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Allen C. Guelzo. *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008. xxvii + 383 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7432-7320-6.

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Lincoln and Douglas: Together Again

The 150th anniversary of the Lincoln-Douglas debates has been commemorated with several books that chronicle the most fabled rivalry in U.S. political history (for example, Roy Morris Jr.'s *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America* [2008]). Veteran Lincoln scholar Allen C. Guelzo is clearly on top of his game with this thoughtful, provocative, and well-researched account of the 1858 senatorial campaign between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. Although many students of history focus on the seven joint debates between the two rivals, Guelzo reminds his readers that the debates were only a portion of a campaign that lasted nearly four months and featured numerous speeches and appearances by each candidate in small towns of Illinois.

Guelzo spends a good deal of time detailing the challenges that beset each candidate as each began the campaign. For Douglas, his defiance of the James Buchanan administration over the ratification of the Lecompton Constitution sparked the Danite insurgency, where Illinois Democrats loyal to President Buchanan, encouraged by Republicans, organized their own state Democratic convention; nominated their own candidates for the General Assembly; and eventually selected Douglas's rival, Sidney Breese, to challenge Douglas for his Senate seat. The Republican Party, notes Guelzo, had its own set of problems. A loose coalition of Whigs, anti-Nebraska Democrats, and Freesoilers, the infant party was united by little more than stopping the spread of slavery into the western territories and its hatred of Douglas. Particularly irksome to many Illinois Republicans was the attitude of prominent eastern Republicans toward the race. Seeing the possibility of recruiting Douglas into the Republican Party as a consequence of his rift with Buchanan, such East Coast Republicans as Horace Greeley hoped Illinois Republicans would rally around Douglas instead of choosing their own candidate–a factor that prompted Illinois Republicans to take the unprecedented step of nominating Lincoln as a senatorial candidate.

While the joint debates were not the entire campaign, they obviously occupy a central portion of Guelzo's monograph. The more popular and well-known Douglas certainly took a calculated risk in agreeing to appear jointly with Lincoln. He had nothing to gain, Guelzo points out, and Lincoln's initial strategy of following Douglas from town to town and giving speeches after Douglas had already appeared made Lincoln look somewhat ridiculous. Perhaps Douglas was afraid of being called a coward for refusing to debate Lincoln, or, as Guelzo believes, he was too much of a gambler to let this challenge pass. Douglas eventually agreed to appear with Lincoln at seven congressional districts throughout the state. As Guelzo points out, Douglas's approach in each debate was roughly the same, attacking Lincoln and the Republican Party for harboring radical, abolitionist sentiments that were calculated to make war against the South, divide the nation, and promote racial amalgamation. By contrast, Douglas persistently advocated popular sovereignty, the right of the people to decide their own laws and customs–including such moral issues as slavery.

Lincoln, argues Guelzo, viewed the debates as cumulative, and thus employed an evolving strategy. Aware that each debate was being transcribed by stenographers and put into print by a number of newspapers, Lin-

coln did not feel the need to repeat himself in every debate. Hence, advised by Republican state committee chair, Norman Judd, that he was too defensive at the first debate at Ottawa, where Douglas had put seven questions to him, Lincoln fired back four of his own questions to Douglas at the second debate at Freeport, the most famous of which was the so-called Freeport question. This question was designed to force Douglas to either repudiate popular sovereignty in light of the Dred Scott case, or, by denying that Dred Scott had a negative impact on the power of popular sovereignty, further alienate him from southern Democrats and thus deny Douglas the presidential nomination he sought in 1860. Ironically, given Douglas's dalliance with Republican leaders in 1858, Lincoln, according to Guelzo, may have been concerned with denying Douglas the Republican nomination as opposed to the Democratic nomination. At Charleston, Lincoln used information given to him by Senator Lyman Trumbull on the secret maneuverings during the Toombs bill, a measure introduced by Georgia senator Robert Toombs that provided for the organization of Kansas as a state and included a provision of popular approval by the residents of Kansas. On Trumbull's testimony, Lincoln charged Douglas with stripping the Toombs bill of a provision for popular referendum, a seemingly puzzling move for the champion of popular sovereignty. In the final debates at Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton, Lincoln, according to Guelzo, became more and more eloquent on the theme of the moral evil of slavery, contrasting the debate between him and Douglas, between Republicans and Democrats, and as a struggle between those who believed slavery was wrong and those who did not.

Although Lincoln clearly became stronger and stronger as the campaign developed, Democrats won the Illinois General Assembly and Douglas was reelected on January 5, 1859, by a straight party vote of 54-46, despite more ballots being cast for Republican legislative candidates. Guelzo is clearly at his best when he explains the reasons for Douglas's victory, weaving through the intricacies of the 1854 apportionment, an apportionment that underrepresented the Republican north and overrepresented the solidly Democratic southern part of the state. The pivotal portion of the state was the so-called Whig belt, the central counties of the state, beginning roughly from Edgar County in the east and stretching across the central portion of the state to Pike County in the west. As a former Whig, Lincoln might seem to have had an advantage over Douglas; however, as Guelzo points out, Whig counties were extremely conservative on the issue of race and the abolition of slavery. Although Lincoln tried hard to maintain a distinction between what he called natural equality (the right to earn bread, work, and exist) and civil equality (the right to vote, sit on juries, and partake of other political rights), the distinction was undoubtedly lost on many voters in the Whig belt. Additionally, several prominent Whigs defected to the Douglas campaign, including Lincoln's friend Theophilus Lyle Dickey. Indeed, the latter delivered a crucial blow to Lincoln when he read a letter from Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden, a prominent former Whig, endorsing Douglas. While there were nineteen legislative districts that had gone for American party presidential candidate Millard Fillmore in 1856, the Democrats captured fourteen of them, giving them a slight edge in the Illinois General Assembly.

Why were the Lincoln-Douglas debates so crucial? Obviously, as almost every biography of Lincoln maintains, Lincoln's role in the debates transformed him into a national figure in a few short months, a status that eventually led him to the presidency. For Guelzo, the debates also demonstrated and exposed an unresolved issue in the youthful United States. With his emphasis on popular sovereignty and majority rule, Douglas focused on the democratic process as an end in itself. As Douglas was apt to say, he did not care if slavery was voted up or voted down. The important point was that the process that determined the status of slavery was fair and everyone played by the rules. Lincoln, by contrast, wondered how a democracy that instituted something immoral and unjust could be living up to its mission and purpose. For Lincoln, freedom existed so that certain ideals and principles could be implemented. As Lincoln said repeatedly throughout the debates, no one had a right to do wrong. For Lincoln, the outcome of the process was as important as the integrity of the process.

Guelzo has written a remarkably thorough and perceptive analysis of a legendary, iconic event in American political history. Although balanced and fair to both Douglas and Lincoln, Guelzo clearly believes that Lincoln got the better of the joint debates; Douglas started strong but faded as a result of his poor health and heavy consumption of alcohol. This point of view is not uncommon among the accounts of many historians of the debates.[1] At the same time, it perhaps underestimates the impact that Douglas had on his audiences, particularly when he played the race card. As Guelzo indicates on repeated occasions, old-line Whigs in the conservative Whig belt had very little appetite for anything that sounded like abolitionism, and Douglas continued to drive home this point in every debate and every campaign speech. As a former

Whig who had practiced law in many of the counties of the Whig belt, Lincoln should have had advantages in the area, advantages that should have been helped by his superior debating skills in the last month of the campaign. Was it the defection of such key Whigs and Dickey or Crittenden that doomed Lincoln? Or, was Douglas more effective in reaching Whig audiences than Guelzo would like to admit?

Similarly, Guelzo seems sympathetic to Lincoln's emphasis on the outcome of democracy or the moral imperatives of a democratic republic as opposed Douglas's focus on preserving the soundness of the democratic process. As Guelzo writes, "but at the deepest level, what Lincoln defended was the possibility that there would be a moral code to a democracy" (p. 311). A number of contemporary scholars cited by Guelzo have articulated concerns that the goals of liberal democracy when focused on process can seem trivial and mundane.[2] Is freedom merely the right to indulge one's consumer appetite and to provide for the physical comfort on the individual? Are there not higher, more important ends? Lincoln's emphasis on natural rights and a synthesis of what Guelzo terms Christian and Enlightenment moral principles answers the question regarding the purpose of a liberal democracy. Those who focus on "process," like Douglas, come off as morally ambivalent and crudely materialistic. At the same time, determining what the moral ends of the democratic state were (and are) a tall order. Indeed, it took a bloody war for nineteenth-century Americans to resolve their disagreements over slavery. In the twenty-first century, we are not closer to resolving critical social and moral issues than were the contemporaries of Lincoln and Douglas. Questions pertaining to abortion, gay rights, and the use of state power in the age of terror do not come down preordained from on high. Indeed, in many debates over moral issues, both parties in the debate are convinced that they represent the "morally" correct position. Instead, these issues must be sorted out in the give and take of politics in cities, states, and regions throughout the country. To say that those who emphasize process are unconcerned with a moral purpose in democracies misses the point. Certainly there is a higher calling for liberal democracies; however, the realization of these higher ends. achieved through reason, persuasion, and elections, was the point of Douglas's argument. While Guelzo understandably shows more sympathy for Lincoln's position, Douglas's emphasis on the sanctity of the democratic process is also an important component of our democratic heritage.

Notes

[1]. For example, see David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 221-223; and William E. Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 61-65.

[2]. Among the scholars that Guelzo cites are Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); and Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: American in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

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