

Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America

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Review

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Guelzo, Allen C. *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America*. Simon & Schuster, \$26.00 hardcover ISBN 9780743273206

Those Famous Debates

Allen C. Guelzo is the author of several books focusing on Jonathan Edwards and American theology and numerous works on the Civil War era, including *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation* (2004) and *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (1999). He combines those interests in *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America*, examining the Illinois senate race of 1858 as both a political campaign and morality play. As Guelzo points out, the significance of the Lincoln-Douglas contest can be understood "only by reconstructing the intricate political geography of the debates *and* the larger campaigns." (xxv)

Stephen A. Douglas was a prominent two-term Democratic senator who believed that agitation over slavery threatened the federal Union. He embraced the concept of "popular sovereignty," introduced a decade earlier by Lewis Cass of Michigan, to further the fundamental principle of self-government and remove the explosive issue of slavery expansion from the halls of Congress. Opposing ratification of the Lecompton constitution, which permitted slavery in the state of Kansas, Douglas broke openly with the Democratic administration of President James Buchanan.

Abraham Lincoln, in contrast, was a Whig when he served a single term in the House of Representatives during the Mexican War. A Republican by 1858, he viewed popular sovereignty as a pro-slavery smoke screen. The Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the *Dred Scott* decision all served the same purpose—to extend the boundaries of slavery. Some eastern Republicans saw Douglas as a hero for blocking Lecompton, and a few even hoped that the "Little Giant" might end up as their candidate in 1860. Illinois Republicans recoiled at the thought of fusing with Douglas, however, and united behind

Lincoln.

The campaign got off to a rocky start for both candidates. The Buchanan administration purged the patronage rolls of Douglas supporters, who financed the canvass by raising \$50,000 from eastern Democrats and mortgaging his property holdings. Most national Republicans, including William Henry Seward, did not actively assist Lincoln. The Lincoln campaign was funded through loans, assessments of the state committee members, and mortgaging the *Chicago Tribune*.

Despite warnings from his advisers that it portended civil war, Lincoln's acceptance speech declared that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Douglas pounced on Lincoln's "mistake." Speaking before a Chicago audience, Douglas emphasized that the founding fathers left slavery up to the state governments; and they never contemplated racial equality. Lincoln's opposition to *Dred Scott* was predicated on granting blacks citizenship.

Lincoln responded that *Dred Scott* rendered popular sovereignty a dead letter. Regarding the House Divided speech, he claimed that the framers of the Constitution expected that slavery would diminish over time and ultimately fade away. Simply put, slavery was morally wrong because it defied the natural law "that all men are created equal." The political battle lines were clearly drawn, but Lincoln remained the underdog.

In an effort to tighten the race, the Republican state committee convinced Lincoln to challenge Douglas to a series of debates. Douglas set the rules. Seven debates were scheduled; the first speaker would have an hour, followed by an hour and a half for his opponent, and then a half hour rebuttal. They would alternate the order at each debate. Guelzo notes that this was not a true debate format; but the long speeches permitted newspapers to print full texts of the debates within several days.

Some twelve thousand people descended on Ottawa, in northern Illinois, for the first debate on July 21. Douglas opened by reading a series of abolitionist resolutions purportedly from the first Republican state convention at Springfield in 1854. He called upon Lincoln to respond to his party's "platform," while making clear his opposition to racial equality. Douglas proclaimed that only the doctrine of popular sovereignty spared Illinois from black voters.

Lincoln, on the defensive, ignored the Republican resolutions and claimed that he supported only the "natural rights" of blacks to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (122). He noted that the physical differences between the races precluded their living together in equality; and that popular sovereignty, in light of *Dred Scott*, allowed western residents to legalize slavery but not prohibit it.

In his rebuttal, Douglas hammered at Lincoln for placing abolition above the right of self-government. Both candidates were cheered off the platform by their respective supporters. Guelzo summarizes each of the seven debates with a "grid" of the candidates' main points and responses. Ottawa, he concludes, was the scene of a particularly disorganized and negative debate, with Douglas coming out on top. For the second debate at Freeport on August 27, Lincoln's advisers urged him to be more aggressive. Several probing questions were drafted, including one that elicited the famous "Freeport Doctrine." Lincoln asked Douglas if territorial residents could lawfully exclude slavery before they entered the Union. Douglas, fully prepared to answer Lincoln, remained committed to popular sovereignty to lawfully protect or prohibit slavery in the western territories. Guelzo places the Freeport doctrine in its proper historical context. Lincoln was not sacrificing himself in order to deny Douglas the presidency in 1860; but Douglas's embrace of popular sovereignty guaranteed that he would not be a suitable *Republican* candidate. Guelzo considers Freeport a draw.

The third debate on September 15 was at Jonesboro, in the region known as "Little Egypt." Douglas appeared lethargic. Perhaps the sparse attendance at the state fair in nearby Centralia drew a larger crowd—contributed to his uninspired performance. Lincoln expanded his attack by asking Douglas if he would vote for a federal slave code to enforce *Dred Scott*. Once again, popular sovereignty was the sole solution; the western residents (not Congress) would determine the fate of slavery expansion. Douglas was the winner in this Democratic southern stronghold.

Only three days later, Lincoln and Douglas met at Charleston in the eastern portion of the state's central "Whig belt." Lincoln knew that the old-line Whigs and nativists in the audience vehemently opposed racial equality. He opened his remarks, in Guile's apt characterization, with "a disgraceful catalog of all the civil rights he, as well as Douglas," felt should be denied blacks. Then, as if to emphasize his racial pandering, Lincoln espoused white superiority and

denounced miscegenation. Douglas was not swayed, however; Lincoln's opposition to *Dred Scott* meant that he secretly supported citizenship for blacks. In his rebuttal, Lincoln declared that citizenship should be left to the states; but that slavery was morally wrong. This was a key distinction. Douglas viewed slavery strictly as a constitutional matter. Lincoln excoriated slavery as a cancer on the body politic. Neither candidate gained the upper hand (or elevated the discourse) at Charleston.

The final three debates were held in the western region of the Whig belt. Galesburg (October 7) was Republican territory, and the audience at Knox College was the largest of the debates. Douglas, hindered by a sore throat, held firm to his principles. States and territories had the right to determine the question of slavery within their boundaries. Lincoln repeated that Douglas was muddling the issue of racial equality in order to ignore the real question—slavery. If slavery was morally wrong, Douglas could not "logically say that anybody has a right to do wrong" (227). Galesburg, according to Guelzo, was Lincoln's best performance, and Douglas's worst.

The debates continued at Quincy on October 13, and concluded two days later in Alton. Lincoln sharpened his attacks in the sixth debate against slavery, calling it "a moral, a social, and a political wrong" (245). Nonetheless, Lincoln conceded the right of states to have slavery, and called for a relatively moderate program of gradual, compensated emancipation in the District of Columbia. Douglas replied that popular sovereignty was embodied in Henry Clay's compromise measures of 1850. This was a telling point in the Whig belt, but Guelzo gives the Quincy debate to Lincoln.

Douglas led off at Alton by repeating the two mistaken themes of Lincoln's campaign: the nation cannot endure as a house divided, and *Dred Scott* was wrong because it deprives blacks of citizenship. With his defense of popular sovereignty and opposition to Lecompton, Douglas portrayed himself as standing up to an ambitious executive, just as Henry Clay had struggled against Andrew Jackson.

Lincoln also used the final debate as an opportunity to drive home key points. His goals were neither civil war nor black equality. Likewise evoking the memory of Clay, Lincoln denounced slavery as a "great evil" (263). Since it is wrong, popular sovereignty cannot justify the expansion of slavery. Alton represents, according to Guelzo, Lincoln's rhetorical peak.

Two weeks after the debates ended, a Democratic majority was elected to the Illinois legislature. Douglas subsequently was returned to the Senate by a vote of 54 to 46. The Little Giant won a dual victory over Abraham Lincoln and James Buchanan. Nonetheless, the specter of the Freeport Doctrine haunted him in 1860. As the champion of popular sovereignty, Douglas was anathema to Republicans and southern Democrats alike. Lincoln staked out the high moral ground on the issue of slavery in the debates, and enhanced his standing with eastern Republicans. He was on the road to the presidency.

Guelzo is at his best when delineating the political maneuverings that underlay the Lincoln-Douglas senatorial campaign. His assessment of the debates is generally even-handed, although he over-reaches when drawing parallels between 1858 and the "Age of Terror." He concludes that Douglas believed "liberal democracy existed only to provide a procedural framework for exercising rights." In contrast, "Lincoln insisted that liberal democracy had a higher purpose, which was the realization of a morally right political order" (313). This certainly put Lincoln on the right side of the slavery question; but where would it lead him on contemporary moral issues? All in all, despite the egregious lack of a bibliography, this volume is a welcome addition to the historical debate over the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

Willard Carl Klunder, associate professor of history at Wichita State University, is the author of Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation (Kent State University Press, 1996). He contributed a chapter, "Lewis Cass, Stephen Douglas, and Popular Sovereignty: The Demise of Democratic Party Unity," to a festschrift, Politics and Culture of the Civil War Era: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Johannsen (Susquehanna Press, 2006).