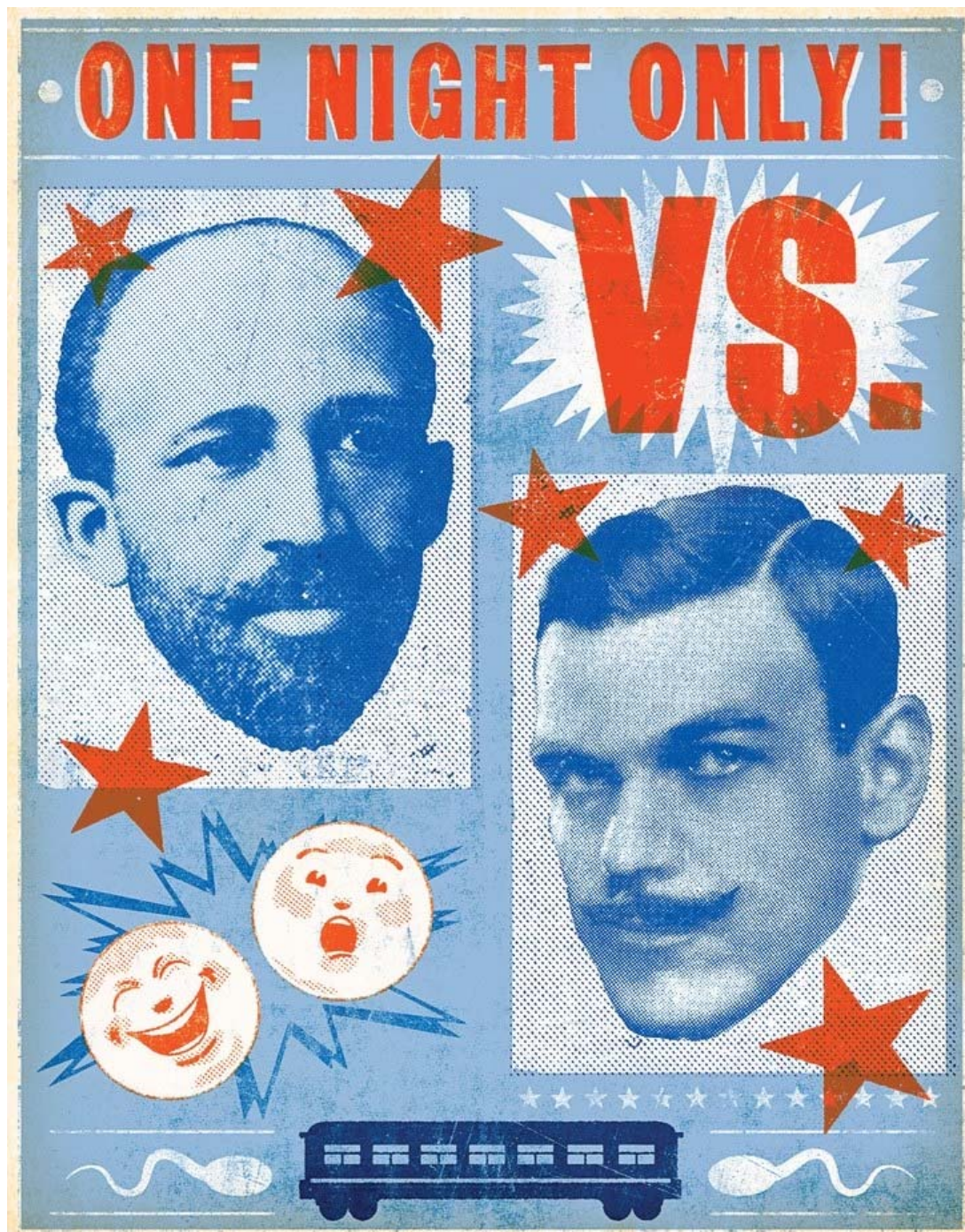


When W. E. B. Du Bois Made a Laughingstock of a White Supremacist

By Ian Frazier August 19, 2019

Why the Jim Crow-era debate between the African-American leader and a ridiculous, Nazi-loving racist isn't as famous as Lincoln-Douglas.



In the Du Bois-Stoddard debate, one man was practically laughed off the stage.

Illustration by Christian Northeast

EXCERPT:

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In March, 1929, the Chicago Forum Council, a cultural organization that included white and black members, announced the presentation of “One of the Greatest Debates Ever Held.” According to the Forum’s advertisement, the debate was to take place on Sunday, March 17th, at 3 p.m., in a large hall on South Wabash Avenue. The topic was “Shall the Negro Be Encouraged to Seek Cultural Equality?”

In smaller letters, the ad asked, “Has the Negro the Same Intellectual Possibilities As Other Races?” and below that the answer “Yes!” appeared with a photograph of Du Bois, who would be arguing the affirmative. Alongside the answer “No!” was a photograph of Lothrop Stoddard, a writer, who would argue the negative.

The Forum Council did not oversell its claim. The Du Bois-Stoddard debate turned out to be a singular event, as important in its way as Lincoln-Douglas or Kennedy-Nixon. The reason more people don’t know about it may be its asymmetry. The other historic matchups featured rivals who disagreed politically but wouldn’t have disputed their opponent’s right to exist. Stoddard had written that “mulattoes” like Du Bois, who could not accept their inferior status, were the chief cause of racial unrest in the United States, and he looked forward to their dying out.

EXCERPT:

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At the time of the debate, Du Bois had just turned sixty-one. He had already written “The Souls of Black Folk,” helped to found the N.A.A.C.P., organized and led Pan-African conferences, and gained tens of thousands of readers for *The Crisis*, the N.A.A.C.P.’s magazine, which he edited and frequently contributed to. Like Stoddard, he had a Ph.D. in history from Harvard.

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The Chicago debate happened in this way: about a year and a half earlier, the magazine *The Forum* had asked Stoddard and Alain LeRoy Locke, the black writer, philosopher, and founding figure of the Harlem Renaissance, to write on the subject “Shall We Give the Negro Cultural Equality?” The magazine also asked the two to read their pieces live on the radio. But then Locke... the day of the broadcast, had not returned. Du Bois agreed to fill in. What he said on air, elaborating on what Locke had written, must have been good, because *The Forum*’s editor told him that the debate was “a corker,” and the consensus was that Du Bois had won. The Forum Council organizers then suggested holding the debate again, before a paying crowd.