In their sesquicentennial year, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates are the subject of a new book by well-known Lincoln scholar Allen C. Guelzo. Having previously explored Lincoln’s role as a “redeemer President” and having closely examined the Emancipation Proclamation, Guelzo turns his attention to the pivotal 1858 Illinois election for the U.S. Senate seat. For the most part, the evidence on which he relies is familiar, but he deploys it in the service of fresh and significant insight.

Guelzo’s principal argument is that the debates are misunderstood if they are abstracted from the Senate campaign as a whole—the approach he thinks has been taken in much extant scholarship. He therefore offers a narrative account in which the seven debates are set in the context of the overall campaign strategy and the shifting dynamics of the race. While he offers a summary of each debate and a mix of quotations and paraphrases from the text, he is not particularly concerned with the internal workings of the text or the patterns of the debaters’ argumentative and stylistic choices. His interest centers more on how the debates responded to and shaped political exigencies and public understanding of the key issues in dispute. This approach distinguishes Guelzo’s work from the classic study (Crisis of the House Divided, 1959) by Harry Jaffa, which focuses on the underlying political philosophy of the candidates, and from my own work (Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate, 1990), which Guelzo characterizes as a “technical rhetorical analysis” (xxii).

The test of Guelzo’s approach is whether it resolves anomalies in other explanations of the debates and whether it offers productive insights that other analyses de-emphasize. On these criteria Guelzo does not disappoint, as several examples from the book should illustrate.

First, Guelzo adds texture to our understanding of Douglas’s political position after he broke with President James Buchanan over the Lecompton Constitution. Because the “Buchaneers” ultimately
did not damage Douglas, it is easy to conclude that they never were a real threat. But Guelzo demonstrates that Buchanan was willing to go to great lengths to destroy him (66, 68) and had means to do so, ranging from control of patronage appointments to the efforts by John Slidell to manufacture a story of mistreatment of slaves on a plantation Douglas held in trust for the sons of his first wife (136). Indeed, Guelzo contends, for much of the campaign Douglas had good reason to regard Buchanan as more of a threat than Lincoln. That explains why Douglas would be so sensitive to the possibility of collusion between the administration and the Republicans to defeat him—a charge which, despite Lincoln’s denials, was not without foundation, since William Herndon’s brother was an adviser to the Buchanan organization (134).

Second, and closely related, Guelzo’s analysis causes us to take seriously the possibility that Douglas might become a Republican. That he did not may lead us to see the risk as idle, but in 1858 it seemed that there was a real chance of his switching parties. Not only did prominent eastern Republicans see Douglas’s conversion as being in their party’s interest, but even Chicago Tribune editor Joseph Medill, the secretary of the Illinois Republican Party, predicted that the Little Giant would switch parties by 1860. Illinois Republicans did not trust Douglas, so this apprehension helps to explain why they would call a state nominating convention (highly irregular, since U.S. senators were elected by the state legislature) and why Lincoln would devote so much of the House Divided speech to warning against the thought that Douglas might serve the Republicans’ purpose. This line of argument was useful for the Republicans because one of the few things they held in common was loathing of Douglas.

Third, Guelzo adds emphasis to the claim that Lincoln began the campaign on the defensive, not only because Douglas was better known but also because Lincoln had hurt himself with the House Divided speech. He might have meant it only as a prediction, and he posed his two alternatives asymmetrically: national slavery or containment (not abolition). But, as Guelzo explains, it was easy for Democrats to overlook those nuances and portray Lincoln as an abolitionist. This was especially serious since the swing votes were in what Guelzo calls the “Whig Belt,” particularly voters who “defected to the Democrats whenever they sniffed abolition” (240). Lincoln’s success depended upon his coaxing Whig voters to support him, so he found himself seemingly backtracking from the House Divided doctrine throughout the campaign. Lincoln was also at a disadvantage because he could not begin an active campaign as early as Douglas did, since he needed
to tie up loose ends in his law practice (110). Lincoln’s silence allowed the Little Giant to “define” him early on and helps to explain how he went into the Ottawa debate on the defensive.

Fourth, Guelzo highlights the intensifying race-baiting by Douglas and the Democrats. Ignoring the careful distinction that Lincoln drew between equality in natural rights (which he favored) and equality in civil rights (which he opposed), Douglas quickly caricatured Lincoln as supporting “Negro equality.” Contemporary readers of the debates who recoil at the Little Giant’s naked racism will fail to recognize how devastating a charge this was, especially for the swing voters of 1858. The traction Douglas was gaining by “playing the race card” helps to explain why Lincoln found it necessary to open the Charleston debate with the disclaimer that he did not favor granting civil rights to blacks. Guelzo maintains that Lincoln took this position reluctantly and that he hedged his claim by regarding the superior position of the white race as “assigned” rather than inherent. He nevertheless concludes that this statement by Lincoln was an embarrassment in the eyes of history and that he, like most scholars, wishes Lincoln hadn’t said it. But rather than judge Lincoln by the standards of 2008, he helps us to understand Lincoln’s remarks as prompted, if not required, by the political context of 1858.

Fifth, Guelzo helps to explain Lincoln’s anomalous discussion of the Toombs Bill in his opening speech at Charleston. Except for the brief disclaimer of racial equality, the bill occupied the entirety of his opening speech, and yet there is virtually no mention of it in any of the other debates. Its disconnected nature makes it an oddity for analysts of the texts, and the depth of its development suggests that Lincoln got carried away. Contemporary readers have difficulty following the esoterica of Lincoln’s argument or taking it seriously. It is easy to sympathize with Douglas’s lament that it is unrelated to the real issues of the campaign. But Guelzo argues otherwise. He notes that the value of Lincoln’s argument was that it denied Douglas’s sincerity as an advocate for popular sovereignty from the beginning. The claim was that Douglas had stripped the Toombs Bill of a clause calling for a referendum on the Kansas constitution. Since the easiest way to unify Republicans was by appealing to their hatred of Douglas, this lengthy argument was of great benefit to Lincoln even if the audience did not follow all the intricacies of its development. Predisposed favorably toward Lincoln’s conclusion, listeners would be less likely to scrutinize some of the more tenuous links in the reasoning. Whereas a focus on the text itself would lead one to the conclusion that the Charleston debate was an oddity, Guelzo regards it as the
point at which momentum began to shift toward Lincoln. He scores the Charleston debate as a decisive win for him, and since the area around Charleston was a portion of the Whig Belt that Lincoln carried in the election, his judgment seems to be confirmed.

If, as Guelzo and most other scholars of the debates maintain, Lincoln dominated the final three debates of the series (a result Guelzo attributes in large part to Douglas’s illness and fatigue), why did he lose the election? And, particularly, why did he lose most of the western segment of the Whig Belt in which those three debates were held? Reminding readers that the close of the debates on October 15 did not mark the end of the campaign, Guelzo examines key events during the final two weeks. He notes that Republicans anticipated vote fraud on the part of Irish immigrants in the employ of the Illinois Central Railroad and explains that this concern was not an idle worry. The Illinois Central was beholden to Douglas and could deploy workers to vote in strategic districts and sometimes to vote repeatedly throughout the day. Even more serious than the charges of vote fraud was what Guelzo characterizes as an “October surprise”: the release of a letter by Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden endorsing Douglas (274). Crittenden was the successor to Henry Clay, and his letter gave credence to Douglas’s dubious claim that he, rather than Lincoln, deserved to inherit the mantle of the Great Compromiser. For old Whigs who were still unsure whether Lincoln embodied Clay’s mild antislavery sentiment or was an abolitionist in disguise, Crittenden’s letter tipped the scales and convinced them that the best way to protect against “negro equality” was to return the Little Giant to the Senate (288). Lincoln, says Guelzo, believed that his campaign had suffered a “last-minute tail dive” (299).

But did Lincoln really lose the election? To be sure, he carried fewer legislative districts than Douglas, but given the malapportionment of representatives, this is no assurance that he would have lost the popular vote in a direct election. Many scholars take the vote cast for the two statewide officers—treasurer and superintendent of public instruction—as surrogates for a Lincoln-Douglas vote. Republicans carried those offices by margins of about 4,000 votes. But Guelzo points out that more votes were cast, in total, for legislative candidates than for the statewide offices. Since Democratic candidates could be considered as pledged to Douglas and Republicans for Lincoln, adding up these votes should offer an even better approximation of a statewide choice between Lincoln and Douglas. Using that standard, the Republicans clearly prevailed, receiving 52 percent of the votes to 45 percent for Douglas among state house candidates and 54 percent to 46 percent
among state senate candidates (286). Moreover, even with all of the apportionment difficulties, the result was amazingly close: a change of fewer than 350 votes divided among three key districts in the Whig Belt would have changed the election outcome (285). These considerations help to explain the depression into which key Republicans fell after the election, but they also make clearer how much ground Lincoln had gained during the course of the campaign.

Guelzo also sheds light on other aspects of the campaign. He observes that it began sooner than planned because Douglas was buoyed by the reception he received at the Tremont House in Chicago on July 9, 1858, and because Lincoln, who happened to be in the audience, spoke from the same location the following night. Guelzo also explains the significant political and rhetorical constraint under which Lincoln operated: He needed both to woo the uncommitted and to dissuade committed Republicans from thinking that Douglas might join them. A strong effort toward the latter would make the former more difficult (51). Having rehearsed the reasons that the myth surrounding Lincoln’s second Freeport interrogatory (the contention that Lincoln asked it, knowing that it would cost him the election but convinced that it would mortally wound Douglas for the presidency) was just that, a myth, Guelzo ventures his own theory of why Lincoln asked the question: for no grander reason than a general desire to clarify the issues in the campaign (162), following advice he had received from Joseph Medill in the wake of his performance at Ottawa. Guelzo also highlights the ambiguous role of Lyman Trumbull in the campaign. Although Trumbull owed his Senate seat to Lincoln’s decision to withdraw in 1855, he displayed little enthusiasm for campaigning for the Republicans three years later. He delayed his departure from Washington until early August, and then gave speeches vigorously denouncing Douglas while saying little about Lincoln (140). Meanwhile Douglas, perhaps wanting to portray Lincoln as Trumbull’s mouthpiece, announced that he would hold Lincoln responsible for whatever Trumbull said. It was this announcement that furnished the pretext for Lincoln’s elaborate argument about the Toombs Bill during the Charleston debate. Guelzo even notes, interestingly, that Thomas R. Marshall, who would be Woodrow Wilson’s vice-president, as a young child clambered onto the platform and sat on the laps of both Lincoln and Douglas at Freeport (154). Finally, Guelzo notes the irony that, using Douglas’s basis for opposition to the Lecompton Constitution—it did not truly reflect the will of a majority in Kansas—his own re-election would lack legitimacy. Of course, two years later Lincoln would be elected to the presidency, also far short of a majority of the popular vote.
While summarizing each of the seven debates, Guelzo does not analyze the arguments in detail, nor does he trace the development of specific arguments across the series of debates (presumably, activities that he regards as “technical rhetorical analysis”). But he does capture one essential feature of the textual progression. Douglas’s arguments stay virtually the same across all seven debates, whereas Lincoln’s evolve during the course of the series. This is how it could happen that Douglas could dominate the opening debate, at Ottawa, and yet with virtually the same arguments fall flat at Quincy and Alton. It is also how Lincoln could fail to repeat strong arguments after he had established them once. A careful study of the texts would reveal how Douglas’s basic choice to ground his policy in pure majoritarianism prevented him from introducing whole categories of new arguments, and his fatigue at Quincy kept him from following through on the charge that Lincoln had no practical means of achieving slavery’s ultimate extinction. But Guelzo’s explanation for the phenomenon is also insightful. Douglas, he maintains, conceived of each debate as a self-contained rhetorical event. Giving no thought to the possibility that his remarks would be “overheard,” he focused on persuading the audience that was immediately present. Repetition for him was not a problem; indeed it buttressed his contention that he could espouse the same principles in every section of the country. (When Lincoln commented at Galesburg that much of Douglas’s speech was the same that he had given elsewhere, the Little Giant retorted that he wished the same could be said of Lincoln.) On the other hand, Guelzo maintains, Lincoln was aware that the debates were being covered in newspapers across the state and beyond. He assumed that he was addressing a reading public and that those in attendance at a later debate would be familiar with his earlier speeches (292). Lincoln said as much at Galesburg, but the attribution to Douglas is speculation on Guelzo’s part. It does point to the critical significance of the telegraph and the railroad in extending the sweep of these debates. And Guelzo draws some support for his view by noting that it was Lincoln, not Douglas, who saw the advantage in republication of the series of debates in book form in time for the 1860 election.

Similarly, while Guelzo has little to say about the underlying political philosophies of the two candidates, he is not altogether silent on that score. He does not follow Jaffa’s lead in describing Lincoln’s commitment to moderation as itself a political principle, nor does he explicitly discuss the campaign as a contest between the liberal and the civic republican political traditions. But he does portray Douglas as defending both unbridled majoritarianism and political stability, whereas Lincoln
stood for a moral principle adapted to the constraints of practical politics. On slavery Douglas was the “pro-choice” candidate, though he placed the locus of choice in political communities in which only white men were empowered. It was not, as Lincoln charged, that Douglas saw slavery as a trifling matter. Rather, he regarded it as a complex and unsettled moral issue, and he denied the right of any community to try to settle it for another. Majority rule would keep the issue confined within the normal boundaries of politics and would preserve stability. From his perspective, then, the problem was the agitation of “lunatic-pious abolitionists, who wanted to disturb the racial status quo, thwart the will of the people, and plunge the whole country into pointless conflict” (246). Lincoln, in contrast, began with the proposition that slavery was morally wrong, recognized that pure moral principle could not prevail in the political world and therefore did not espouse abolitionism, but insisted that slavery be treated as a wrong and at least not be permitted to spread. The clash between an ultimate commitment to proceduralism and a commitment to substantive moral positions makes clear the underlying philosophical conflict. As with his treatment of debates as texts, Guelzo says enough to outline the framework of a more elaborate argument, even though his major concern is to situate the debates as historical events within the context of the larger political campaign.

Notwithstanding the significant contribution Guelzo’s work makes to understanding the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, in certain respects it is problematic. First, he divides the campaign into five distinct phases, with precise dates for each and with maps showing the travel of each candidate during the specified period. But he neglects to explain the major characteristics of each phase (if the phases were different in any respect other than where the candidates traveled) or to account for his choices of beginning and ending points, or to indicate what this periodization of the campaign contributes to our ability to understand or to appreciate it.

Second, Guelzo suffers the vice of his virtue. By foregrounding the campaign context, he de-emphasizes what is happening in the text. To be sure, he summarizes the content of each debate with a grid—a two-column chart that identifies the major claims of each candidate and the response, if any, by the opponent. Whichever candidate spoke first is assigned the left-hand column. But the grids do not reflect the texture of the debate. They do not evaluate either the quality or the significance of any argument; they do not distinguish between the asserted denial of an argument and the refutation of it; they do not display the interactive or the cumulative character of arguments—how one argument relates to or builds upon another. Sometimes they
do not make clear which candidate initiated the argument or whether the argument was picked up at a later time.

Third, while Guelzo is admirably willing to “judge” the debates, he does not provide grounds for his judgments. He maintains that “it is just barely possible, based purely on impression, to say” that Douglas prevailed at Ottawa and Jonesboro, that Lincoln won in Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton, and that the debates in Freeport and Charleston were essentially a draw (290). This is an important and heuristically rich claim, some parts of which depart from conventional wisdom. Jonesboro may have been a less clear-cut victory than Guelzo maintains, Freeport is often, if mistakenly, counted as a definite win for Lincoln, and Charleston is hard to evaluate because of its atypical content. Moreover, one’s judgment of debate outcomes depends on one’s criteria. Does one make a disembodied assessment of the arguments? Evaluate each candidate’s performance relative to expectations? Look for shifts in momentum (elusive as that may be)? Use the election results as proof of the debate results? Employ some other standard? These are interesting issues, and addressing them might have enabled Guelzo to strengthen his claim that the debates are best understood within the larger context of the campaign. After rendering his tentative judgment, however, Guelzo declines to develop an argument for it. Instead, he urges readers that they “should not put too much stock by this” (290) and reaches the noncontroversial conclusion that Douglas failed to “sweep” the series. Lincoln performed better than expected; he attracted notice from beyond the state, and that in turn led to speaking invitations and national prominence. All true, and all important in the long run, but Guelzo misses the opportunity to evaluate the conflict between the two men from the perspective of 1858.

Fourth, Guelzo may have oversimplified Douglas’s response to the *Dred Scott* decision. To be sure, his principal response was that the decision could be squared with popular sovereignty, because slavery could not survive without friendly local legislation. But he also maintained that the decision applied only to acts of Congress, not to the acts of territorial legislatures, and hence that it was not directly applicable to the case at hand. Lincoln and others argued that this distinction was specious; what Congress could not do directly, it could not do indirectly through its creature the territorial legislature. But Douglas believed that territories were not like colonies but were incipient states enjoying a similar degree of sovereignty. Guelzo quotes secondary sources to say that in the *Dred Scott* decision, Chief Justice Taney explicitly extended the reach of the decision to include territorial legislatures (21). That was Taney’s own view, but it was joined by only two other justices and so
was not the ruling opinion. The ambiguity of the court’s decision on this matter gave Douglas an escape route, if only for the time being. The ambiguity also warrants giving more emphasis to Lincoln’s fifth interrogatory, propounded at Jonesboro, which sought to establish that it was logically inconsistent to support the *Dred Scott* decision and then to withhold whatever friendly local legislation might be required.

Finally, it must be noted that Guelzo’s subtitle, whatever its marketing advantages, is misleading. To be consistent with his own main argument, he should focus not on the *debates* but on the *campaign*. If anything “defined America,” by his reasoning, it would be the entire senatorial contest rather than the seven debate encounters in particular. But, more importantly, Guelzo does not establish that either the debates or the campaign “defined America” in the sense that the national identity was clearly established or that a major conflict about it was resolved. For those who read them carefully, the debates did make clear the difference between purely procedural and substantive notions of moral principle. But the underlying conflict between liberalism and civic republicanism was present at the founding, survived the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and as Guelzo himself notes (314), is with us still. The debates articulated that conflict in the issues of the day, but they did not resolve it. And yet it may be that the essentially contested nature of both liberal and civic republican traditions, and the shifting dynamic of the relationship between them, is really what defines America—in 2008 as in 1858.