

Directions:

Read the excerpts of President Lincoln's speech¹ below and create an outline of the reasons Lincoln gives for his view that the decision is "erroneous" (incorrect).

Lincoln's reasons the decision is erroneous:

- Chief Justice Taney, "denounces all who question the correctness of that decision, as offering violent resistance to it."
- Opinion was "based on assumed historical facts which are not really true"
- Chief Justice Taney assumes "that the public estimate of the black man is more favorable now than it was in the days of the Revolution. This assumption is a mistake."
- the Declaration of Independence declares that "all men are created equal."

Outline his objections to the dissenting opinion as well.

Lincoln's objections to the dissenting opinion:

- "see what a mere wreck-mangled ruin-it makes of our once glorious Declaration."
- "...Declaration promised something better than the condition of British subjects; but no, it only meant that we should be equal to them in their own oppressed and unequal condition."
- "it gave no promise that having kicked off the King and Lords of Great Britain, we should not at once be saddled with a King and Lords of our own."

When you finish the outline, write an argumentative essay expressing your own views on the decision. Which of Lincoln's arguments, if any, did you find most persuasive? Which of Lincoln's arguments, if any, do you find objectionable? Support your opinions with reasons and, whenever possible, use specific phrases from the speech to illustrate your points.

June 26, 1857

Fellow citizens ...

¹ Source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/speech-on-the-dred-scott-decision/>

And now as to the *Dred Scott* decision. That decision declares two propositions-first, that a negro cannot sue in the U.S. Courts; and secondly, that Congress cannot prohibit slavery in the Territories. It was made by a divided court-dividing differently on the different points. Judge Douglas does not discuss the merits of the decision; and, in that respect, I shall follow his example.

He denounces all who question the correctness of that decision, as offering violent resistance to it.

If this important decision had been made by the unanimous concurrence of the judges, and without any apparent partisan bias, and in accordance with legal public expectation, and with the steady practice of the departments throughout our history, and had been in no part, based on assumed historical facts which are not really true; or, if wanting in some of these, it had been before the court more than once, and had there been affirmed and re-affirmed through a course of years, it then might be, perhaps would be, factious, nay, even revolutionary, to not acquiesce in it as a precedent.

I have said, in substance, that the *Dred Scott* decision was, in part, based on assumed historical facts which were not really true; and I ought not to leave the subject without giving some reasons for saying this; I therefore give an instance or two, which I think fully sustain me. Chief Justice Taney, in delivering the opinion of the majority of the Court, insists at great length that negroes were no part of the people who made, or for whom was made, the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution of the United States.

On the contrary, Judge Curtis, in his dissenting opinion, shows that in five of the then thirteen states, to wit, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey and North Carolina, free negroes were voters, and, in proportion to their numbers, had the same part in making the Constitution that the white people had. He shows this with so much particularity as to leave no doubt of its truth; and, as a sort of conclusion on that point, holds the following language:

“The Constitution was ordained and established by the people of the United States, through the action, in each State, of those persons who were qualified by its laws to act thereon in behalf of themselves and all other citizens of the State. In some of the States, as we have seen, colored persons were among those qualified by law to act on the subject. These colored persons were not only included in the body of `the people of the United States,- by whom the Constitution was ordained and established; but in at least five of the States they had the power to act, and, doubtless, did act, by their suffrages, upon the question of its adoption.”

Again, Chief Justice Taney says: “It is difficult, at this day to realize the state of public opinion in relation to that unfortunate race, which prevailed in the civilized and enlightened portions of the world at the time of the Declaration of Independence, and when the Constitution of the United States was framed and adopted.” And again, after quoting from the Declaration, he says: “The

general words above quoted would seem to include the whole human family, and if they were used in a similar instrument at this day, would be so understood.”

In these the Chief Justice does not directly assert, but plainly assumes, as a fact, that the public estimate of the black man is more favorable now than it was in the days of the Revolution. This assumption is a mistake.

It is grossly incorrect to say or assume, that the public estimate of the negro is more favorable now than it was at the origin of the government.

I have now briefly expressed my view of the meaning and objects of that part of the Declaration of Independence which declares that “all men are created equal.”

Now let us hear Judge Douglas’ view of the same subject, as I find it in the printed report of his late speech. Here it is:

“No man can vindicate the character, motives and conduct of the signers of the Declaration of Independence except upon the hypothesis that they referred to the white race alone, and not to the African, when they declared all men to have been created equal—that they were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and residing in Great Britain—that they were entitled to the same inalienable rights, and among them were enumerated life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The Declaration was adopted for the purpose of justifying the colonists in the eyes of the civilized world in withdrawing their allegiance from the British crown, and dissolving their connection with the mother country.”

My good friends, read that carefully over some leisure hour, and ponder well upon it—see what a mere wreck-mangled ruin—it makes of our once glorious Declaration.

“They were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and residing in Great Britain!” Why, according to this, not only negroes but white people outside of Great Britain and America are not spoken of in that instrument. The English, Irish and Scotch, along with white Americans, were included to be sure, but the French, Germans and other white people of the world are all gone to pot along with the Judge’s inferior races. I had thought the Declaration promised something better than the condition of British subjects; but no, it only meant that we should be equal to them in their own oppressed and unequal condition. According to that, it gave no promise that having kicked off the King and Lords of Great Britain, we should not at once be saddled with a King and Lords of our own.