

DEBATES HAVE COME A LONG WAY SINCE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS 'DISCUSSION'

by Herbert Mitgang

When the most famous of all election debates took place in 1858, they had a kinder name: joint discussions. There was no panel of journalists, or even a single moderator. And they were for U.S. senator from Illinois, not president.

The abrasive issues surrounding Abraham Lincoln and his opponent, Sen. Stephen Douglas - popular sovereignty, local self-government, obedience to the Supreme Court's ruling on slavery in the Dred Scott case, Union vs. a House Divided over the extension of slavery into new territories - clearly demanded discussion in the press and in person.

So Lincoln proposed a series of joint discussions, asking Douglas "to divide time and address the same audiences during the present canvass." Fearing that the Republicans would term a rejection cowardice, Douglas accepted.

This was the agreed-upon format: seven debates over a three-month period, opening speeches one hour, replies 90 minutes, rebuttal by the first speaker a half-hour.

There was no hiding behind studio lecterns, no "Larry King Live," no World Series conflicts; it was one on one, rain or shine, without makeup or microphones.

The average audience was 10,000 or more. There were no tickets; it was first come, first closer to the platform. Some people came for the pageantry, yet the big turnouts spoke well for citizens willing to stand and listen to three hours of political talk.

At the first joint discussion in Ottawa, 12,000 people stood in a scorching August sun to hear the candidates. Their words were recorded by "phonographic" or shorthand reporters, the beginning of this method of newspaper coverage. The discussions, including heckling,

also were hot.

The Chicago Tribune, which was pro-Lincoln, said the debate "gave greater satisfaction to our side." The headline in the pro-Douglas Chicago Times went: "Lincoln's Heart Fails Him! Lincoln's Legs Fail Him! Lincoln's Tongue Fails Him! Lincoln's Arms Fail Him! LINCOLN FAILS ALL OVER!"

While the candidates discussed the issues, there also were personal recriminations, mainly among supporters but also between the debaters. Douglas told a crowd that Lincoln was once a storekeeper who sold whiskey; Lincoln, who did not drink or smoke, scored a hit by saying he had left his side of the bar long ago but Douglas still imbibed.

The debaters went deep into the wellsprings of liberty in the language of the Constitution. Why was slavery not mentioned openly by the Founding Fathers? Where were the words "slavery" or "Negro"? Douglas saw this as justification for his views, but Lincoln took a longer look: "It was hoped when it should be read by intelligent and patriotic men, after the institution of slavery had passed from among us, there should be nothing on the face of the great charter of liberty suggesting that such a thing as Negro slavery had ever existed among us."

At the final debate in Alton on Oct. 15, 1858, Lincoln summed up the months of talking in these prescient words:

"I have said, and I repeat it here, that if there be a man amongst us who does not think that the institution of slavery is wrong in any of the aspects of which I have spoken, he is misplaced and ought not to be with us. Has anything ever threatened the existence of this Union save and except this very in-

stitution of slavery? That is the real issue. That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles - right and wrong - throughout the world."

On Election Day, Nov. 2, 1858, Lincoln's total vote was 125,430 to Douglas's 121,609. Yet Lincoln did not gain the seat because the legislature, not the voter, determined who went to the Senate, a situation that prevailed until the Constitution was amended in 1913. And when the Illinois Legislature balloted the first week in January, Douglas received the 54 Democratic votes and Lincoln the 46 Republican.

Still, the widely followed debates had a tremendous effect. Even in defeat, Lincoln emerged as the Republican from the West, a man of national stature and a possible presidential candidate.

(Herbert Mitgang is a writer for the New York Times. This material originally appeared in the Times and is used with permission.)