

A MODERATE APPROACH TO ANALYZING A LINCOLN DOUGLAS RESOLUTION

by Marilee Dukas

To begin, I feel it necessary to say that this article was solicited. In no way, do I pretend that I have some corner on truth for Lincoln Douglas debate. No one should interpret this article as an approach that will always work; it is an approach that I believe is simple and valid. My perspective on the activity is relatively conservative in that I believe that it is the **purpose of Lincoln Douglas debate to weigh values that are in conflict**--the values that are assigned by the resolution. I am also convinced that, given this as the purpose of the activity, there is very little room for definitions that allow for abusive positions or that are designed to define the other side out of the round. Because I am so firmly convinced of this, my students do not play the game from a perspective other than what we can reasonably believe would be the issues actually posed by the resolution. Given this concept as a basis, I would like to explain how my students and I approach a new topic and why I think this works.

1. **Carefully examine the grammatical structure of the resolution.** Many students use the words in the resolution in the wrong part of speech, which, of course, completely alters the meaning of the resolution.

Additionally, a value premise is frequently pretty obvious, if you just look at the structure of the sentence.

For example, consider the resolution *That individual obedience to law plays a greater role in maintaining ethical public service than does individual obedience to conscience.* Clearly the goal outlined by the resolution is "maintaining ethical public service." Thus, the obvious

value premise is ethical public service.

Sometimes familiarity with the grammatical structure will clarify the issues which inhere in the debate.

For example, in the resolution *That individuals with disabilities ought to be afforded the same athletic competition opportunities as able-bodied athletes,* there is an elliptical clause. The elliptical portion is "as able-bodied athletes are afforded." This grammatical structure changes the ideas from equality of treatment to equality of privilege. Understanding that the affirmative burden is simply to afford similar opportunity for athletic competition for disabled athletes, not to provide the same activity, such as football or pole vaulting, allows the affirmative much-needed ground in this debate.

2. **Define the words.** Definitions should be fair. It is frequently useful to reword a sentence using the definitions so that you understand what the words really mean in the context of the resolution. It is also useful to take note of possible abusive definitions so that you can prepare for positions that could spin off these definitions. When this happens, debate usually degenerates from the issues that should be the basis for values debate.

The following examples really occurred:

Consider the resolution *When in conflict, society's goal of eliminating discrimination ought to transcend an individual's right to par-*

ticipate in exclusive voluntary associations. Some people defined "participate in exclusive voluntary associa-

tions" as the activities of hate organizations, including the crimes committed by such organizations during the 1960's. Apparently the point was that to *participate* in any way antithetical to eliminating discrimination had to include actually doing something to harm minorities. This analysis completely ignores the use of the word *right* in this resolution. There are no rights to break the law or to harm people.

In the topic on disabled athletes, the word *same* became a major point of contention. The best rounds I heard defined same as similar. With a definition of same as exact, the debate became silly--that disabled athletes should be allowed to play for the Chicago Bulls.

Tautologies can lead to fallacious reasoning and poor debate.

For example, in the topic *That individual obedience to law plays a greater role in maintaining ethical public service than does individual obedience to conscience,* law was

sometimes defined as "collective conscience." The debate became that to obey law was also to obey conscience, so no matter which side you debated, the value was conscience. Needless to say, the debate was confusing.

On the topic, *When in conflict, a business's responsibility to itself ought to be valued above its responsibility to society* some people argued that business' responsibility to society is to be responsible to itself. If both sides are the same, there is absolutely no reason to debate, except to discuss a critique on the resolution. At this point, the educational value of the discussion be-

comes questionable.

Phrases like "when in conflict" are designed to preclude such circular argumentation. If these phrases are accepted for what they are clearly designed to do, there is room for debate. If debaters contend that conflict is armed conflict or conflict is competition among businesses, then we will debate what the words mean, not which values ought to be prioritized.

It is also useful to pay special attention to the use of different words in different parts of the resolution. The chances are good that the wording committee had a reason for their choices. It seems to make sense to ask yourself why.

For example, in the resolution *When called upon by one's government, individuals are morally obligated to risk their lives for their country*, the use of *government* tends to make the claim legitimate because a recognized authority, not a revolutionary group, would make the "call". The word *country* seems designed to preclude forcing the debate into extremes like a *government* like that one established by Adolph Hitler. There seems to be a huge difference in fighting for Germany and fighting for Hitler.

This realization focuses the debate on the principles in conflict, not extreme examples.

In policy debate, there are specific standards for topicality arguments which allow for debate over the issue of topicality, about the meaning of words. In Lincoln Douglas debate, there are no stock issues, no clearly defined burdens or standards. Thus, it is virtually impossible to have a good "topicality" debate in LD. I have even heard some debaters use as their standard for topicality "my definition came first in the dictionary". Placement in the dictionary may do well as a guide for pronunciation, but it fails as a standard for best defi-

nition.

Given my conservative approach, the debate should be about which *value* is superior. Perhaps it is understandable that I do not like debates about the meaning of words. I think that this is a good approach to topic analysis because, while not everyone agrees with my perspective on arguing definitions, a large number of judges do. It would seem to make sense to begin the debate by not putting yourself at a disadvantage because so many judges just do not think topicality issues are a part of Lincoln Douglas debate, while virtually no one actually requires a discussion of definitions.

3. Identify real-world examples within the resolution.

Almost all topics began because of an incident, a real example of the conflict. Considering this does two things: a. It allows you a great source to begin the research. With rare exception, there was a values discussion that surrounded the incident. Looking up those discussions that occurred immediately after the incident can provide good basic insight into what people really think about the values conflict. b. It helps you to discover where the real debate probably lies. Values debate is seldom one that should involve extremes. Both sides get to defend some good things, and both sides must defend some bad things. Otherwise, there is no debate. When a debater attempts to take a position in an extreme, the debate generally becomes the proverbial 2 ships in the night. It is at this point that critics of the activity think that LD is simply dueling oratory. When the debaters find real, defensible, yet debatable positions, we have good Lincoln Douglas debate.

The following examples may clarify:

Exclusive, voluntary associations were an extension of all-white country clubs. This topic was a direct spin-off of the PGA incident which occurred in 1990. PGA golf-

ers discovered that the all-white country club which was hosting had discriminatory membership policies, and golfers threatened not to attend the tournament unless those policies were changed. At the same time, the reality is that there are also all-black fraternal organizations which are very protective of their membership. It is important to note that it was the society, not the government, that influenced the change in the original scenario at the PGA tournament. This provides a very compelling point for clarification if one side is trying to claim that the word *society* in the resolution really means *government*. The government had absolutely nothing to do with the change that was wrought in this situation; the golfers themselves affected the change. There were numbers of articles following the incident that both established the horrors of discrimination and claimed that, while discrimination may be bad, people do have a right to associate with whomever they please.

The 1990 nationals topic was *That individual obedience to law plays a greater role in maintaining ethical public service than does individual obedience to conscience*. This topic was clearly inspired by the Oliver North incident.

A 1993-94 topic was *The public's right to know is of greater value than the right to privacy of candidates for public office*. This was following the 1992 election in which names like Gennifer Flowers became familiar. Earlier elections had pushed people like Gary Hart out of the presidential campaign because of this question.

In all of these situations, the right vs. wrong of the values conflict was discussed in virtually every periodical in America. The ideas discussed in the media may seem simplistic, but they will be easy to explain and probably easy to sell to most judges. At least you have an

historical basis for discussion. [Of course, this is not to say that examples should be the primary focus of the actual debate, simply a beginning point for topic analysis.]

4. **Find the middle ground** where the debate really is. Consider all of the values embedded in the resolution. My students and I spend a lot of time on this--days of class discussion. This is just critical.

For example, on the discrimination topic, the affirmative can easily extrapolate to fairness, equality, dignity, etc. The negative has a seemingly more difficult job because it appears that they must defend that discrimination is good, and a debater is not going to win many rounds doing this. Consider, however, an individual's right to privacy, to choose, to associate in a private world with whomever s/he pleases, to be a morally autonomous person. Consider the ramifications of having society dictate your moral choices. If you do some reading and a lot of thinking, it becomes pretty obvious that there are values claims on both sides. The debate is not about how good the KKK is, nor is it about the idea that women are somehow inferior and should be treated in that manner. In reality, there are two very legitimate values claims.

It is silly to pretend that the other side "must" defend the extreme. A debater may manage to enrage a few judges, but most good judges are going to listen to both sides and vote on the issues rather than inflammatory rhetoric.

In LD solvency is just not an issue.

The affirmative on the topic, *That in US policy, the principle of universal human rights ought to be prioritized over conflicting national interest*, was not obligated to prove that American policy would somehow solve for human rights violations. This is terribly unfair because the affirmative does not get to

present a specific plan that could be designed to preclude some specific disadvantages or even some specific solvency arguments.

It is certainly valid for a debater to argue that there is no moral obligation where an action is not possible, but neither side should get involved in a solvency or a counter plan debate. It is likewise valid for a debater to argue that when "ought" is the operative term, there is an obligation to try.

Likewise, we usually get pretty bad debate when one or both of the debaters tries to argue from the slip/slope fallacy. I am personally convinced that if one debater tries to force the debate into a collapse of the social order, then the other debater has a perfect right to try to force it to oppression. We learned when we debated oppression versus no government that that particular conflict does not make for good debate.

I am convinced that the smartest thing a debater can do is to find a position that virtually anyone can believe. These topics are debatable. There are believable positions on both sides.

5. **Defend as little as possible.** In LD, there is no presumption because there is no policy and no status quo to presume "innocent". There is no analogous courtroom scenario. BOTH SIDES have a burden of proof, and should defend that their value is preferable, not just that the other side is wrong. [This is, of course, one of the huge differences between policy and LD] Thus, both the affirmative and the negative must defend a value. I am fully aware that some coaches and judges do not agree with me about this. However, I would maintain again that, unless you are sure about the perspective of your judge, there is little reason to take a chance on attitudes about presumption when a huge number of judges expect both sides to defend a value. Assuming

my position on burdens, it is seldom necessary, or even a good idea, to present a position that claims that the other value is evil. This is almost impossible to sell because if the topic is debatable, both values are, *prima facie*, good [or bad]. Generally, it is the debater's obligation to outweigh, and this is where the position needs to set up.

It is absolutely critical that arguments have impact, that they matter in terms of the value premise, which is supposed to be the basis for a decision. This is also why it is better to use a value premise that can be adapted to virtually anything the other side may say. Otherwise, the argument is about which value premise is better, not about which resolutional value is better--which leads to the proverbial 2 ships. Even if you do not like to use value premises, there needs to be some kind of impact on a values level that gives an argument meaning.

It makes competitive sense to interpret the resolution so that the debate will be limited to the actual values conflict and does not require a defense of the actual interpretation of the meaning of the resolution. If you set up your argument so that you are going to have to defend that your interpretation of the resolution is correct, you put a huge burden on yourself.

a. The judge may not believe you. When you premise your actual position on some kind of strange interpretation of the resolution, you take a real chance on judge intervention.

For example, on the resolution on human rights v. national interest mentioned above, many coaches and judges believe that, because there is no modifier other than US in front of the word policy, the debate deals with both domestic and foreign policy. Some debaters based a position on the assumption that

the resolution was limited to foreign policy. Regardless of how you may feel about this particular discussion, a number of people just do not buy this limitation. Why would you want to design a position that a judge may, on face, reject?

b. This puts a huge burden on your rebuttal time. If you have to argue that your definition is valid or that your interpretation of the resolution is valid, you will waste valuable rebuttal time which needs to be spent on arguing the actual issues. It is not terribly difficult to design a position in which such issues do not matter.

c. The debate is usually just boring as dirt. Most interesting discussion surrounds the values in conflict, not the interpretation of the words in the resolution.

6. Generally, **my team spends a great deal of time reading, considering the ramifications of the wording, and asking why.** We have lengthy discussions about why arguments are true and why issues matter. If we cannot answer our own questions, we do not run the argument.

Finally, these are simply suggestions for a moderate approach to resolutorial analysis. I would certainly welcome suggestions from anyone who can help me to add to the educational value of the activity for my students.

(Marilee Dukes has coached national champions in both Lincoln Life Lincoln-Douglas and Policy Debate. She has served on the LD topic Selection Committee. This paper was originally presented at the 1996 NDCA Fall Convention.)