

GOLDWATER AND KENNEDY, OR LINCOLN AND DOUGLAS?

You've probably heard that McCain's campaign challenged Obama to do a series of town hall debates starting next week. It's an interesting idea, down to McCain's suggestion they fly together to the first one (but I gotta warn McCain—I don't think Michelle will let Obama fly on the SugarMamma Express, not even if McCain proposes it in the interest of civility).

What's more interesting to me is the imagery both campaigns are appealing to with their competing proposals. McCain pitched the town halls as a repeat of town halls that Goldwater and Kennedy planned to do—no doubt appealing to Obama's self-conscious appropriation of the Kennedy legacy, not to mention McCain's fanciful notion that he inherited the Goldwater legacy, and not just his seat.

In 1963, Senator Barry Goldwater and President John F. Kennedy agreed to make presidential campaign history by flying together from town to town and debating each other face-to-face on the same stage. In Goldwater's words, those debates "would have done the country a lot of good." Unfortunately, with President Kennedy's untimely death, Americans lost the rare opportunity of witnessing candidates for the highest office in the land discuss civilly and extensively the great issues at stake in the election. What a welcome change it would be were presidential candidates in our time to treat each other and the people they seek to lead with respect and courtesy as they discussed the great issues of the day, without the empty sound bites and media-filtered exchanges that dominate our elections. It is in the spirit of President Kennedy's and

Senator Goldwater's agreement, in the spirit of the politics of change, and to do our country good, that I invite you to join me in participating in town hall meetings across the country to discuss the most important issues facing Americans. I also suggest we fly together to the first town hall meeting as a symbolically important act embracing the politics of civility.

(Incidentally, no one, thus far, has created a media firestorm suggesting that McCain has wished ill on Obama by referring to JFK's assassination.)

McCain's pitch for a town hall format, of course, is an attempt to get Obama on his—McCain's—preferred turf. Small venues, pollsters pick the audience, unscripted exchanges. It's an attempt to avoid the disaster of the green ghoul speech from last night.

Obama might like unscripted exchanges, but he was not about to allow McCain to push such preferential terms for himself. So in response, they proposed the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

As Barack Obama has said before, the idea of joint town halls is appealing and one that would allow a great conversation to take place about the need to change the direction of this country. We would recommend a format that is less structured and lengthier than the McCain campaign suggests, one that more closely resembles the historic debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. But, having just secured our party's nomination, this is one of the many items we will be addressing in the coming days and look forward to discussing it with the McCain campaign,

Of course, Abraham Lincoln is the **other**

president Obama self-consciously fashions himself after, going back to his campaign kickoff in Springfield. Also note—the Hillary campaign tried to goad Obama into additional debates in April by pitching a Lincoln-Douglas debate, a format that would have served her well.

But a Lincoln-Douglas debate, a public celebration of policy discussion, a chance to orate with large audiences, that would seem to favor Obama (particularly if McCain continues to forget the difference between Sunni and Shia).

This could get mighty interesting.