

The Lincoln-Douglas Debate of 1984

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I should have conceded as soon as Abraham Lincoln entered the room. It didn't matter that his stovepipe hat was made of construction paper or his beard a bunch of cottonballs dyed black. It didn't matter that he wore a plaid shirt, tan cords and Nike Cortez training shoes. It didn't matter that in my American History class's recreation of the 1858 Senatorial Debates Honest Abe was really Rob Parton, an amiable flanker for the football team: that October afternoon, to the other eighth graders, he was the real thing.

I wore no costume. I didn't need one to draw attention, as I was Calder Middle School's sole minority student, the son of a black father and white mother who were the only voters on our street with Mondale and Ferraro yard signs. For the next forty-eight minutes, though, I would be Stephen Douglas, the Little Giant. I wasn't thinking this when the first bell rang and the applause for Lincoln grew, but I know now Fritz and Gerry had a better shot at winning their election than I did.

The teacher, Ward Peters, stepped between Rob and me, gesturing for everyone to sit down at their tables. It was his idea—this mock election—a surefire way to make “history come alive.” Peters slightly resembled Kenny Loggins, gave easy tests, and won over most of the student body when he finished first in the twist contest at the final football pep-rally. I wasn't impressed. The material we covered poorly

rehashed what I'd learned two years earlier, when my history teacher was Mr. Suarez, a Puerto Rican from Lorain. Still, Peters seemed not one to fear. It was his first year teaching, and he wanted his students to learn, even if his methods were shaky.

But now was the time for me to sit down and face my classmates of the past two-and-a-half months. I looked at my digital watch, then glanced at them all, wondering who knew what had really happened during the election of 1858. I turned to Rob. He moved as if trying to keep his hat balanced on his head and stared upward while it wobbled. I clutched my blue folder, swollen with debate notes, concentrating on my opening, "My fellow Illinoisans"—no easy word for an eighth-grade mouth, especially one with braces and bands—until I could silently enunciate it three times without stumbling. Ward Peters waved both hands. The room grew silent, and he said, "Welcome, then, to the Lincoln-Douglas debate."

Saliva pooled in my mouth. I swallowed but more replaced what I got down my throat. The other students—most of whom had asked me if I were Italian, Indian or what?—cheered again, nearly all gazing in Rob's direction. Jack Walker, my homeroom- and table-mate, appeared to still be defacing his textbook, *Of Thee I Sing*. Moments earlier, I'd seen him cut with a pocketknife an A and C of the AC/DC logo. Judging by the motion of his hand, he'd moved onto the lightning bolt. "Mr. Lincoln. Senator Douglas," Ward Peters said, like a page instructed to only refer to the actors by the name of the character they were playing.

Rob sat stiffly, one hand patting his cotton ball beard. I noticed then he was missing something: Lincoln's mole. I congratulated

myself for this discovery, wondered if I might somehow work it into my speech. But in my weekend preparation, I'd been so faithful to the events of 1858, I couldn't now insert some wisecrack about Rob's costume, not while I wore loafers, jeans and a red and white rugby shirt. Prickles of sweat broke out over my chest, and I shifted from one buttock to another, wishing I'd agreed to my mother's idea about wearing an oxford shirt and a necktie, like a real debater. I closed my eyes, pressed my blue folder against my bouncing knees. Now was the time to quit, to give up this folly of winning because Douglas had won, and finding for myself a role other than the face in the class photo that didn't quite fit, but I wouldn't let my mind linger on such thoughts. As if to obscure them, I closed my eyes. "Now to see who'll begin," Ward Peters said, loosening the knot of his knit tie, then rolling up the sleeves of his checked shirt. He fumbled in his pocket and soon retrieved a coin. He balanced it on his bent thumb, flicked it spinning, and said, "Mr. Lincoln? Heads or tails?"

In Dayton, before my father was transferred by the phone company to Springfield, then Toledo, then Columbus, then suburban Columbus, then here to Calder, I discovered there were at least two versions of history: what the teachers and textbooks asserted and what I learned from books at home. And if I armed myself with facts about overlooked heroes and heroines, I believed prejudice, bigotry and run of the mill idiocy could be beaten. Long before Martin Luther King's birthday became a holiday, before the coldest and shortest month of the year was set aside to honor the contributions of African Americans, I analyzed my textbooks, noting how for every mention of

Benjamin Banneker or photo of Harriet Tubman the editors had left out Ralph Bunche, Shirley Chisholm, or Denmark Vecsey, to name a few. The books I trusted were the *Negro Encyclopedia* and *Ebony's History of Afro-America*. And between third and seventh grade—when I attended four different schools—I irritated nearly every history teacher I had, listing aloud the accomplishments of Crispus Attucks, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer and Charles Drew. I can admit now I was showing off, more than just a little, but in sixth grade, Mr. Suarez appreciated what I was doing. He gave me *Zinn's People's History* and *From Slavery to Freedom*, by John Hope Franklin, books I still own today. He said I should try to educate other students of color in need of uplift or Anglos that complained aloud about minorities not doing anything for this nation of ours.

Things were different in Calder. We now lived in a small town, closer to Wheeling, West Virginia than Columbus. It was ringed by farms and towns with vaguely Indian names. Black people weren't in the classrooms. They existed on televisions and in folklore about trips to big cities and narrow escapes. My father was experiencing the same sense of alienation, I'm sure, but I could never tell then. If anything, he seemed happy to live here and told me if things worked out we wouldn't move anyplace else. He and my mother both had long supported my attempts to learn black history, but when I first complained about how Peters's class lacked challenges, he assured me that sometimes it was okay for a class to be easy. I don't doubt he was trying to dissuade me from a career in education. In his first year at the phone company, he earned more in salary than his combined three years as a junior high science teacher. But there was more to it.

The Sunday before the mock-election, while he watched the Browns lose to the Steelers once again, I was at the dining room table with my history books and the thin biography on Douglas I found at Calder's library. After he groaned and flicked off the TV, my father came into the dining room and picked up the biography. "Made any buddies yet?" he said, peering at me from over the cover.

I shrugged. Jack Walker was the closest thing I had to a friend. He called me Jimi because of my passing resemblance to the guitarist. "Looks like you're getting ready to teach a class, Clay," my father said.

"Just want to do my best," I said. I could have told him more, of how I wanted to impress people, how after Rob was encouraged to play Lincoln my hand was up to take on the role of Douglas, the winner. I could have told him how I believed my performance would earn a victory and afterwards classmates might want to get to know me, not interrogate me about this strange decision my parents had made years earlier to marry. I didn't tell my father any of this. I didn't even open my mouth, as if the braces were a contraption to quiet me as well as correct the alignment of my teeth.

Above me, my father breathed through his nose, then set the book down. "It's not your job," he said. "Teaching." He stooped to be at eye level with me. I blinked. Back then, there were times I wished he wasn't black. Or I wished my mother was black, something to make us less of an oddity. I looked down at my notes, copying "Kansas was the site of many skirmishes between abolitionists and pro-slavery forces." My father grabbed my chin. "You can't get through to all of them all the time," he said. His hand moved upward, tousling my hair, which I'd tried to grow into an afro but could only

keep it inflated with constant picking. "You hear me?" he said. "You understand?"

I nodded but was already writing the first few words of the victory speech I was growing sure I would be giving. I had, after all, history on my side.

"Mr. Lincoln chose tails," Ward Peters said. "And tails it is." He held out a Kennedy half-dollar and said, "Do you choose to go first or second, sir?"

Rob stood, hat tottering, both hands fumbling to keep it on his head. "First," he said. When he reached his full height, he retrieved from his back pocket a piece of paper folded into the size of a playing card. He started to shake it out, then, as if sensing such a motion would lose him his hat, he used both trembling hands to smooth out the paper. Once he positioned the page before him, he hooked a thumb under this armpit, a move that confused me until I remembered an illustration from the textbook where Lincoln was thusly posed. In class, Rob rarely spoke and ended answers interrogatively: "Jefferson?" Now he looked at the paper and read: "Thank you ladies and gentlemen I am glad to see you today and want to tell you that I want to be senator and will do everything I can to be a good one." He paused, breathed through his open mouth. "And you'll be happy when you vote for me because I care about the people and want to do what's right. Thank you."

That was it? Had the applause that followed not been so total, I might have felt sorry for Rob. Seated, he grew flushed and stared open mouthed at all six tables, where the students stood, cheering and

whistling and clapping. Boys and girls, football players and FFA members, even some of the bathroom smokers in black concert t-shirts. Jack Walker stayed seated. He looked around the room, too, his wide pale face puzzled beneath his black bangs, as if the noise had waked him. Seated at his desk, Ward Peters clapped ponderously. I turned around. The look on his bearded face was one I'd see a lot later, when I was enrolled in History Education, a look that barely disguised he was mentally revising the assignment, making sure to give more specific instructions next time. For now, in the classroom, he could only thank Rob. He coughed. "Senator Douglas?"

Now I was the only one standing. I looked again to Rob, who fanned himself with the black hat. Then, as if shocked, he sat up and rummaged in his pants' pocket until he placed with his finger a tiny black disk on his left cheek—the wrong one. By that moment, I had sensed this mock election was a popularity contest. Still, I wasn't giving in. I would make these knuckleheads recognize their duty to conform to history.

"My fellow Illinoisans," I began, my braces and bands making it hard to shape all those vowels and s's. I paused, in time to see a girl named Connie Weeks lean next to Meg Fowler and whisper, "What did he say?"

"He thinks we're in Illinois," Meg whispered back, loud enough for Ward Peters to shush them and say, "Go on, Mr. Douglas."

As if they were Douglas's white, male, adult contemporaries, I exhorted my classmates to be cautious with their vote. I spoke of the Constitution's glories and a senator's obligation to their maintenance. I warned them of the trouble these rabble-rousing Republicans might

loose upon our fair state and union. I wiped my upper lip a few times. I spoke of states' rights as strongly as Strom Thurmond. The pages of my speech trembled, too, and I tried to quietly suck in the spit my braces created. Yet I sallied forth, closing my eyes, as if I believed every word I spoke. "In conclusion," I concluded. "The choice is clear. Do you, my good friends, want to suffer the consequences of radical ideas or continue with solid, honest leadership? I hope that—for our state's sake and our nation's sake—you choose well."

I looked up, silently thankful for my thesaurus. There was some applause, but most came from Ward Peters and even Rob Parton, who still had his mole on the wrong cheek when he shook my hand. Peters stood between us again, dropped his hands on our shoulders and said, "An excellent job. By both our debaters. Any questions?"

Smelling of Old Spice and Wrigley's, Peters was only an inch or two taller. His hand felt heavy, as if he might be keeping me in place. "Surely," he said, "some of you would like a little more information before casting your ballots?" He sounded excited, his voice rising, as if he'd concluded the exercise would be worth repeating. Perhaps he was selecting the next one. Kennedy and Nixon? Carter and Reagan? A few noisy minutes passed, with stomachs gurgling, chairs creaking, a pencil rolling across a tabletop and clattering on the floor. More chairs groaned. The clock ticked loudly. Everyone but Rob and I had looked upon this as a blow off class. Several didn't have textbooks before them. Finally, someone near the chalkboard said, "Why do they call you Honest Abe?"

A real puzzler. Rob cleared his throat and spoke more convincingly than he had all class: "Because I cannot tell a lie."

Wrong face on Mt. Rushmore, I wanted to say, but neither Ward Peters nor I corrected Rob, and the class cheered as if he'd promised a permanent end to pop quizzes. "Anyone else?" Ward Peters said. He cleared his throat. I couldn't see his eyes but suspect they were darting around, hopeful somebody else would ask a question that revealed he'd done the reading. "Yes," said a voice. And then Jerry Mowry stood. Another football player in cords and Cortez training shoes, he wiped his messy hair back on his head. "Mr. President," he said. I turned to Ward Peters, who would not allow this mistake. "I'll remind you that the year is 1858," Peters said, a statement that fetched no comprehension from Jerry. He blinked. His lower lip hung open and wet. Peters continued: "And this is an election for the U.S. Senate."

"Ok," Jerry said, cocking his palm at his waist, barely concealing a crib note. A worse reader than Rob, he said, "What will you do if there is a civil war?"

My shoulders tensed. Peters had to feel it in his hand. I should have stepped out of the role of Stephen Douglas then, should have shouted that Jerry's question proved that no student, other than I, knew American history. Yet indignation clogged my throat, and saliva pooled in my mouth. Why didn't the students know this was a foolish, not to mention un-historical, question? Why wasn't Ward Peters correcting Jerry again? Rob, seemingly reading from his own crib note, said, "A house divided will not stand." He smiled and shrugged. Applause sounded as loud as rain on a tin roof, and I wondered how orchestrated this whole mess was. I doubted Ward Peters was in on it, feeding Rob lines or cueing his pets to lead the cheering. Still, the students had already decided the victor of this mock election would

be Rob, not because he was more popular than I, but because they believed they were doing their duty, to avoid corrupting history. And they weren't finished. There was one more question, directed at Stephen Douglas, he who'd stand in the way of the Railsplitter's victory.

Once the applause ebbed and before Peters could ask for more questions, Connie Weeks, with her Dorothy Hamill hair and cowl-necked sweater, stood. "I have something to ask Douglas," she said.

"Go ahead," Peters said.

Didn't I deserve at least a Mr.? I wanted to remind Peters I was the incumbent but was more worried that the students of Calder Middle—few of whom knew my name was Clay—would start calling me Douglas. I swallowed more saliva. Meanwhile, Connie Weeks breathed haughtily, crossed her arms, and said, "You talk about slavery. And it's wrong. But you said it's ok sometimes."

What was the question? I wanted to ask, as Connie's face wrung itself into a smirk of disbelief. "I don't know," she continued, "if you've read the Constitution." And here she turned, as if confident all behind her shared her feelings. She turned back. "But it says all men are created equal. What do you think about that?"

The Declaration of Independence, I said to myself, a half-second before—thank God—Peters corrected Connie and made clear which document was written when. But I didn't need the time to develop my answer. I was no psychic, but I suspected as soon as Connie spoke erroneously of the Constitution that she was getting to the issue where Lincoln was on the right side. Over the weekend, I knew someone would ask about slavery, if only to put me on the spot. In fact, I

had to select between a states rights argument and a plea to let the voters determine their directions, which is what we spent a lot of time debating back in Mr. Suarez's sixth grade class. Or, as I decided then in that chilly classroom, I could take the simplest answer. The worst answer for me and my father, of course. I swallowed, made sure I spoke in the oratorical style of Douglas, and said, "In 1858, madam, the negro"—I winced, as if someone had stepped on my foot—"is still considered property."

Her mouth still open, Connie sat down. When Ward Peters took his hand off my shoulder, I thought he was going to applaud, but he didn't. "Time to vote," he said. "Everyone write either Lincoln or Douglas on a sheet of paper, fold it up and put it on my desk." An enormous peal of laughter followed, as Rob pulled off his beard and fanned his face again with the hat. My jaw tight, I pulled out a sheet of paper. All along, I planned on voting for myself. I'd wanted to win since I'd volunteered to be Douglas. Why else would I participate? Now, as my fingers moistened my paper, I didn't feel like writing Stephen Douglas's name. Not after what I'd just said. I kept seeing my father's face, as if reliving the moment from the weekend. What would he have said had he heard me? The Sunday before, he'd told me I couldn't get through to all of them. Now I doubted I could get through to anyone.

My plan changed. I would shame these clods around me, alert them to their ignorance of the story of our nation. I could see myself standing near Peters's desk, where a pennant sized American flag stood next to the Ohio flag, lecturing about the past and, without even knowing who Santayana was, warning them if they didn't learn

what happened, they'd repeat it. But did I have to vote for Rob? Even had he worn a full costume from the 1850's, even had he promised a dollar, I couldn't vote for him. I shook my head, then looked up. Jack Walker strode toward Peters's desk, a folded piece of paper in his hand. His biker wallet jingled merrily, in contrast to the thump of his black boots. I dashed a name on my ballot, folded it, and tossed it next to Jack's on Peters's desk. Jack winked, then turned around and weaved his way through the throng of voters, eager to make their voices heard.

It wasn't unanimous. Damned if I didn't get three votes. In home room, the next day, I learned Jack had voted for me. That's what he'd tried to communicate with his wink. Rob's hat and beard was stupid, he said. "You did all the work, Jimi." He mimed a guitar solo and slapped my back.

A second vote came from a member of my history class, but I never learned who cast it and why, though I like to believe that vote shows how good a job I'd done. The third, of course, came from Ward Peters, only I didn't know this when he tallied the numbers on the chalkboard—18 to 3—then dusted his hands and pushed up his sleeves. "I had to eliminate one," he said, staring at Jack, who turned over his textbook. "I didn't know Angus Young was on the ballot."

I covered my laughter with a cough, but no one was paying me much attention. They were laughing and looking at Jack, who waved, then put his head down on his book.

"But," Ward Peters said, "as you can tell by the total, you all took a different view than the people of Illinois back in 1858."

Applause started up again—everyone’s hands must have been sore—and Rob waved, while Jerry and some of the other football players lifted him up on their shoulders. But Ward Peters wasn’t done. “Settle down,” he said. “Settle down.”

His eyes were darting, and his skin grew redder. Ten years younger than I am now, he must have felt a little overwhelmed, struggling to make clear the real lesson for twenty kids who were probably thinking about what snack they’d have at home. I experienced a similar moment while student teaching a seventh grade history class. After handing back a test nobody passed, I sensed if I stayed on as a teacher, I’d be unloved until years later when grown students returned to say I was tough but they’d really learned. That’s why I quit that program, moved over to poli sci. Still, Peters showed promise as an educator. He said, “All right. Class hasn’t ended yet, officially.” He sighed, rubbed his bearded chin, unaware he’d left a white streak there. “I want to inform you—and this will be on the exam Friday—Douglas did win the election.”

I looked at my watch, the digital seconds pulsing toward the end of class. In two minutes I could remove myself from this room and, hopefully, my role as Stephen Douglas—lover of slavery and loser to Abraham Lincoln. “But,” Ward Peters said. “It is interesting to ponder what might have happened had Lincoln lost. Perhaps he wouldn’t have run for president.” He shook his head, still unaware of the white streak, though a number of students, Connie Weeks and Jessie Fowler among them, were whispering and pointing. Peters said, “But that’s history. We study what happened, not what might have happened. Any questions?”

The seconds flashed by on my watch. I wanted nothing more spoken until the bell sounded, but Connie Weeks—her nasal voice now unforgettable—said, “Who’d you vote for, Mr. Peters?”

“Douglas,” he said, too quickly. “He was better prepared.” I heard his earth shoes peeling off the tile floor. He was coming near me, but I wouldn’t look away from my watch. Students would never call me Clay Beasley. I’d be Douglas for as long as my father’s job kept us in Calder.

Peters was close enough now for me to smell his Old Spice. I swallowed but my mouth instantly filled up with spit. Peters said, “But what impressed me most was his answer to your question, Connie. I’m sure that’s exactly what Douglas would have said.” His hand fell on my shoulder. I flinched but wouldn’t look up, recalling again what my father had said over the weekend. Was this one of those times when it was best not to try to get through to everyone? Should I just keep my mouth shut? I’d had all those earlier chances to quit being Douglas and return to being myself, Clay Beasley. Now seemed the time to step out of the role. I might not ever get another chance. “Mr. Peters?” I said.

His hand still on my shoulder, he looked down at me, smiling. “Yes?”

He wasn’t an enemy. The students weren’t all bigots. But they needed a lesson other than the one he wanted to give them. “I couldn’t have voted for Douglas,” I said, meaning in 1858, I couldn’t have voted. But the Calder kids had their textbooks. Let them figure it out for themselves, I thought. Just then, Peters’s grip on my shoulder weakened. His eyebrows rose and his lips parted, but I didn’t want to give him a chance to speak. I stretched my lower jaw and the bands

that kept my mouth tight. I swallowed more spit. Then I said, "So I voted for Angus."

The bell rang. The first student standing, I passed Rob, his hat and beard resting on his lap. I pointed to the cheek where his construction paper mole still sat, the wrong cheek for Lincoln, and he was reaching for it when I exited the room. □