Review Essay

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Although interest in the topic has never waned, the sesquicentennial of the 1858 debates between Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln will certainly increase attention to the best-known formal exchange in American political history. Already plans have been announced to commemorate the debates at the original locations fourteen years after C-SPAN offered national coverage for its reenactments. Allen C. Guezlo’s Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America, published this year, is seen by some as the topic’s definitive treatment.

The historical context for the debates is further aided by the publication of two other books. Roy Morris Jr.’s The Long Pursuit, by focusing on the three-decade competition between the debaters, includes a serious examination of the 1858 meetings. John A. Corry’s The First Lincoln-Douglas Debates does not, instead highlighting what he argues is the prequel, a series of speeches both gave in the fall of 1854. In that campaign, Lincoln worked to succeed James Shields, the incumbent U.S. senator. Douglas fought to rally voters behind his Kansas-Nebraska Act and save Shields’s seat.

Corry’s book largely focuses on recounting and analyzing Lincoln’s remarks in the abbreviated debate series of 1854, though he credits location of a Douglas campaign speech as completing the sources he needed for the book. He is not above arguing with Douglas in his footnotes, as he does on page 80 when discussing Douglas’s October 3, 1854, speech in the Illinois state capitol.

Some counterfactual history comes into play during the last pages as Corry poses a scenario in which Lincoln—rather than Lyman Trumbull—succeeds Shields and joins Douglas in the Senate. Without the 1858 debates, would Lincoln still have emerged as a national figure?
Corry answers yes, citing Lincoln’s debating skills and ability to hold his own against stiff competition.

*The Long Pursuit*, however, does a much better job of demonstrating the competition that produced a man able to best the national political figures he brought into his administration. Morris does so by treating Douglas seriously and demonstrating instances where Lincoln was, perhaps, not quite the pedestal-perching figure some assume him to be. Morris wastes no time in outlining his thesis—“Had it not been for Douglas, Lincoln would have remained merely a good trial lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, known locally for his droll sense of humor, bad jokes, and slightly nutty wife” (xi–xii).

The thirty-year struggle between the two men was largely one-sided until the last six, as Douglas achieved national prominence and Lincoln’s ambition, the “little engine that knew no rest,” in William Herndon’s words, sputtered in frustration and disappointment. Not surprisingly, at times such feelings may have led Lincoln to say things he knew not to be true. Morris provides an example from Lincoln’s famed “Lost Speech” in Bloomington on May 29, 1856. Lincoln erroneously alleged that Douglas supported Southern fireater George Fitzhugh’s assertion that slavery was such a good idea it ought to be extended to white laborers. “Old habits die hard and Lincoln could not resist whacking ‘Judge Douglas’ whenever he got the chance” (87).

And what of old John Brown, who Lincoln described as a man of “great courage and rare unselfishness” after his ill-fated raid on Harpers Ferry while at the same time trying to absolve himself and the Republican Party of any responsibility for the fiasco. Yet, Morris notes, Lincoln’s rhetoric decried a “house divided” and the evil of slavery. “When an extremist such as Brown took such warnings seriously and set out to redress the evil in the best way he knew how . . . neither Lincoln nor any other northern leader could convincingly plead complete innocence” (128).

It would be a serious mistake to view Morris’s volume as an “anti-Lincoln” work. He clearly demonstrates Lincoln’s better understanding of the fundamental changes sweeping American politics in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. And while Douglas and Lincoln were clearly rivals—and intense ones—Morris also provides examples of mutual respect and friendship, such as when, at Lincoln’s request, Douglas wrote a personal letter to the president of Harvard, “immeasurably” aiding Robert Lincoln’s admission (135).

Morris grasps a basic fact. To really understand Lincoln and his greatness, one must deal with Douglas. The melodramatic role as “villain” in the Lincoln story sometimes assigned Douglas under-
mines rather than enhances the sixteenth president’s remarkable story. Building upon earlier scholars such as Robert W. Johannsen (whom he acknowledges), Morris gives us a more realistic—and therefore more useful—picture of the politics that produced two remarkable men.

Morris provides not only a readable book but a valuable one to historians. He provides a clear explanation of why the famed 1858 debates still capture our imaginations and why, amid all the obscure squabbling about who said what and where contained in the exchanges, they still speak to us. And how, in their own time, the competition between two migrants to the Prairie State, “helped define and determine the course of American politics during its most convulsive era” (xiv).

Why do historians as well as readers in general continue to revisit the well-trod ground of those 1858 debates? Anyone who has read the debates soon realizes that the classic image of the confrontations is leavened by petty disputations, things all-too-familiar to our own politics. Amid all the obscure accusations and counter-charges, however, are some timeless exchanges. It is those that draw us back.

The Douglas-Lincoln disagreement, most markedly illustrated in 1858 but spilling beyond that year in both directions, was fundamentally about the nature of democracy. Douglas, Morris argues, believed in the supremacy of majority rule, Lincoln in the right of the individual. “One way or another, it is a debate that still reverberates in American society” (xiii).