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The Lincoln-Douglas Solution

Abstract

No matter which of Monday night's two candidates you think won or lost, the real loser was the debate itself. The physical environment of Hofstra's Mack Center was surprisingly cramped and poorly lighted; the podiums made both candidates seem remote; and Lester Holt's hapless management was repeatedly stampeded-over by the debaters and the audience. Both Trump and Clinton appeared to be playing parodies of themselves, Trump by turns meandering and furious, Clinton condescending and unimaginative. [*excerpt*]

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The Lincoln-Douglas Solution

By [Allen C. Guelzo](#)

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Joe Raedle/Pool via AP

No matter which of Monday night's two candidates you think won or lost, the real loser was the debate itself. The physical environment of Hofstra's Mack Center was surprisingly cramped and poorly lit; the podiums made both candidates seem remote; and Lester Holt's hapless management was repeatedly stamped-over by the debaters and the audience. Both Trump and Clinton appeared to be playing parodies of themselves, Trump by turns meandering and furious, Clinton condescending and unimaginative. Both did little more than rehearse first-hand the insults they had previously traded at a distance, while Holt behaved as though his task was to atone for Matt Lauer.

You would think that, after 40 years of pre-election presidential debating (since the Carter-Ford face-off in 1976), we would have found a format that actually fostered the real goal of debate, which is the presentation of disciplined argument, without a predetermined outcome. Think again. Maybe we need 40 more years. Or maybe we need 158 fewer years. As in, say, 1858.

The gold standard of American political debating has always been the seven debates held that year by Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas across the state of Illinois as part of Lincoln's bid to unseat Douglas as a U.S. senator. And no wonder, since the Lincoln-Douglas debates were

what brought Abraham Lincoln his first nation-wide attention and paved the way to his successful bid for the presidency in 1860.

But even beyond their Lincoln connection, the Lincoln-Douglas debates stand out as impressive pieces of political theater. They were held not in studios or auditoriums but in the open Illinois air, in town squares and public spaces where the crowds frequently swelled to 25,000. One would speak for an hour; his opponent would follow for an hour-and-a-half; the first would speak again for half-an-hour in rebuttal; and each would take turns as the lead-off debater. And they had only one issue in view: *Should the U.S. government prevent the expansion of African-American slave labor into the newly organized territories of the West?* If it's stamina that debating should measure, look no farther.

On those terms, we might expect the Lincoln-Douglas debates to have become the template for all subsequent national debating. But they didn't. No presidential candidates engaged in one-on-one debates until Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy appeared in four televised exchanges before the 1960 elections. But the use of broadcast television made those debates a very different creature from Lincoln-Douglas. Nixon and Kennedy would each speak for only eight minutes (and in a television studio), field questions from a four-member panel of journalists, and then deliver three-minute closing statements. The result had next to nothing to do with political issues. Nixon was widely judged to have "lost" because he looked wan and uncomfortable under the studio lights, while the tanned and athletic Kennedy exuded confidence and ease.

In every presidential debate since, the results have hinged more and more on the candidates' appearance than their logic. Likewise, the moderators have become more and more obtrusive. In 2012, CNN's Candy Crowley intervened in a dispute between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney over when, exactly, Obama had described the Benghazi attack as an "act of terror." On Monday night, Lester Holt attempted to do the same to Trump on four occasions, only to have the candidate blaze back with angry denials. And the Hofstra crowd became so raucous that Holt had to "admonish the audience...to be silent, so it would be helpful for us."

So, is this a back-to-the-future moment for presidential debating? Possibly. To re-adopt the Lincoln-Douglas model, however, we would have to eliminate the moderators. Lincoln and Douglas got through all seven debates by sharing the platform with only the local arrangements committee, whose chairman merely introduced each speaker in turn. To be sure, there were reporters aplenty at the debates, but their place was in the audience, taking notes. The idea that the press would decide what issues to discuss, offer corrections (as they saw) it to the candidates, and then ask the questions would have been treated by Prairie Staters of the day as an annoyance.

A return to Lincoln-Douglas would also mean moving out of studios and confined spaces. Admittedly, the logistics of arranging for an open-air debate are formidable, not the least for the security problems it would pose. But using a sports stadium as the venue would allow for at least the same level of screening used for major sporting events. Loud-speaker systems would ease the strain on candidates' voices, while the natural distances that would separate the candidates from the audience (and the television cameras) would shift the burden of communication away from appearances and back to policy issues.

Above all, let the candidates speak from a single lectern. Put as many local notables as you like on the platform, but have the candidates take turns speaking, as Lincoln and Douglas did, from a single lectern. That way, the candidates will be compelled to speak to the people, and not just to each other from dueling lecterns.

I doubt whether re-vamping presidential debating in this fashion will appeal much to the Commission on Presidential Debates, which developed the press-forum model in the first place. The CPD board of directors contains not a single historian, much less any debate professionals. Nor has it shown much curiosity about other alternatives, including variations on academic and parliamentary-style debate.

It's too late to expect the Commission on Presidential Debates to do a complete overhaul of the remaining 2016 showdowns. But the Lincoln-Douglas model has at least one undeniable argument in its favor: It gave us Abraham Lincoln.

Allen C. Guelzo is the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College and the author of "Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America."

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