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Congress Back Then: The Great Slavery Debates



by K. Daniel Glover
Thursday, January 27, 2000
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Vice President Al Gore surprised his Democratic presidential contender, former Sen. Bill Bradley, with an unconventional campaign proposal Dec. 19 when the two made a joint appearance on "Meet the Press." Rather than sell ourselves and our ideas for America to voters through 30-second soundbites, Gore asked Bradley, why don't we vow to debate each other twice a week and drop all radio and television advertising?

Bradley, then a surging underdog rather than a humbled loser in the Iowa caucuses, refused to take the bait. He smugly rejected Gore's invitation as a ploy. The *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* was among those to agree with Bradley. In a Dec. 21 editorial, it called Gore's proposal a "transparent effort to embarrass Bradley" that "rang hollow" and "portrayed the vice president as borderline desperate."

Bradley and the *Journal-Sentinel's* editorial board may be right. But Gore's proposal raises some good questions: Are regular and frequent campaign debates a good way for voters to get to know their candidates. Or are they, in our telegenic era, just another forum for candidates to vogue for the cameras, posture to the people and attack their opponents?

A look at our nation's most famous debates, the clashes over slavery between Sen. Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln just before the Civil War, may provide some answers.

Two men with a past



Abraham Lincoln & Stephen Douglas

Douglas and Lincoln were anything but strangers when they trekked across Illinois for their seven official debates in that state's 1858 Senate campaign. The two had known each other for nearly a quarter-century by then and had been political and personal foes for years.

Douglas lost his first House bid (in 1838) by 36 votes to Lincoln's law partner, John Todd Stuart. Lincoln also condemned a law that enlarged the Illinois Supreme Court -- a law that, as a lobbyist, Douglas helped enact, and that led to his appointment as a judge on the court in 1841. Douglas and Lincoln even competed for the affections of the same woman: Mary Todd, whom Lincoln eventually married.

Philosophically, the two battled repeatedly on the hottest political issues of their day: the pros and cons of territorial expansion, the

rightness of the Mexican War and, most importantly, slavery. Douglas was a rabid expansionist, and his appointment as chairman of the Senate Territories Committee thrust him not only into the center of that debate but also the debate on whether slavery would expand as the nation's borders did.

Douglas helped forge the Compromise of 1850. The compromise, among other things, left the issue of slavery in the territories of Utah and New Mexico up to its citizens. It resolved the greatest threat to the union since 1820, when the Missouri Compromise basically divided the nation into the slave-owning South and the free North.

To Douglas' mind, the 1850 pact established a precedent for "popular sovereignty" on the question of slavery. Congress henceforth would admit new territories without regard to slavery, Douglas argued, and the people of those territories would decide whether to allow it. He applied that principle four years later, when the debate about whether to allow slavery in Kansas and Nebraska arose.

The end result: Congress, by votes of 37-14 in the Senate and 113-100 in the House, passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which made "inoperative and void" the slavery-related boundary that had separated North from South. The law divided the Democratic Party, hastened the end of the long-dying Whig Party and ultimately catapulted Lincoln to an influential role in the emerging Republican Party, as he frequently condemned the statute.

Popular sovereignty vs. morality

Douglas and Lincoln renewed their rivalry four years later amidst a more contentious environment. In the interim, one lawmaker had caned another on the floor of Congress because of a debate on the slavery issue; the Supreme Court had ruled infamously in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that slaves had no rights of citizenship and Congress had no right to regulate territorial slavery; and abolitionists and pro-slavery settlers had rushed to "Bleeding Kansas" to make it slave or free by force.

Lincoln resigned his seat in the state legislature to campaign for the Senate and in short order made a nuisance of himself wherever Douglas spoke. He was in the Chicago audience when Douglas announced his re-election bid July 9 and responded to Douglas' comments the next day. He later followed Douglas to Bloomington and Springfield, responding to his messages there, too.

In part to have more control over their confrontations and in part to avoid charges of being too cowardly to debate Lincoln, Douglas accepted Lincoln's brief, written invitation for more formal debates July 24. Douglas set the parameters: one debate each in the seven Illinois congressional districts where they had not yet discussed the issues, three hours of total debate time, and a rotation that allowed Douglas to open and close four times to Lincoln's three.

Great pageantry attended each event, from the first one in Ottawa on Aug. 21 to the last one in Alton on Oct. 15, and the public and media

swarmed to hear what the two had to say. The attendance at Ottawa, a town of 6,000, exceeded 10,000. The crowds were larger at other debates, and for the one in Charleston, a train carried 11 cars of Indianans, who had no votes in the race, to the city.

The thrust of the oratorical battle centered on Douglas' concept of popular sovereignty -- ridiculed as "squatter sovereignty" by Lincoln -- and Lincoln's moral stance against slavery, or at least the expansion of it, regardless of the popular will. Lincoln, like Douglas, argued for a "superior position" for the white race and against "social and political equality of the white and black races." But at Charleston, he also said it was "quite possible for us to get along without making either slaves or wives of Negroes."

Douglas, on the other hand, demonstrated contempt for blacks. At the Freeport debate, he recalled having been disturbed by a scene the last time he was in town: freed slave Frederick Douglass in a carriage with two white women, the three of them being driven by the white, male owner of the carriage. He encouraged irrational and racist fears with talk of "black settlements" and the transformation of Illinois into a "free Negro colony." And at Quincy, he defended the continued existence of slavery by arguing that the nation "can exist forever divided into free and slave states, as our fathers made it."

Lincoln lost the election -- Illinois Republicans won the popular vote but lost the battle for legislative seats -- and worried aloud that he would "sink out of view and ... be forgotten." But history has judged him the winner of the debates, if only because his performance catapulted him onto the national scene.

The rest of the story

History also has judged the debates themselves as winners, an almost sacred occurrence in the annals of American democracy. "Seldom before or since," Harold Holzer wrote in *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: The First Complete, Unexpurgated Text*, "has political rhetoric elicited such sustained, fevered interest, or exerted such powerful or longstanding influence."

One aspect of the debates, however, often is forgotten amidst the rightful celebration of the their historical impact. Neither Lincoln nor Douglas took the high road in the debates.

Their rhetoric, Holzer said, "was seldom as majestic as folklore suggests." Instead, the men more often than not punctuated their comments with "biting humor, bitter sarcasm and hellish fury" and opted for "character attacks and conspiracy charges, replete with personal insults and name-calling, and not to a high-minded exploration of the issues."

All of which makes you wonder just how much the American voter could benefit today from twice-a-week debates from the likes of Democrats Al Gore and Bill Bradley or Republicans George W. Bush and John McCain. If Lincoln and Douglas could not raise the level of their discourse in 21 hours of debate on an issue that divided a nation,

can we expect any better from lesser candidates when America is fat and happy?

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Related Links

Read the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Visit a page dedicated to "The Little Giant", Douglas nickname. Despite their rivalry, Lincoln and Douglas apparently held no animosity toward each other because Douglas held Lincoln's hat at his first presidential inaugural. So renowned are the Lincoln-Douglas debates that the National Debate Forum instructs people in how to conduct similar debates. Abraham Lincoln Online and the Abraham Lincoln Research Site are among the numerous Web pages dedicated to one of America's most celebrated presidents.



Who won the Lincoln-Douglas debates? Would today's voters benefit from similar encounters? Why or why not? Is Lincoln rightfully revered despite the white supremacist views he espoused in the debates and at other times? Has history viewed Douglas fairly?

Below are the last ten comments in chronological order.
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2/2/00 6:27:36 PM SHEEN
Jack Chick. ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. You'll have to do better than that. But he is interesting. Jack Chick: Right-wing Christian Fundamentalist and literalist cartoonist. Not a very sound source for anti-Catholic stuff. I believe the Athiests do a better job of attacking the Church than the Fundamentalists.

2/2/00 10:12:32 PM bill from buckhead
I was just noting that many of the catholic church's best minds look to marxism(liberation philosophy) to make up for the deficientcies of their faith.

2/2/00 10:17:55 PM Michelle
bill from buckhead: That would be "liberation theology," right? And if these priests are aware enough of the "deficiencies of their faith" (!) to embrace socialism, why are they not leaving the church, period? Maybe they know something you don't?

2/2/00 10:49:44 PM bill from buckhead
Because they think Jesus was the ultimate communist. It's always amazed me that Jesus and the earlier christians never had a good thing to say about wealth but most of today's christians are super materialistic and selfcentered. It's human to try to have things both ways, one day Hannity/Rush/anarcho-libertarians say Clinton/Gore/Blair/Schroeder are communists but the next day they are following raygun and his handlers depending on what point they try to make.

2/3/00 8:17:46 AM Bill Bunn
Hear, hear: Tom O wrote "The peoblem with debates is that they aren't debates at all, but just a collection of soundbites." Indeed Perot showed how to run.

2/3/00 8:30:49 AM Bill Bunn
SHEEN: "The IRA did take up with Germany." (1) When you are fighting an oppresser who is much more powerful, how particular can you afford to be about where you get your guns? (2) The Protestants in the north also got guns from Germany, in fear that they would be forced into a Catholic Ireland. (3) Despite war propaganda, the war was not about good and evil, but a conflict of imperial ambitions. If Germany was worse than the allies in WWI, it was a slight difference. // "... left-over WW I arms." The