

6.59

Matthew 12:22–25—A House Divided

A house divided against itself shall not stand.

—Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln did not actually say the most famous thing he ever said. Or, better, he *did* say it, but he was quoting Jesus at the time.

In Lincoln's day, the saying was well-known and everyone would have recognized it as a quotation from Jesus. Lincoln used it as the essential text for a speech in which he laid out his view that the United States could not continue to be a country in which slavery was legal in some states but not in others:

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States, old as well as new—North as well as South.

Lincoln was not president at the time he gave this speech. Indeed, he had not yet been elected to any public office, but was running for

a seat in the Senate. His advisers cautioned him to sidestep the extremely divisive issue of slavery but on June 16, 1858, he did exactly the opposite and laid out a position that would probably be unpopular with people on both sides of the issue.

He probably hoped that a “Jesus quote” would help; it didn’t. He was soundly defeated in the Senate race and pundits of the day credited that defeat to the “house divided speech.” Later, however, the mood of the nation changed, his speech was remembered, and he came to be regarded as a man who had been ahead of his time and who had been willing to speak the truth, even no one wanted to hear it.

A common verdict of historians on Lincoln’s “House Divided Speech” is that it cost him the Senate, but gained him the presidency.