

"A PROPOSAL FOR RESOLUTIONALLY BASED CRITERION AND OPPOSING INFORMING VALUES IN LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE"

by
Fred Robertson

It was my first year at Fremont High School, 1985; I was the assistant speech and debate coach. I had 8th period as one of my planning times, and this was when the rambunctious group of students known as the speech and debate class met across the hall from me in Room B-110. I had begun occasionally taking in a few extempers to give them feedback on their practice speeches, and I might watch an interpretation piece now and then, but my duties were not yet onerous. There was one particular speech and debate student, however, who soon caught my eye, not because of any special talent—though I later found he had quite a lot of ability—but because this pint-sized sophomore kept getting thrown out of class, and therefore spent a lot of time in the hallway just outside my room. One day he saw me watching him endure another period in exile. After knocking on my door, he asked if he could come visit me in B-111. Foolishly, I saw no harm in this, and soon thereafter, the little conniver had convinced me to coach him in something called Lincoln-Douglas debate.

Within about a month and a half, after finding out what the topic was and perusing the Baylor Briefs, we decided we were ready to enter the wild world of competitive debate. He and I were at our first tournament at Millard South High School, where my tiny neophyte was an entrant in LD. At this time, there was no such thing as novice LD, so in our first round, we found ourselves facing a third-year senior from Omaha Westside. I say “our” first round, because I went to the round with my young charge, anxious to see what our weeks of training and study would yield. My eager novice was affirming, and he delivered his 1AC with sincere belief and engaging enthusiasm. My heart was proud. Next came cross-examination, but we felt we were prepared. Although barely 4 feet tall, my once hall-exiled youngster exuded the confidence of a man twice his size; I figured he could handle himself.

I’ll never forget that first question from his opponent: “I don’t believe you mentioned a value in your case. Do you have a value, or any values?”

My debater and I exchanged puzzled glances. Value? Values? We must have skipped that section in the Baylor book. I shrugged, silently giving him the message—“Your guess is as good as mine.”

After a brief pause, my sophomore Lincoln-Douglas debater, a lad by the name of John Gibson, answered, “Values? I don’t have any values. Am I supposed to?”

Some of you who are reading this, who know Gibson (John judged Lincoln-Douglas debate and was an assistant coach for most of the 90’s; he taught and coached debate very successfully at Millard West High School for the past three years) may be thinking that no truer statement was ever made by him, but I didn’t tell the story to embarrass John. Instead, I told it to illustrate my own lack of knowledge as I began coaching LD, and in general, the rather “new event” nature of Lincoln-Douglas at that time, which wasn’t all that long ago.

One thing remains the same, however, in my reaction to Lincoln-Douglas debate, 16 years later. I am still often puzzled by the way a value or values are used in a round, and I am also usually a bit perplexed by the way in which a criterion (which was added to the value or values in most places, I believe, in the early 90’s)¹ is utilized in LD debate.

It really shouldn’t be so confusing. A criterion is quite simply “a rule or standard for making a judgment.”² A value is an “established ideal of life that the members of a given society find desirable.”³ Perhaps the “given society” part of that explanation is questionable, since some values are perhaps more universally recognized, but this definition of a value still seems quite accurate. When a couple of people debate a resolution in which such desirable ideals and their prioritization are at issue, values usually will be in conflict,

with proponents on the different sides of the issue selecting different values which they believe deserve higher rank. For example, in the November/December topic currently being debated as I write this article—“**Resolved: A lesser developed nation’s right to develop ought to take priority over its obligation to protect the environment**”—it appears that the affirmative might value “the provision of basic human needs” or “progress” or “economic, social, and political advancement.” Conversely, the negative might argue that “environmental preservation” or “ecological balance” or “equal respect for all life” is an ideal that deserves higher prioritization. Or, as used to be the case in many Lincoln-Douglas debate rounds in the late 80’s and early 90’s, a debater might argue that his or her side of the resolution was informed by more than one value.

I know that some people reading this are already reacting—“No. You’ve got it all wrong. The value is the one ideal that we could all agree upon, desired by both sides of the debate when they argue about this issue.” Therefore, the value should perhaps be proposed as “governmental legitimacy” or “the fulfillment of the social contract” or old standbys such as “morality” or “justice.” The value shouldn’t be argued about, at least not that much, according to this view of Lincoln-Douglas debate; rather, it is the criterion portion of the debate in which the real clash ought to take place, because the different sides of the debate ought to propose that quite different criteria should be used in order to determine either affirmation or negation of a resolution to be “governmentally legitimate” or “moral” or “just.”

I’ve judged plenty of rounds that have been argued in this way. They have usually turned out ok, although there are many rounds, of course, in which the value/criterion argumentation becomes little more than a side issue. Nevertheless, it has always struck me as odd that Lincoln-Douglas

rounds are argued in this manner, because I think (as do some others, like Heath Dixon, former coach at San Antonio—Lee High School)⁴ that this way of arguing has pretty much everything backwards. Opposing sides on issues that cause values argument do not usually disagree because they value the same thing equally; they most likely disagree because they believe different values ought to have higher priority. Proponents of the legitimacy of capital punishment value retributive justice and believe it deserves to be prioritized over the sanctity of all human life; whereas opponents of capital punishment value the sanctity (or perhaps, the dignity) of all human life above any retributive value. I realize that there are folks who would argue with that assessment of values on the opposing sides of the capital punishment issue. Some would contend, along with Kant, that advocates of capital punishment take their position because of a respect for the dignity of all life, along with a high value placed upon autonomous choice. I won't deny that there are times when opposing sides of a resolution may be informed by the same value; however, I would still argue that this is not the case as a general rule.

But if this is so, where does the criterion come in? This is a reasonable question, given that if one accepts my first premise—that a single preeminent value is not in reality agreed upon by opponents in Lincoln-Douglas debate—there would then be no reason to have the affirmative and negative proposing different criteria as ways to meet the same value.

However, I believe if one looks at the definition of criterion—"a rule or standard for making a judgment"—it becomes clear that the criterion can serve a vital role in a debate in which someone is asked to make a judgment—namely, the judge. Therefore, I see the criterion (as do some others, like Eric Sack, former debate coach at Lincoln Southeast High School)⁵ as a proposed standard for judgment, which ought to be derived from the resolution at hand, and which ought to be arguably achievable by both sides of the resolution. After all, the debaters are arguing about a resolution, and the judge has to decide which debater better supports either affirmation or negation of that resolution. Therefore, the debaters ought to propose a standard, tied to the topic at hand, for making that judgment, and then prove that they meet that standard. For example, on the development/environmental protection topic, since the decision-

maker in the resolution is a lesser developed "nation," and since the resolution asks what that nation "ought" to prioritize, I believe a very solid criterion for determining who wins a round on this topic would be who best meets "governmental duty."

The resolution is, after all, a proposal of what ought to be placed in a position of higher priority in a lesser developed nation's duties—either development or environmental protection. The two sides of the debate, because of differing value prioritization, do not agree on what is more important in fulfilling governmental duties, and the affirmative might argue that it would be unfair to expect that the same priority to protect the environment be placed upon lesser developed nations, but both sides are clearly arguing "I am telling the real story of what ought to be a lesser developed nation's moral duty." It's the criterion that ought to be the more likely to be agreed upon standard, at least as I see it (as do some others, like John Gibson; he and I eventually became a bit less confused about such things)⁶.

A few of you who have read what I have written on the Id-1 (a great debate listserv administered by P.J. Wexler)⁷ concerning this subject may still be asking "But aren't you just arguing that debaters ought to turn the value and criterion around?" and/or "Isn't a criterion like 'governmental duty' still very general, and haven't you argued in the past that such vague generalities lead to mind-numbing debate rounds?"

To the first question, I answer "Yes. That's pretty much exactly what I am arguing—the way the majority of Lincoln-Douglas debaters argue the value and criterion inverts what the words actually mean." I understand how the more commonly accepted approach developed. When one side argued "freedom is a great value and most important to us all" and the other side argued "security is a great value and even more important," which happened frequently in Lincoln-Douglas rounds in the late 80's, coaches searched for a way to clarify such nebulous debate. Crucial to the ensuing development of the value premise/value criterion format was the idea that a values premise ought to be the core of any affirmative or negative case, and that such a values premise agreeable to both sides of a resolution can actually be deduced. I have never concurred with those who argue that such an agreed-upon values premise, common to both sides of a resolution, is actually determinable, or that this format leads to better debate. How-

ever, I do believe that agreement of both sides is possible in the criterion debate, when the standard is proposed as a decision mechanism based on the resolution, which leads to my answer to the second question.

Minh Luong, at a National Debate Coaches' Association workshop a few years ago (and in an article published in the *Rostrum*)⁸, proposed that more specific, concrete values and criteria ought to be argued in Lincoln-Douglas debate. I agree. It makes for better debate if a negative values "preservation of ecosystems" instead of "nature," since the latter is far more nebulous in meaning and not conducive to straightforward argument. I argue that the same specificity is necessary for quality criterion debate, and that debaters ought to explain the actual qualities that define their proposed criteria. For example, an affirmative proposing the criterion of "governmental duty" on the November/December topic might explain that a nation's duties must include securing the interests, rights, and needs of its people, and that a lesser developed nation especially ought to pursue this duty, because it is by definition (I know this is arguable, development kritik lovers) not adequately meeting its obligations to its people. Even given some harm to the environment, an affirmative could argue, these obligations must be the nation's priority.

On the negative side, one could argue that the "governmental duty" of any nation is not so simple. Although nations must certainly value the needs, rights, and interests of their people in the here and now, countries also have duties not to harm the needs, rights, and interests of their own future citizens. Nations also have duties to do no intentional harm to other countries that have done them no harm. Despite the special conditions of a lesser developed nation, which appear to call for heightened weight to be given to development as a governmental duty, these universal moral obligations of nations also apply to lesser developed nations, the negative could explain; therefore, a priority needs to be placed upon environmental protection, since without such a priority, harms to future citizens as well as other nations would occur, and more important principles of governmental duty would be violated.

There will be many who look at a proposal such as the one I am offering and ask "But doesn't this mean that the value is" (*Robertson continued to page 56*)

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deprioritized as the central locus of argument, and that a resolitional criterion instead becomes the main focus, with arguments which follow that match more specified explanation of what that criterion means? Wouldn't the value then become nothing more than an 'an ideal concept' that is given higher influence in informing the arguments on one side of a resolution?"

My answer to both these questions is "Yes." (and I'm pretty sure a few others, like Truman State College debater and multiple debate camp instructor Shane Mecham, would agree not only that the answer is yes to the questions above, but that better debate would more consistently occur if more people agreed that the answer *should* be yes)⁹. However, I would qualify my "Yes" answer to the second question by arguing that if a value is an ideal conception that informs arguments, that does not put the value into a position of being "nothing more than" that. As jurisprudential genius Isaiah Berlin pointed out long ago, decisions about the ideal conceptions called values—how they ought to be ranked, and which value ought to be sacrificed when two important ones come into conflict—are perhaps the most important decisions that any just government must make¹⁰.

I used to think this value-criterion turnaround was a radical proposal, but now I realize that I wasn't thinking straight. In most of the rounds I've seen lately, debat-

ers avoid getting into convoluted arguments about value/criterion interpretation by collapsing both issues into "the standards debate." In many other debates, the arguments given via the contentions become much more crucial to real in-round adjudication, and the value/criterion debate just fades away. Nevertheless, I assert that the orientation to both value and criterion argument that I propose in this article would lead to better clash and clearer delineation of the issues that really matter on most Lincoln-Douglas debate topics. I believe that the more common value/criterion two-step—"my value is governmental legitimacy and my criterion the assurance of individual rights"—often under-explained and perfunctorily presented, adds little more than obfuscation and confusion to most rounds (and I'm fairly sure a few others, such as Bishop LeBlond Memorial coach Terrance Shuman agree)¹¹.

Do I have a value, or any values, that inform my position in this article? I called Gibson to ask for help in answering this question, but he just told me to do something I can't print after I read him the first part of this article. So I guess I have to come up with my own answer. I value clarity and specificity of argument and straightforward clash on heart of the resolution issues. Most importantly, however, I propose as a criterion that which will produce the highest quality argumentation on the resolutions before us in Lincoln-Douglas debate.

I believe that the type of "standards" debate I've proposed in this article, with a resolution-based criterion focus and opposing informing values, will best produce such argument.

(Fred Robertson is in his 16th year as head debate coach and director of forensics at Fremont High School in Nebraska. Since 1988, when his first Lincoln-Douglas debater competed at NCFL Nationals in New Orleans, he has fairly regularly had students qualify to the NCFL and NFL National tournaments in LD, and he has also had six students earn qualification in Lincoln-Douglas debate to the Tournament of Champions at the University of Kentucky. He has also coached policy debate teams to NCFL and NFL Nationals. Fred has served as Nebraska district NFL chair three times, and he has been a member of the NFL Lincoln-Douglas Debate Topic Wording Committee for four out of the last five years. He writes regularly on the ld-l, the Lincoln Douglas debate listserv. Fred enjoys, among numerous other diversions, (1) the appreciation of rock and roll music, from the Stones to Webb Wilder to Guided by Voices; (2) the art of thoroughbred handicapping, from the bucolic bullrings of Nebraska to the traditional turf at Keeneland; and (3) the job of coaching and judging debate.)