Springfield, Feb. 14, 1860

Messrs. A. P. Hale
J. R. Fullmernder
J. W. Correel.

Gentlemen:

Your letter, in which among other things, you ask what I meant when I said this Union could not stand half slave and half free, and also what I meant when I gave a house divided against itself could not stand” is received, and I very cheerfully answer it as plainly as I may be able — Your misquote, to some material extent, what I did say, which indicates to think you have not very carefully read the speech in which the expression occur which to purge you to understand — For this reason and because the language I used is as plain as I can make it, I now give at length the whole paragraph in which the expression which purges you occur — It is as follows: “We are now far into the fifth
year since a policy was initiated with the
avowed object, and confident promise of
putting an end to slavery agitation—Under the
operation of that policy that agitation has
not only not ceased, but constantly augmented.
I believe it will not cease until a crisis
shall have been reached, and passed—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
even the Ne plus ultra slave owners will not
be willing to have it extended: or it will
continue to spread until it fills the position
It carefully, and conclude I mean what I say: and
not mean anything I am not going to say, and you
will have my meaning—Douglas attaches
This upon this, to paying it was a declaration of war
between the slave and the free states—You will
perceive I said no such thing; and I never
thought of no such thing—
If I have said “I believe this government
not last always, half slave and half free,
would you understand it any better than
you see?—“Endure permanently” and “last
always” have exactly the same meaning.
If you, or any of you, will state to me
some meaning which you suppose I have, I
can, and will, instantly tell you whether
that was any meaning.

Yours very truly,

A. Lincoln
One of Lincoln’s most famous and memorable speeches was the “House Divided” speech delivered at the Illinois State Republican Convention in Springfield, June 16, 1858. Lincoln had just been nominated to oppose Stephen A. Douglas in the senatorial race, a campaign which included the historic Lincoln-Douglas debates and launched him on the road to the White House. Eighteen months later, three Sangamon County farmers, Hall, Fullinwider and Correll, wrote asking him to explain more clearly his meaning in the much-quoted first paragraph of the Convention speech.

On exhibit is Lincoln’s “cheerful” reply to this request. Since he was not sure that the enquirers had read the text accurately, he quoted the entire significant paragraph. Then he said that he could not think how his meaning could possibly have been expressed more plainly—“conclude that I meant all I said and did not mean anything I did not say, and you will have my meaning.”

From the William E. Barton Collection of Lincolniana
Springfield, Feb. 14, 1860

Messrs. O. P. Hale
  R. Fullender
  W. T. Corree.

Gentlemen.

Your letter, in which, among other things, you ask what I meant when I said the Union could not stand half slave and half free—now also what I meant when I said a house divided against itself could not stand—is receivable, and I very cheerfully answer it as plainly as I may be able. You misquote to some material extent, what I said, pay; which incurs me to think you have not very carefully read the speech in which the expression was made to puzzle you to understand. For this reason, and because the language I used is as plain as I can make it, I now give at length the whole paragraph in which the expression which puzzles you occurs. It is as follows: "We are now far into the fifth
year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object, and constant purpose of
putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy that agitation has
not only not ceased, but constantly augmented. I believe it will not cease until a crisis
shall have been reached and passed. A
house divided against itself cannot endure;
I believe this government cannot endure
permanent 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 be in the belief that it
is in course of ultimate extinction; or its advo-
cates will push it forward till it shall become
 alike lawful in all the states, old as well
as new, North as well as South.
That is the whole paragraph; and I implore
you to make my meaning plain. Look over
it carefully, and conclude I mean all I say, one
does not mean anything I do not say, and you
will have my meaning. Douglas attacks me
upon this, in saying it was a declaration of war
between the slave and the free states. You will
perceive I said no such thing; and I now say
I thought of no such thing.
If I have said "I believe this government
cannot last always, half slave and half free,
would you understand it any better than
you see?" "Endure permanently," and "last
always," have exactly the same meaning.
If you, or any of you, will state to me
some meaning which you suppose I have, I
can say brute ignorance, tell you what
that was my meaning.

Yours very truly,

A. Lincoln
Springfield, Feb. 14, 1860

Messrs. O. P. Hall
J. R. Fullmerides
W. J. Correec.

Gentlemen.

...Your letter, in which among other things, you ask "what I meant when I said this Union could not stand eographically and half free" and also what I meant when I said a house divided against itself could not stand" is received, and I very cheerfully answer it, as plainly as I may be able. You misquote, to some material extent, what I did say; which induces us to think you have not, my colleagues, read the speech in which the expression occurred which puzzles you to understand. For this reason, and because the language I used is as plain as I can make it, I now quote at length the whole passage in which the expression which puzzles you occurs... It is as follows: "We are now far into the fifth..."
Abraham Lincoln. Letter to Oliver P. Hall, Jacob N. Fullinwider, and William F. Correll, February 14, 1860.

Lincoln explains his "House Divided" speech to three Sangamon County farmers.

William E. Barton Collection of Lincolnia
year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object, and confessed purpose of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy that agitation has not only not ceased, but constantly augmented. I believe it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. I believe this government can not 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 opinion of the country shall direct, or its advocates will spread it until it shall become almost so extensive as to put it in the course of ultimate extension, or its advocates will point it forward till it will become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South.

That is the whole paragraph; and I trouble you now to make my meaning plain—so much as
Springfield, Feb. 14, 1860

Messrs. O. P. Hall
H. L. Fellows
W. F. Corbett.

Gentlemen,

Your letter, in which among other things, you ask “What I meant when I said this Union could not stand half free,” and also what I meant when I said “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” is received, and I may assure you that I have thought of it ever since it was before me; and I have thought of it ever since. You must quote to some multitude on this, what I now say; which encourages me to think you have not. I am, therefore, read this speech in which the supposition occurs which to puzzle you to understanding. For this reason and because the language of yours is as plain as I can make it, I now quote at length the whole passage in which the supposition which puzzles you occurs. It is as follows: We are now five years into this fifth
year, and a policy was initiated with the avowed object, and confident promise of putting an end to future agitation. Under the operation of that policy that agitation had not only not ceased, but constantly augmented. I believe it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed—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 under a more just rival in the free state; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the states, old as well as new—so far, North, as well as South.

That is the whole paragraph, and it puzzles me to make my meaning plain. I look over it carefully, and conclude I mean all I said out. But I mean anything I say not my words, but you will have my meaning. Douglas attended me upon this, saying it was a declaration of our enemies that the slave law and the free states. You were permitted to swear no such thing, and I am sure you as I thought of no such thing.

If I have said "I believe the government cannot endure always, half slave and half free," would you understand it any better than you see? "Endure permanency," and "endure always," have exactly the same meaning.

If you, or any of you, will state to me some meaning which you suppose I have, I can, and will, conscientiously tell you whether that was my meaning.