

# THE EMPEROR HAS NO CLOTHES, OR, WHAT IS WRONG WITH SPEED DEBATE

by Douglas Modde

I have been associated with debate on and off since 1979, as a debater, a judge, and a part-time coach. My experience in debate has had a more profound influence on my life than any other single thing I have done. In recent years, however, I have become increasingly dismayed with the direction of policy debate. I believe that speed and jargon have replaced solid speaking skills and quality analysis. As an ex-debater, I am ashamed because of the lack of clear speaking at weekend tournaments. As a judge, I am ashamed that I have helped to perpetuate this travesty by not forcing young people in my rounds to speak clearly. As an ex-coach and an educator, I am ashamed that I have taught the wrong skills to my students. Collectively, we should all be ashamed.

Debate has the propensity to teach young people several valuable skills. The primary skill is, of course, speaking. The ability to speak in a clear, concise and succinct manner is a life skill that will assist young people in all their endeavors. Good speakers earn better grades in college and secure better jobs when they graduate. Great speakers lead the nation and the world.

Unfortunately, the current theme in debate is speed, not speech. Garbled sentences are accepted as evidence. Blip responses are accepted as refutation. Jargon and catch phrases are accepted as analysis. The ability to speak well have been sacrificed at the altar of speed. As debaters, we should all be ashamed.

At a recent tournament I attended, there were no ballots. Judges were given little index cards on which to record their decisions and were told to give "oral" critiques. This was done in order to expedite the process of recording decisions. I cannot imagine a worse idea. Oral critiques only cover debate jargon and decision criteria. In contrast, the ballot is designed to allow the judge to make comments on speaking style, delivery, and poise. By failing to critique the true

speaking skills of the debaters, judges and coaches are giving tacit approval to garbled, mumbled, and slurred styles of debate. As judges, we should all be ashamed.

Anecdotally, I was venting some of my concerns one day to two other coaches when one of them said they would "lose their funding if the principal saw a policy round." The other coach explained how he was attempting to generate some outside funding sources, but "of course, he would never show the corporate sponsors a policy round, because that would kill the idea." How tragic. Policy debate should be a showcase of a school's best and brightest, a gem to be held up and admired. Instead, the shoddy speaking skills we have all accepted are an embarrassment, something to be hidden away. As coaches, we should all be ashamed.

Another problem that accompanies the speed frenzy is the superficial manner in which issues are covered. Real analysis is almost nonexistent. In its place jargon is bandied about in some bizarre type of secret code. To the outsider, the code is gibberish. To the informed, it is also gibberish, but we are all afraid to say that the emperor has no clothes. Instead, we all applaud the beauty of the clothes and silently pray that no one exposes our hypocrisy. As educators, we should all be ashamed.

Given these problems, what can be done? We all need to be like the brave little boy who speaks out and says that the emperor is naked. Debaters need to learn to speak clearly before trying to speak quickly. Judges need to hold speakers accountable. Coaches need to emphasize clear speaking, not sloppy verbiage. Educators must never lose sight of their true mission, to prepare the next generation for the future. The game of debate must be changed. Clear, concise, succinct speakers should be rewarded. Garbled, vague, unintelligible speakers should be negatively sanctioned. As debaters, judges, coaches, and educators, we should all work to end our shame.

## JUVENILE CRIME ONLINE

The *Federation News* reports that the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC), OJJDP's centralized source for maintaining and disseminating information, has made hundreds of agency publications, research findings and program evaluations available free of charge to those with electronic access.

First-time users can send an Internet e-mail message to **look@ncjrs.org** to automatically receive a reply outlining the services of the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, a component of the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

The publications are available through OJJDP's World Wide Web homepage and the NCJRS Bulletin Board System (NCJRS\*BBS).

\* OJJDP's World Wide Web homepage:  
**<http://www.ncjrs.org/ojjhome.htm>**  
Look for the welcome to high school debaters.

\* NCJRS's Bulletin Board System (NCJRS\*BBS):  
Direct dial through your modem:  
**301-738-8895**  
Modems should be set at 9600 baud and 8-N-1  
Gopher to **ncjrs.org:71** or telenet to **bbs.ncjrs.org**  
At the login prompt, type ncjrs and follow the instructions to become a registered user.

For specific requests, send an e-mail message to  
**askncjrs@ncjrs.org**

*(Thanks to Dick Fawcett at the National Federation for compiling this material. The Federation has a comprehensive list of free and low cost debate materials as well as the fine debate series "Forensic Quarterly". See the Federation News, June 1996 for the complete list.)*