



Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America

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In 1858, Abraham Lincoln was known as a successful Illinois lawyer who had achieved some prominence in state politics as a leader in the new Republican Party. Two years later, he was elected president and was on his way to becoming the greatest chief executive in American history. What carried this one-term congressman from obscurity to fame was the campaign he mounted for the United States Senate against the country's most formidable politician, Stephen A. Douglas, in the summer and fall of 1858. Lincoln challenged Douglas directly in one of his greatest speeches -- "A house divided against itself cannot stand" -- and confronted Douglas on the questions of slavery and the inviolability of the Union in seven fierce debates. As this brilliant narrative by the prize-winning Lincoln scholar Allen Guelzo dramatizes, Lincoln would emerge a predominant national figure, the leader of his party, the man who would bear the burden of the national confrontation.

Of course, the great issue between Lincoln and Douglas was slavery. Douglas was the champion of "popular sovereignty," of letting states and territories decide for themselves whether to legalize slavery. Lincoln drew a moral line, arguing that slavery was a violation both of natural law and of the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence. No majority could ever make slavery right, he argued.

Lincoln lost that Senate race to Douglas, though he came close to toppling the "Little Giant," whom almost everyone thought was unbeatable. Guelzo's Lincoln and Douglas brings alive their debates and this whole year of campaigns and underscores their centrality in the greatest conflict in American history.

The encounters between Lincoln and Douglas engage a key question in American political life: What is democracy's purpose? Is it to satisfy the desires of the majority? Or is it to achieve a just and moral public order? These were the real questions in 1858 that led to the Civil War. They remain questions for Americans today.

Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America Details

Date : Published February 1st 2008 by Simon & Schuster

ISBN : 9780743273206

Author : Allen C. Guelzo

Format : Hardcover 383 pages

Genre : History, North American Hi..., American History, Nonfiction, Politics, Military History, Civil War



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From Reader Review Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America for online ebook

Aaron Million says

Lincoln scholar Guelzo undertakes an in-depth analysis of the now-classic 1858 debates between the future president, and Illinois Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Guelzo begins with brief, helpful biography of Douglas (he being the lesser-known of the two; of course, pretty much anyone next to Lincoln would be lesser-known). He examines Douglas' positions throughout his time in Congress, specifically his collaboration with Henry Clay on the Compromise of 1850 and then the ill-fated Kansas-Nebraska Act, which helped accelerate the pace towards Civil War.

Next, he discusses the current state of Illinois politics and also of the beginning of the disintegration of the Democratic party into sectional factions: North and South. Throughout the book, Guelzo describes the balancing act that Douglas had to try to attempt in order to appease both sides. Ultimately, while not detrimental to his re-appointment as Senator (Senators were then chosen by the state legislatures; so, whichever party controlled the legislature in effect chose the next Senator), he was unable to reconcile the two sides as the Southern Democrats were 100% for slavery, while the Northern Democrats just wanted to leave it alone and rely on Douglas' frequently offered reasoning of popular sovereignty to keep the issue from exploding.

It's difficult to believe now, but at the time Lincoln was considered a loser: a one-term Congressman, defeated in his pursuit of the Senate in 1855, a successful enough lawyer but politically he appeared to be finished. He had his share of backers, but really struggled to drum up support for his campaign. Almost in a desperation move, he challenged Douglas to a series of debates. Against his advisers' better judgment, Douglas accepted. He had much more to lose than Lincoln; by agreeing to the debates, he in effect elevated Lincoln's status significantly.

Guelzo then traces the candidate's respective paths leading up to and in between each debate. Maps of their travels across Illinois are helpfully interspersed throughout this part of the book. The seven debate sites were all chosen by Douglas. The two switched places each debate re: who went first. The format was each candidate spoke for an hour, with the one leading off getting a final half-hour for rebuttal. While neither technically "won" the debates, on the whole, Lincoln clearly had the better of Douglas. Lincoln, obviously, had the stronger argument and was able to present it in terms that people could understand. Douglas, still trying to ride the fence between the competing factions of the Democratic Party, became angry at Lincoln's refusal to go away. Douglas did not help himself by drinking heavily. This, coupled with him contracting bronchitis, definitely hindered his latter performances.

While the Republicans did not gain control of the legislature, they did make some inroads in the elections that year - enough so that Lincoln's profile began to be enhanced. This continued straight into 1860. So, while he was not appointed Senator, these debates really served as a springboard towards his eventual victory in 1860. Guelzo concludes with a nice chapter about the above-mentioned boon for Lincoln, and also about Douglas' decline, struggles, and then early death in 1861. This is a great piece of scholarship on an important event in America's past, and Guelzo makes it interesting and exciting to read.

Grade: A

Robin Friedman says

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates And The Nature of America

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas engaged in a series of seven debates in a bitterly-fought contest for the United States Senate. The Democratic incumbent, Douglas, was the coauthor of the Compromise of 1850 and of the notorious Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Douglas, however, had broken with the Democrats when he opposed as fraudulent the so-called Lecompton constitution under which Kansas would be admitted to the Union as a slave state.

Abraham Lincoln had served a single term in the United States Congress where he had opposed the Mexican War. He had ran for Senate in 1854 and had been narrowly defeated. His initial party affiliation was with the Whigs, but with the demise of the Whigs he joined the newly-formed Republican party.

The driving issue in the Lincoln - Douglas debates was slavery. Douglas advocated for a doctrine of popular sovereignty under which the residents of the United States' new western territories, such as Kansas, would decide for themselves whether they wished to be a slave state or a free state. Lincoln and the Republicans opposed vigorously the expansion of slavery to the territories. The debates took place against the backdrop of the Supreme Court's "Dred Scott" decision in which Chief Justice Taney had held that neither Congress nor the territorial governments had the power to exclude slavery. In the contest for the Senate, Douglas narrowly kept his seat, even though Lincoln received more of the popular vote. But the debates brought Lincoln to national prominence, and they emphasized the split that divided Douglas from the Southern Democrats following Douglas's repudiation of the Lecompton Constitution. As a result, the Democratic party was split when Douglas was nominated for the presidency in 1860. The Republicans, of course, won with their dark horse nominee, Abraham Lincoln.

In his book, "Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America" (2008), Professor Allen Guelzo explores the debates not only from the standpoint of history and politics, but, more importantly, philosophically -- from the standpoint of what they meant, and what the respective positions of Lincoln and Douglas meant, for their times and for our country's understanding of itself. It is thoughtful, difficult, and inspiring book. Guelzo is a Professor at Gettysburg College and the author of, among other books, a study of "Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation" and "Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President" which explores Lincoln's attitude towards religion.

Guelzo offers the reader a great deal of background and perspective on the debates. Tellingly, after Douglas had repudiated the Lecompton constitution, he became something of a hero to Eastern Republicans many of whom supported him in the Senate race and saw him as a potential Republican nominee in 1860 -- all with the encouragement of Douglas. Thus Lincoln entered the contest without the backing of much of the national party. But Douglas had problems of his own as the administration of President Buchanan, furious with Douglas for his desertion over Lecompton, took away his patronage appointments in Illinois and worked against him in the campaign. With his famous question to Douglas during the second debate at Freeport, Lincoln pinned down Douglas on the doctrine of popular sovereignty, thus both confirming his alienation from Southern Democrats and also taking any hope away that Douglas could be considered a viable Republican candidate in 1860.

Guelzo offers revealing detail of the grueling nature of the campaign -- with portraits of each Illinois town in

which the debate took place, its leading citizens, and the political considerations that shaped each candidate's presentation. While the candidates offered their competing visions for America, the debates were on far from a high plane, as both candidates catered to racism, innuendo and insult. Particularly in the southern sections of Illinois known as "Egypt," Lincoln made comments to his audience that many today would regard as racist. Admirers of Lincoln frequently struggle, with questionable success, to interpret or explain away these comments. Guelzo, as do many scholars, distinguishes between the "natural rights" to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, found in John Locke and in the Declaration of Independence, and "civil rights" which are more local in character and dependent upon the values of a community. Lincoln opposed slavery as the violation of natural rights but was less firm than many would be today on the question of civil or political rights. The story is complicated and gains in depth with the telling.

The debates, for Guelzo, ultimately reflect two views of America. Lincoln's view places moral value at the center of what democracy and the United States is about. Slavery was morally wrong and repugnant to the Declaration of Independence even though its existence was acquiesced in by the Framers in the Constitution. For moral reasons, Lincoln believed, the expansion of slavery could not be tolerated. Douglas, in contrast, represented a processual view of the United States and of freedom. He wanted to defuse conflict over the slavery issue, to avoid the making of value judgments on the matter, and to allow each community, in essence, to set its own rules. As Guelzo summarizes the difference between Lincoln and Douglas (at 311):

"At the deepest level, what Lincoln defended in the debates was the possibility that there could be a moral core to a democracy. The fundamental premise of Douglas's popular sovereignty was that democratic decision-making, in order to be free, has to be unencumbered by the weight of factors which are nonpolitical in nature, such as kinship, ethnic identity or moral and religious obligations. The purpose of politics is not to lead 'the good life' or to pursue what is good and true by to ensure fair play, toleration, and personal autonomy."

Lincoln and Douglas thus presented alternatives that our nation faces, in some form today: "what was the American experiment about? Finding space to be free, or finding an opportunity to do right? ... Enlightened self-interest or beloved community? And was there a way to hold on to one without entirely losing a grip on the other?" p. 314

In reading Guelzo's study, I was reminded of an earlier book on the debates by Harry Jaffa, "The Crisis of the House Divided" which has less historical information than Guelzo's book but which raises essentially similar philosophical issues about American democracy.

In this time of elections and national debate, Guelzo has written an outstanding book to help Americans understand their past and to understand the directions in which they wish to go.

Robin Friedman

William Monaco says

This book gave me added insight into the most famous and important debates in the country's history. In addition to learning about Douglas, I also enjoyed seeing Lincoln evolve as he traveled around Illinois in 1858. There are a lot of seeds taking root in his speeches that would bloom into his Right Makes Might address at Cooper Union. Very intriguing commentary at the end as well that shows how relevant the Lincoln/Douglas debates remain today.

Ted says

Political opponents with presidential aspirations square off. A vote against war resurfaces as a campaign issue. The candidates take the low road to appeal to their audiences' baser instincts. The candidates' physical appearance becomes the subject of idle chatter. Campaigns poll potential voters. Charges of election fraud, dirty tricks and backroom deals are hurled. Citizens are polarized on a central issue. The heart and soul of the nation is on the line.

The presidential campaign of 2008? No, the Illinois senatorial campaign of 1858 as described by award-winning author Allen C. Guelzo. Guelzo follows the campaigns of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen L. Douglas with a novelist's eye for color and detail. He analyzes the ever-changing political calculus surrounding the campaign, providing context to the seven historic debates. Guelzo leaves the impression that the politics of today is not all that different from the way it used to be.

The fundamental difference was the widespread interest in the race. Throngs in the thousands, or even tens of thousands, turned out for campaign stops and most of the open-air debates. "Audience participation" was routine. And the speechifying would continue long after the main event had ended. Politics passed for entertainment in many small towns on the frontier. But as Guelzo describes it, the shopkeepers, teachers, preachers and farmers of the prairie were eager to get involved in what they understood would be a turning point in the decades-long struggle over the defining issue of the age.

Lincoln and Douglas is a comprehensive, thoroughly researched and skillfully written account of a campaign Guelzo aptly describes as "an overture to a violent opera."

(This review first appeared in Kentucky Monthly magazine.)

Robert Melnyk says

Very good account of the famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas for the Illinois Senate race of 1858. The book details the debates themselves, but also gives an account of how they were viewed/received by the politics of the time, both locally in Illinois, as well as across the country. Interesting analysis of how Lincoln on most accounts won the debates (at least most of them - there were 7 in total), still lost the election, but how it also propelled him to prominence, and the Presidency in 1860.

Chelsea says

This book is an excellent one. Dr. Guelzo certainly knows his stuff.

Rather than focusing the book primarily on the seven debates between Lincoln and Douglas, Guelzo expands the picture and examines in detail the entire political campaigns of 1858 in order to give the debates context. "Lincoln and Douglas" taught me much I didn't know about Lincoln as a man and as a politician (sometimes we forget that in addition to being one of the greatest U.S. presidents in history, he also had to maneuver the political scene of his day - and boy, could he maneuver).

One star off for a lot of political jargon (which, being quite young in the world of elections and voting, I didn't quite understand) and for not printing the full texts of the debates in the book. Still, I recommend it highly.

On a side note, I had the privilege of listening to Dr. Guelzo speak at my college last week, and he is a wonderfully knowledgeable historian and the most eloquent speaker I've ever listened to. If you ever have a chance to hear him present on Civil War topics, go with a notebook, pen, and high expectations.

Jason says

The headline is, this is kind of a journeyman-quality narrative. It is both thorough and complete, but rarely embellished with a catching turn of a phrase or the sort of literary flourish that can make prose truly memorable.

Yet as a reference, it is truly handy. First, the narrative is broader than most earlier works on the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Most of the other books written on the subject look only at the debates themselves. This is very easy as they were transcribed in both Democratic and Republican papers, and thus have kind of a built-in bias detector on the transcription. What they don't do is provide much of the political context to the debates. After all, these were not just preludes to the election of 1960, these were debates about a Senate seat. The "debaters" were talking to an audience and that audience had prejudices and local concerns just like in every other speech made on a campaign trail. So Mr. Guelzo ably puts the debates in their proper context.

Secondarily, at the end of every debate, he provides what we used to call a "flow" in competitive debate. By that I mean a summary of points made by each debater, and notations on whether or not a debate point was repeated and/or rebutted. Thus, at the end of a narrative, you can quickly assess what Lincoln and Douglas were emphasizing, and what they were avoiding.

Though the text itself was not too riveting, I learned quite a bit from this book. I lived in Illinois for many years, and even worked at the legislature in Springfield. I always found it odd that outside the capitol building, there were two large statutes -- one of Lincoln and the other of Douglas. If anything, the "Little Giant's" (as the diminutive, but rotund Douglas was known) statute was larger.

I had also been to a couple of the debate sites -- Jonesboro and Alton. But, other than that, my knowledge was limited. Here I learned quite a bit about the origins of the Republican party -- how it was built on the remains of the Whigs and the anti-slavery Democrats. There were great insights on Douglas' relationship with Buchanan and the national Democratic party. I also did not know that this was Lincoln's second "run" for the Senate. He had narrowly lost in 1856.

Of course, one bit of context I was aware of was that in 1858, no one elected senators. They were chosen by the state legislature. So consider this, the most famous debates between two candidates in American history, did not involve an election. So, the debates really set two precedents. First, these were really the first public debates for federal office in American history. It would set a precedent for all levels of government that would be followed up to the present day. Secondly, for the first time ever, candidates would run for Senate. In this case, they were running indirectly. They had been "chosen" by their parties through resolutions at the party conventions. Then, effectively, they were campaigning for their respective parties to elect the most delegates to the state legislature.

Northern Illinois was locked up for Lincoln. Southern Illinois was locked up for Douglas. Central Illinois was known as the Whig belt. The remnants of the Whig party were still there, and they would basically decide the election. The Whigs were the party of Henry Clay. They believed in the "American System" meaning a strong central government that contributed to economic growth through national infrastructure projects. They also liked tariffs to promote domestic manufactures. They opposed the Mexican American War, however, and Lincoln as a former Whig provided Douglas with some fodder on this front.

In general they sat right in the middle on the great question of the day. The Whigs did not, as a whole, like slavery. However, they also were terrified of the prospect of Civil War. So abolition was a dirty word in Whig quarters. As you can imagine, the debates then, focused on persuading these voters. Interestingly, and again a revelation I only received from this book, the House Divided speech was a political disaster that almost cost Lincoln the election right from the start. Douglas would hit on it again and again. Basically, for Whig voters, the House Divided speech sounded a lot like a promise of Civil War. Also interestingly, I have heard for years about Lincoln's own racism and view's reflective of the times.

I now believe that this is a serious misjudgment of Lincoln. I believe that he was truly an advocate of full equality of the races. While he hedged a bit by implying that the declaration promised freedom to the slaves, and not social equality, it is also clear that he would not rule that out either. It is also true that as a result of his broader statements of equality of the races, he was forced by political circumstance to step away from his words a bit. Some of this is sadly ugly. But, he never stayed there, and by the end of the campaign, he seems to have returned to his soaring rhetoric about equality.

Of course, the other odd fact about the Lincoln-Douglas debates is that he loses. Two years later, by-in-large thanks to the telegraph and the coverage of the election throughout the nation, Lincoln would be elected President. There is no doubt that the seed for Douglas' demise and the splintering of the Democratic party was planted during this campaign. There is also little doubt that the seed for Lincoln's greatness also found root here. He might have gone on like so many other politicians -- a one term Congressman who failed to reach the Senate twice. That's usually a recipe for retirement. But in Lincoln's case, the power of his argument and his words would allow him to be a dark horse candidate in 1860, and the rest, as they say, is history.

For me, this was a fine follow-up to Team of Rivals. It filled in a lot of blank pages in my knowledge of Lincoln. For true Lincolnologists, there may not be that much new here, but for the budding devotee, it was a valuable read.

SeaShore says

Dr Allen Carl Guelzo, Historian is a noted Civil War era Scholar.

It is 1858. He lays the background- Open air debates consisted of a sequence of speeches. About 161 newspapers in Illinois were the mouthpieces for the Political Parties and other current events. There were Democratic-swayed newspapers and Republican-swayed newspapers. No neutral newspapers! The people of the State were actually voting for Republican and Democratic State Representatives; and also State Senators. They were not voting directly for Lincoln nor Douglas. United States Senators were not directly elected by the people of the State until 1912.

Some of the author's comments that intrigued me:

Douglas' big baritone voice that wears out pretty quickly and Lincoln who was concerned about looking normal, whatever normal was; looked like a tall scarecrow, (known as Long Abe) according to author Guelzo, with a high pitched and penetrating voice that could be heard by very large crowds across very large distances and he did it with little effort.

Abraham Lincoln, born 1809 and assassinated 1865, 16th U. S. President 1861-1865, was a deeply committed Whig; Stephen A Douglas, Father of Popular Sovereignty, drank heavily during his campaign and he was a racist, bombastic, fierce and a fervent Jacksonian democrat. (Andrew Jackson was the 7th president, 1829-1837. Born 1767, Died 1845) Remember this is 1858.

They attacked each other for 'the most ridiculous things'. The debates were focused on weakening the opponent through diversionary tactics. Very familiar tactics.

"Douglas is the least man I ever saw." said Lincoln.

Douglas: Yes I know Abraham Lincoln. He used to sell liquor.

Lincoln: Yes, I ran a grocery store and if I sold liquor, Douglas would have been my best customer.

Taking a human being and deciding whether that person deserved the Right to Life; Right to Liberty; Right to Happiness is wrong said Lincoln in response to Douglas' position on slavery.

The Spirit of Liberty!

Guelzo says that after 150 years since the debates of 1858, all of us are invited to come up on the platform and join Lincoln and Douglas in an ongoing debate.

One of my references was Harold Holzer, editor of another book, The Lincoln-Douglas debates, written in 1993.

Nathan Albright says

Although this is a very excellent book written by a notable Lincoln Prize-winning author, there are at least a couple of issues with the title. For one, the author states that one of the deliberate aims of this book (and a successful one) is to expand the focus beyond the debates to the comparative campaign histories of both Lincoln and Douglas in 1858, placed in a series of larger contexts, of course, relating to the history of both men and the importance of both men in contemporary political philosophy. For another, in a strict sense, as the author reminds the reader several times, Lincoln and Douglas did not strictly engage in debates, but in serial speeches in which the speakers could choose to answer the comments of the other speaker or not.

Neither were the debates scored on points, although the author does his best to use a chart form to categorize the claims and counterclaims and rebuttals in all seven of the debates, and does his own admittedly personal scoring of the debates to give Lincoln a slight 3-2-2 edge among the seven debates, but coming out considerably stronger in the end as a result of the widespread expectation that Douglas would be a far stronger debater given his much higher political profile. This is a worthy and technical history, combining rhetorical analysis with a deft handling of the tactical and strategic elements of the campaign on both Lincoln's and Douglas' side, which ought to satisfy any political junkie who happens to be interested in the

slavery issue and its relevance to the start of the Civil War, and also the relevance of Lincoln and Douglas to our contemporary societal and civilization-wide malaise.

In terms of its organization, the book is straightforward and chronological. The book introduces its subject (and finishes the book) by bracketing the main story in the context of how Lincoln and Douglas and their debates have been viewed by different generations, most notably in the 1960 presidential debates between Nixon and Kennedy, and noting that despite the fact that they have been mined for worthwhile political philosophy by able men such as Professor Jaffa [1], the Illinois Senate campaign of 1858 has rarely been examined as a whole. The author then spends over 300 pages doing just this, with vivid detail about dirty tricks, evenhanded commentary on the use of pretty girls to send a political message, the alcoholism of Douglas, Lincoln's sordid but sadly necessary task of pandering to the prejudices of the decisive Whig belt in the center of the state, and the bungling errors of Buchanan to attempt to defeat Douglas that ended up leaving Douglas shaken but still in the Senate after the long campaign. The author also comments on how two little-recognized elements dramatically shaped the campaign and its aftermath, first, how Douglas used a letter from Kentucky Whig Crittenden (most famous in history as the author of the doomed Crittenden Compromise after the 1860 Presidential Election) endorsing him over Lincoln to win critical support among the Whigs of Central Illinois, and the second, how little support Lincoln got from some important Republicans and former Whigs within Illinois. This book presents the debates not in isolation, but in part of a larger context, a larger context both in terms of the presidential aspirations of both Lincoln and Douglas, and how the debates themselves became best remembered because of their value as good print material for a voracious reading audience, and also how Lincoln and Douglas addressed matters at the core of the Western republican-democratic political order.

It is these larger questions that are of the most relevance to contemporary readers. To praise Lincoln accurately means to believe that the survival of our Republic, and others, depends on a people being in possession of republican virtue, understanding that no one has a right to do what is wrong, no matter what the majority of the people or the courts. In this case, votes are a means to an end, namely the end of the good life, a life as free of moral and political corruption as possible. For those who praise Douglas, though, there is no higher thought beyond individual rights, no moral compass, no core principles on which our society depends, no moral chest to resist the pull of corruption and decadence. Often, Lincoln's moral stature is admired but not emulated by the political culture of our time, for it is easier to praise virtue than to practice it by far. Douglas, for all of his obvious moral trimming and inconsistency, is a man clearly more of our times, with his boozing and womanizing and his focus only on the present campaign without a larger political philosophy to guide him. Lincoln sits carved in marble, but Douglas makes on us fewer demands, and so we practice politics as he does, focused on the present, rather than thinking about what sort of society it is that we want to encourage and build up. This book performs a notable and worthwhile task in putting the debates in their proper place and in tying them to a greater context, in such a way as to satisfy both the political junkie and the moral philosopher among its reading audience.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

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Sean Wylie says

Absolutely must read for anyone interested in American History or Political History. In these 7 debates Abraham Lincoln (a no name 1 term former congressman) challenged the 3-time elected Stephen Douglas for his Senate seat of Illinois. Judge Douglas was the leading political man of the age known as 'The Little Giant'.

These debates are considered the birth of the modern politics and were the first set of debates captured word-for-word by journalists and published nation-wide. The debates would vault Lincoln on to the national stage. And while he would lose the Senate battle to Judge Douglas, he would ultimately have the final word when he defeated Judge Douglas for President of the United States. His victory would launch the Civil War and the rest is history with Lincoln becoming our greatest president.

We may think our politics of today are the most divided of all time. That is not true. Today's political debates are simply the most VISIBLE because of the horror of the 24-hour news cycle. Our most vicious debates in Congress today revolve around the percentage of taxes we pay and the whether certain medical procedures should be legal. In these debates between Lincoln and Douglas the candidates are debating whether the black population were closer to cows or fellow human beings. Now that is a true 'house divided which cannot stand'.

As many of you know I am an audiobook fanatic. This is a great opportunity for you to try out an audiobook for the first time. These were speeches and the whole perception is different when you hear it spoken. Plus they star David Strathairn as Abraham Lincoln and Richard Dreyfuss as Stephen Douglas, which is wonderful casting.

Patrick says

Fabulous book! I have never read the text of the Lincoln/Douglas debates, and I likely never will, but I think this is better if you're not some serious history professor.

A hundred pages or more pass before they even get close to debating, and that sets up all of what is happening in the different political parties and the nation so you can make sense of the speeches. I wouldn't have understood a lot of the references to the infighting among the Democrats, the whigs, Henry Clay, and various votes and amendments without the context from the book. And this is where you began to see Lincoln's nobility as he usually refuses to be too moderate (for the time) and denounces slavery as inherently wrong. You also see his negative attitudes about black people in context and when he said a couple negative quotes I had read before.

I just highly, highly recommend this to give a lot of life and meaning to the bare fact we learned in high school that Lincoln had some important debates. It was especially good after reading *The Case of Abraham Lincoln: A Story of Adultery, Murder, and the Making of a Great President* and seeing some of the politics over the course of a couple years.

Donna says

I put this book on the history shelf, but it might as well be in current events. The great debates of Lincoln and Douglas point out either how far we've come, how far we've fallen, or that the dirt and meanness of contemporary politics are nothing new.

This book puts the 1858 debates in the context of the entire senate campaign. Did you know that if we had direct election of senators at that time, Lincoln would have won?

In the end, the author puts the central conflict of American democracy between Douglas' fundamental premise that politics is not about leading "the good life" but to ensure "fair play, toleration, and personal autonomy" and Lincoln's conviction that a "liberal democracy had a high purpose, which was the realization of a morally right political order."

And whether you agree with the current state of world affairs, that might be exactly the American debate going on now about Iraq, in the elections in Palestine and Lebanon, and in all circumstances where the majority of the electorate chooses the "wrong" (morally corrupt) politician.

Brandon Claycomb says

Guelzo's recent book on Gettysburg led me to this work, which impressed me equally. For such a careful historian Guelzo is a remarkably gripping author. He shouldn't be able to make Lincoln's seven debates with Douglas so dramatically compelling but he does, while also connecting their campaign elegantly to the other political developments leading the country to civil war. This is as fun and edifying as history gets. Highly recommended.

Chet says

An enlightening description of the background and environment of the debates. I had tried reading the debates themselves, earlier, but could not really make sense of them and so gave up. With the historical background given by this book leading up to the debates, by the time I got to and read the first debate, I then understood what they were talking about. There are a lot of ways to compare the issues with things that are going on today, such as the morality of something (slavery) vs "states rights". Such as race baiting. Such as attacking the speaker instead of addressing the issues. Then as now, "states rights" means you can't tell me what to do, but I can tell you what to do. ;-) It looks like the political parties have flipped, though. The Republicans today are acting like the Democrats did back then. This book reveals a lot about the situation leading up the Civil War, and afterwards. The book does not contain transcripts of the debates, just summaries, but the transcripts are readily available online.

Steve says

It was 150 years ago that Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas squared off in a political battle for the U.S. Senate. Not only was

this hotly contested series of debates garnering great attention in the state of Illinois, they were also the focal point of the country as a whole. Slavery, and its spread into new territories and states as the Union expanded, was the pressing issue of the day and a growing concern for everyone as the nation slowly ground its way toward war.

Allen C. Guelzo approaches the debates in a way that few have ever done. Rather than an outline of the political conflict with some discussion of key talking points, he digs deeply into the very heart of each campaign and lays some outstanding groundwork. To understand the fiery rhetoric and passion within the debates, one needs to understand the tumultuous times, and the decisions behind them, that led to this match-up to begin with. Guelzo cuts to the heart of the slave state/free state issue, explaining the troubles in Kansas and Nebraska, the troublesome decision in the Dred Scott Case and Douglas's firm belief in "popular sovereignty" as the most democratic method by which states would determine their futures.

Detailed within is also the birth of the Republican Party, which was truly no more than a group of disillusioned Democrats from Nebraska, and Whigs, all who shared one supremely strong passion: a complete loathing of Stephen A. Douglas. And it is interesting to see within this framing and explanation that the genteel and iconic Lincoln was, in fact, deeply opposed and outspoken against Douglas. As such, seeing Lincoln and his fire to defeat Douglas and operate within the political machine presents him as much more than the regal presidential figure we have come to idolize and more of a scheming and, ultimately, human figure. Guelzo also shows us that Lincoln did win the popular vote for the Senate but that the districting system in place in Illinois gave the election to Douglas. However, the groundwork had already been laid for Lincoln and his road to the White House.

More than just political issues of the day, the Lincoln-Douglas debates were about the idea of democracy. Each candidate had their own very strong view of the purpose and nature of the democratic process and what it was meant to provide. Guelzo details each view and highlights the benefits and the pitfalls of each, and illustrates how some of those very conflicts are raging even in our modern times. The debates were also the starting point for the future of political conflict --- the creation of the face-to-face system by which competitors would vie for votes from the same stage, a format that Lincoln did not approve of.

The depth to which Guelzo goes into the debates and the campaigns is tremendous, but in mining so deeply, he does not simply resort to a dry delivery of historical footnotes. His passion for the

subject is evident in the text, and he presents it in a wholly engaging and smooth reading manner. A two-time winner of the Lincoln Prize, Guelzo will no doubt draw more attention and accolades for this exceptional work, and deservedly so, for he has taken an historical moment hidden behind the haze of reverence and broken it down to its very core elements. In doing so, he has illuminated the event and made it all the more impressive.
