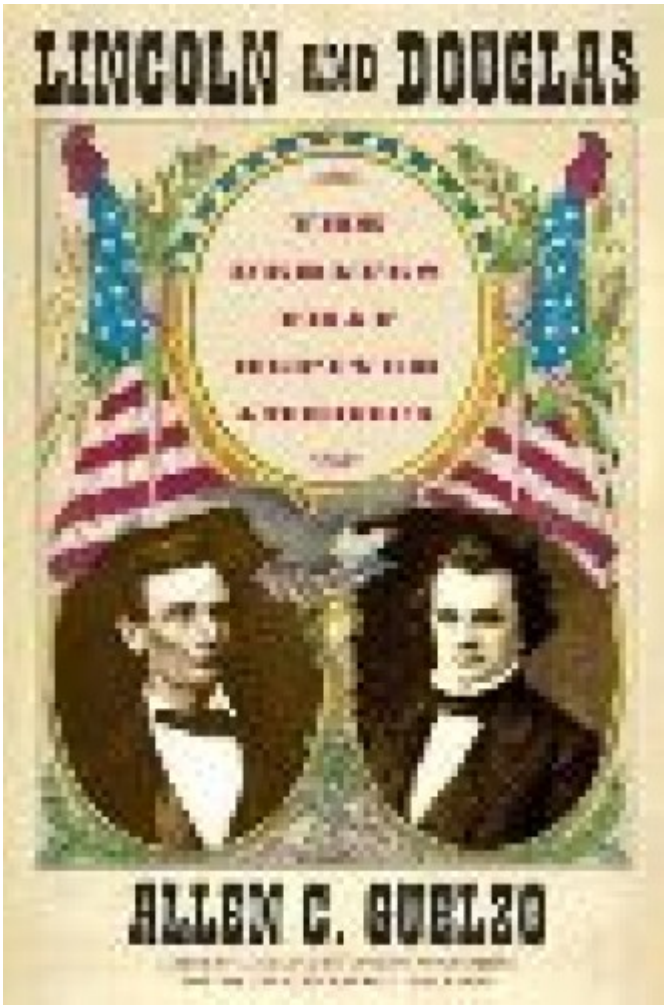
Great debates

By Andrew Murphy in the August 26, 2008 issue

In Review



Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America

Allen C. Guelzo
Simon & Schuster

During the third debate of the 2000 presidential election, then–vice president Al Gore stepped away from his podium and wandered over to George W. Bush's side of

the stage while Bush was answering a question. Observers were perplexed. Was Gore attempting to establish an alpha-male persona? Trying to rattle Bush by intruding on his personal space? Simply aiming to connect with the live audience and inject some excitement into a rather staid event? Whatever Gore had in mind, his behavior remained puzzlingly ambiguous.

No such ambiguity surrounded Stephen Douglas's performance during his fifth debate with Abraham Lincoln, held in Galesburg, Illinois. An observer noted that Douglas "shook his fist in wrath as he walked the platform. A white foam gathered upon his lips, giving him a look of ferocity." But Douglas went even further, as Allen Guelzo tells us in his magnificent account of the debates. The candidate approached Lincoln, accusing him of questioning his integrity. "'Does Mr. Lincoln wish to push these things to the point of personal difficulties here?' Douglas demanded, backing around and shaking his clenched fist within a few inches of Lincoln's face."

This month marks the 150th anniversary of the start of the Lincoln-Douglas debates (in honor of the occasion, the University of Illinois Press has just published a definitive edition of the texts of debates), and 2009 will mark the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth. Perhaps no scholar is better suited to the task of helping us celebrate and make sense of these anniversaries than Guelzo. A professor at Gettysburg College, Guelzo is one of the foremost interpreters of Lincoln's life and legacy. His 2002 biography, *Abraham Lincoln*: *Redeemer President*, explored the intellectual foundations of the 16th president's political worldview and presented Lincoln not only as a gifted orator but as a penetrating thinker. Four years later, Guelzo's *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation* explored this most puzzling of documents—described by historian Richard Hofstadter as possessing "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading"—and found a powerful engine of American liberty worthy of careful consideration. (The latter volume is part of a broader corpus of books on Lincoln, initiated by Garry Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, that focus on a single speech or historical moment. It is profitably read alongside Gabor Boritt's *The Gettysburg Gospel*, Harold Holzer's *Lincoln at Cooper Union* and Ronald C. White's *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*.)

With this book, Guelzo turns to the decade before Lincoln's run for the presidency and takes his readers on an in-depth tour of the 1858 campaign, which made Lincoln a household name in the East and paved the way for his emergence as an unlikely candidate for the Republican nomination two years later.

Lincoln and Douglas opens a new window on this phase of Lincoln's life and career. Guelzo emphasizes the debaters' roots in 19th-century American politics and culture and highlights the stark differences in their political philosophy, personal style—and physical appearance: Douglas's "stumpy legs and paunchy torso," Guelzo writes, "made him look like Humpty Dumpty in a toupee, while Lincoln's height was largely in his legs and gave audiences the impression of a scarecrow come to life." Detailed maps allow readers to trace the candidates' travels, and grids trace the various charges, countercharges and threads of argument back and forth between the two candidates in each debate. (The grids are helpful for reading the debates as written texts, but it is less clear whether they capture the rhetorical and theatrical elements of the Lincoln-Douglas confrontations.)

Guelzo's eye for telling details is on full display, as in this account of the second debate, in Freeport, Illinois:

> A small boy wiggled up onto the platform and unself-consciously hopped onto Douglas's lap, then traded places for Lincoln's lap when it was Douglas's turn to speak. (Half a century later, the boy, Thomas R. Marshall, would be the vice president of the United States.)

Of course, Lincoln and Douglas were arguing not merely over who should represent Illinois in the U.S. Senate, but over which candidate best represented the legacy of the nation's founders and offered the best prospect for preserving the Union and resolving the conflict over slavery. Douglas's emphasis on "popular sovereignty" elevated process over substance. As he put it, he did not particularly care whether slavery was voted up or down. His position leaned heavily on the argument that—Lincoln's incendiary rhetoric about a "house divided" notwithstanding—the founders had fully endorsed a nation that was half slave and half free. If they had wanted to eliminate slavery or seek racial equality, they would have spelled out this position clearly. "This Government was made by our fathers on the white basis," Douglas argued at the Galesburg debate, "by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever." Fidelity to the founders' legacy involved ensuring that the Union continued to shower its benefits on whites and opposing the inflammatory rhetoric of abolitionists and others who espoused airy and troublesome notions of liberty.

Lincoln, on the other hand, understood the American nation as "conceived in liberty" (as he would later put it on the Gettysburg battlefield) and dedicated to an abstract

proposition: that all men are created equal. He hastened to point out (in crude language during some of the earlier debates; with more charity in the final debate in Alton) that this did not mean that everyone should be treated equally in all ways immediately, but that black and white Americans were both deserving of the natural rights elaborated in the Declaration of Independence. As he said in Alton:

> I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not mean to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all men were equal in color, size, intellect, moral development or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what they did consider all men created equal—equal in certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . . They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, or yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit.
> They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society which should be familiar to all—constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even, though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people, of all colors, everywhere.

Lincoln's claim that the nation could not continue half slave and half free rested both on his argument that the founders tolerated the existence of slavery while intending its eventual demise and on his political understanding of the strength of the slave system, which had shown a voracious appetite for power and the ability to corrupt the political process in pursuit of that power. (Methodist bishop Gilbert Haven had likened the slave power to an anaconda, squeezing the nation in its deathly grip.) For Lincoln, developing a political vision in line with the views of the founders would require repudiating this tolerance of slavery and moving away from concrete practices of the founders' time in service of their larger vision of liberty.

Guelzo sheds the most light on the debates when he emphasizes that they should be seen not as seven discrete events but as part of the candidates' larger campaigns. We often forget just how long a shadow Douglas cast over antebellum American politics. The debates themselves were hardly Lincoln's idea; they were forced on the

unwilling candidate by Illinois's Republican state committee, whose members were unimpressed with his earlier strategy of following Douglas around the state and delivering speeches in his wake. Guelzo evokes the boisterous and rowdy nature of the debates; the taunts and hecklers that each candidate had to contend with; the political geography of Illinois, where racial politics tweaked the arguments of the debates in various ways; the partisan processions that escorted the candidates into the debate towns; the shifts in the weather; Douglas's increasingly problematic drinking as the debates wore on; the ways that Lincoln and Douglas spawned imitators across the country; and the details of the election and the system of representation that gave Douglas the victory while Lincoln arguably had more popular support.

Douglas and Lincoln were not through with each other after Election Day. Douglas's presidential ambitions fell apart as his party splintered. Guelzo recounts that on Inauguration Day 1861, "when Lincoln rose to take the oath and discovered that he had no place to rest his top hat, Douglas obligingly stepped forward and held it for him." Douglas accompanied Mary Todd Lincoln (whom he had courted, years earlier, in Springfield) to Lincoln's inaugural ball. Later that spring, just a week before his death, Douglas told an audience in Chicago that he contemplated the prospect of civil war with "a sad heart . . . with a grief that I have never before experienced."

Lincoln and Douglas, Guelzo helps us see, were both great Americans, and together they embodied the nation's complicated identity, its hopes and fears, its youthful self-confidence and its deep divisions, and its stubborn faith in itself. Their debates are part of a larger debate that the nation has been having with itself since its founding documents were drafted: Is democracy primarily a matter of vote counting, or is there something more fundamental, a moral core that gives the whole enterprise meaning and imbues it with purpose? As Guelzo concludes in his epilogue, it is a debate that Americans have never quite settled.