



Echoes of the past before Sunday's presidential debate in St. Louis

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ST. LOUIS — It was October, and Missourians were headed to the debate.

Race was on their minds. Law and order was on their minds. And many people did not feel represented by their government.

The Republican candidate for office, a former congressman named Abraham Lincoln, was challenging Democrat Stephen Douglas for the chance to represent Illinois in the U.S. Senate. The two had already debated six times.

Their seventh and final debate was scheduled for Alton, Illinois. About 5,000 people showed up to listen, including citizens from St. Louis. In 1858, showing up in person was the only way to hear the candidates argue.

About 20 miles southwest of Alton on Sunday, 158 years later to the month, a Republican and a Democrat are going to debate. Race is probably going to be discussed. Law and order is probably going to be discussed. And many citizens do not feel represented by their government.

Less than 10 miles from the spot where Michael Brown was fatally shot by Officer Darren Wilson, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton will stand about 10 feet apart on the campus of Washington University in St. Louis for the second presidential debate of the 2016 election.

Thomas Hildebrand is ready to watch.

A Washington University student originally from Alton, Hildebrand co-founded the group Missouri Youth for Trump. Even though the university's College Republicans shunned the Republican nominee, Hildebrand spent Saturday finalizing details for a "Meet the Deplorables" event scheduled for 3:30 p.m. Sunday on campus.

"Mr. Trump's a very bombastic candidate," Hildebrand said. "I think people are afraid to be roped in with whatever stereotypes are out there about Trump supporters. So we're just trying to have a nice, civil meet-and-greet."

Hildebrand was raised by two lawyers, studied chemical engineering as an undergrad and then stuck around for a graduate degree. He remembered attending a rally for Mitt Romney during the last presidential election. He left unimpressed.

Then, he attended his first Trump rally.

"There was everybody, from college students, to farmers, to minority voters," Hildebrand said. "I mean, I just saw an incredible diversity that I hadn't seen at the Romney event."

When Trump took the stage, he spoke to the economic hardships Hildebrand had seen firsthand in Alton.

"I sort of feel forgotten," said Hildebrand, who listed industries and factories Alton has lost over the past several decades.

There are other issues Hildebrand feels strongly about, like law and order. On Thursday, a St. Louis County police officer named Blake Snyder was shot and killed. He was the first county officer to die in the line of duty in 16 years. Hildebrand worries about police officers feeling safe on the streets they patrol.

But it's Trump's "America First" approach to trade that really resonates with him and overshadows any other shortcoming or scandal, including the recent release of a lewd audio tape.

"This election does not feel like 'Republican versus Democrat' to me," Hildebrand said. "It feels to me like it's 'Americanism versus Globalism.'"

That global audience will almost certainly be tuning in. People from Angola, Guatemala, South Korea, Rwanda, Russia, China, Colombia and Canada wrote, in messages to the Missourian, that they had either watched the first debate outside of the U.S. or knew of somebody who had.

Nielsen estimated that 84 million people watched that debate on TV. In the 1850s, there weren't 84 million people in the entire country.

But viewers will be watching what could be called an incomplete debate. Not every candidate eligible for the presidency will have a chance to fight for votes Sunday.

Don Fitz is the Green Party's candidate for governor of Missouri. His party's candidate for president, Jill Stein, was one of those left out of Sunday's lineup.

"Americans need to hear from all of the people going to be on a ballot," Fitz said.

His goal in running for governor is to get at least 2 percent of the vote in Missouri. If it can get 2 percent, he said, the Green Party won't have to sign petitions to get on the ballot again in four years. However, he said he has encountered enough Democrats dissatisfied with the Democratic nominee for governor, Chris Koster, that maybe, just maybe, he could win.

"That's no more hallucinatory than believing Donald Trump would be a good president," he said. "Or more hallucinatory than thinking Hillary Clinton would be an honest president."

There are 28 political parties in the United States today, according to Ballotpedia. Only two usually wield power. That is not unlike the reality of the 19th century, which saw more than just Republicans and Democrats. The Whigs were more open to big government. The American party was terrified of immigrants. The Free Soil Party fought the extension of slavery.

It was an extension of that last issue, the realities of being black in the United States, that Shirlissa Pruitt, Amir Brandy and Dinah Tatman wrestled with Saturday around Tatman's dining room table.

All three live in St. Louis and were involved in the Ferguson protests soon after Michael Brown was killed. They singled out Brown's death as a major turning point, not because the death of a black man by a white police officer was new to them, but because they'd never seen anything like the community response that followed.

"Enough was enough," Pruitt said, "about things that we had been dealing with and suffering on a daily basis, throughout our lives."

"It's like a volcano," Tatman added. "Because of the seismic shift, and change and pressure that's, you know, cultivating within a closed environment."

But after the eruption came outsiders, and with them, outside money. After what Brandy described as a "grass-roots" uprising, they felt their community's movement was co-opted by outside groups like Black Lives Matter. Donations that flowed in, they said, corrupted some black leaders more than it helped the poor.

Over two and a half hours, the word "racism" was almost never used. But it was ingrained in a conversation that covered a lack of jobs, discriminatory hiring practices, the deaths of local activists, corporate exploitation, and the influence of lobbyists on the government. The entire economic and political system, all three agreed, needed to be torn down and reconstructed.

Trump and Clinton, the would-be leaders of the existing system, did not excite them.

Tatman has decided not to vote this election. Pruitt thinks she will vote, but is not happy about her choices. All three were deeply skeptical of Clinton. Pruitt said it was difficult for her to know what Clinton believed in.

"Trump has been consistent since Day One," Pruitt said. "He's misogynistic, racist — you know what I'm saying? That's consistency right there."

Brandy often lifted his eyes to the ceiling while he listened to the other two talk. Hearing them helped him remember things forgotten, and helped him form his own thoughts.

"Hillary divides us, Trump unites us," Brandy said. "It is my opinion if Trump got into office, we would probably be better off because we would address the issues collectively."

The mood was somber. One of Brandy's best friends, a man named John Spivey, was found dead Friday night of an apparent heart attack. Pruitt listed off people she knew who had died over the past several years.

"Everything has to change," Tatman said. "Is that change going to be smooth? No. Never has. Is that change going to come immediate? It never has. Will that change cost people lives? Always has."

After a while, the three stood up from the table, held hands and prayed.

When the prayer finished, they walked outside toward home.

Supervising editor is Allison Colburn.