

A  
G  
A  
I  
N  
S  
T

M  
A  
I  
L  
-  
O  
R  
D  
E  
R

E  
V  
I  
D  
E  
N  
C  
E

"The National Forensic League does not recommend or endorse advertised products or services," and it's a good thing they don't. Once again, the September *Rostrum* arrives stuffed full of subscriptions and generic block books. Those of you who already shudder in revulsion at the mention of these ads may skip ahead to the next article; this piece is a friendly warning for coaches and/or students whose souls do not yet rebel against the very notion of buying success in high-school debate.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to avoid mail-order evidence is that it is a bastardization of anything good that debate may represent. Rather than encourage students to industriously prepare for competition, these materials claim to eliminate the need for preparation, for a price. Witness one current outfit from Austin which claims, "We don't publish a handbook until we would be ready to go to a tournament armed only with our handbook." At least four of the other mail order houses promise to include cases with the evidence, thus saving students the minimal labor of plugging the disjointed quotes they buy into their own outline. These profiteers promise success without the tedium of hours spent at the library or in serious thought. Mail-order evidence encourages students to try to buy their way to the top, and it leaves them with a warped understanding of the evidence purchased and of competitive ethos. What is the value of a quotation, in any context, when it does not reflect a true appreciation or understanding for the work of its author, but is instead nothing more than a few words purchased for the occasion? Students who follow this path will surely discover that for all the ease of their debate experience, they have gleaned very little, except the habit of claiming other people's work as their own. It should go without saying that it would be less than honest for a student or a coach to sell parents and administrators on the virtues of debate as an intensive workshop for research, thought, and writing when, in fact, students let mail-order people do the work for them.

This is a good time to talk about the mail-order people: who are they? The answer, of course,

varies with each outfit. The vast majority of them are college students who debated while in high school. Their primary aim is to make a profit, and they may not be aware of the harm they do from an educational standpoint. They see an opportunity to make money, and they take advantage of it. One prominent outfit bills itself as "a think tank or [sic] researchers". At the 1994 NFL Nationals, this distinguished think tank was represented by two young men in shorts and t-shirts with a VCR which played a loop tape of gorillas screaming loudly (as Dave Barry says, I am not making this up); the noise of the gorillas drowned out thought and conversation in their proximity until your author threatened the members of the think tank and they turned the volume down. The advent of ink-jet and laser printers has allowed even the most ignorant yahoo to produce impressive-looking advertising. In any case, you should not be deceived by the claims of the ads. People who are highly trained in moral and political philosophy do not hawk collections of quotes to high school students. People who do hawk collections of quotes to high school students are not teachers in any normal sense of the term and cheat students out of the most educationally-valuable aspects of a forensics background.

The content of the mail-order materials is predictably poor. If you buy from honest sources, you will find that the quotes come from a very limited number of books, because the seller of the quotes is only familiar with a limited number of authors. If you buy from more irresponsible sources, you may find a great variety of quotes, but you will of course be aware that those quotes are, for the most part, lifted out of all meaningful context. The authors' intentions may have been twisted beyond recognition, but you have no way to know for sure, because you didn't do the research yourself. In fact, you have no way to know that the quotes are even accurate or direct quotes. This is not to impugn the integrity of any particular producer of these pernicious materials, but simply to point out that, as the hapless consumer, you have no way to know the truth, other than to take the word of the college debaters. If you do go to the

by Jason Baldwin

trouble to seek out the original source for each quote, then you have wasted the \$30 it cost to get the mail-order quotes, because you're doing the work anyway. These products will tell you nothing about a philosophy or a debate topic that you can't find out for yourself. Anyone who has \$100 for a year's mail-order research subscription has \$100 to buy a number of really good books that will teach him/her more and serve him/her longer than any disjointed collection of quotes.

I should also say a few words here about books of 'generic' L/D evidence. These are typically published in conjunction with the topic-specific booklets, but some of the policy evidence publishers also produce large handbooks of 'generic' L/D evidence. The same perils to education and accuracy that befall topic-specific booklets also apply to these 'generic' sources. But in a larger sense, it is appropriate to ask what a college student can possibly mean by 'generic' L/D evidence. To seriously call the evidence generic implies that it has little topic-specific content or value and that it is easily available elsewhere (i.e., for free at a library). If this is truly the case, to read such evidence in a debate round is wasted breath, and to purchase it from someone else is wasted money. Perhaps the compilers of 'generic' evidence merely mean to suggest that the evidence is frequently applicable to the issues debated in L/D. If this is truly the case, it is all the more reason for the students themselves to be familiar with the primary sources. It is inexcusable for a student to repeatedly quote the same lines from an author in many different contexts without understanding that author's work from a firsthand reading. If you seek only a good working knowledge of the most historically-significant social and political philosophers, there are better and cheaper means to acquire such knowledge on your own.

You may also wish to consider the fact that in their selection of evidence for topic booklets and 'generic' handbooks, college students are increasingly likely to draw from the post-modern drivel which comprises most of their college education in philosophy. One recent handbook "focuses on fifteen new, contemporary, multicultural and traditional philosophers including

Richard Rorty, Alexandra Kollontai, Marilyn French, Jean Lyotard, and Molefi Asante." If you are not familiar with these names, don't worry--you haven't missed anything. If you are familiar with them, you know that they have virtually nothing of value to say about L/D debate resolutions, unless you wish to argue that there are no values and that language has no meaning. Anyone who has actually read Richard Rorty will agree that his writing would be opaque to 99% of high school students and is not congenial to brief quotation in a six-minute constructive argument. This same evidence-seller now has a second book of 'generics' which includes James Baldwin, Betty Friedan, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Funny, but I don't recall the last resolution on which someone quoted *The Feminine Mystique*. Mail order evidence is probably the only avenue by which such trendy "philosophers" (?) could creep into L/D, but this is a good a place as any

**. . . a friendly warning for coaches and/or students whose souls do not yet rebel against buying success. . .**

to nip that trend in the bud. The last thing L/D needs is to fill its debate rounds with the sort of unintelligible post-modern "critiques" that have become all-too-common in policy debate. Beware, mail-order customers.

Some may still ask, "But what if I need mail-order evidence to be competitive?" Here I can only speak from my own limited experience, but my answer is, "You don't need this stuff, period." In four years of L/D debate, I never touched mail-order evidence. I did spend lots of time in the library reading and lots of time working with my coach and teammates on arguments. I don't recall ever debating a student with mail-order evidence and cases at a top-level multi-state tournament or round-robin, or in the elimination rounds of local Alabama tournaments. I did debate plenty of mail-order debaters in preliminary rounds, and I never debated one who I thought was worthy to stand

in the presence of anyone who had prepared for himself. The mail-order cases were always an embarrassment, and the evidence was read off the mail-ordered page in a tone of confusion; frequently the mail-order arguments contradicted one another. (How do you think a college kid mails you three affirmative and three negative cases plus 50 pages of evidence seven days after the topic is released?) In my experience, even the most under-prepared student who did his/her own work could easily defeat any mail-order debater.

One situation I cannot effectively address is the plight of the team without access to a library. I don't mean the team without access to a great research library; the Birmingham Public Library is not a collection known for its scholarly depth, but it does well enough for Vestavia Hills L/D. I mean the team without access to any library at all. While I hesitate to pontificate about a situation I have not personally experienced, my intuition is that it is educationally preferable for students who can't conduct their own library research in any case to craft their own arguments from a rudimentary knowledge of philosophy and an awareness of current events, rather than for such students to buy their arguments, ready made, through the mail. L/D is not rocket science, and the resourceful team should be able to get by quite nicely with a small core collection of philosophical classics which are readily available from many publishers and bookstores by mail. And whether my intuition is right here or not, these situations are not my primary concern. What bothers me are the many, many teams who have easy access to wonderful libraries but still buy mail-order evidence.

In sum, mail-order evidence and cases are antithetical to the value of education and the integrity of competition; they are often of dubious origin; and they are, at best, a competitive liability. If enough teams quit buying them, perhaps they'll shrivel up and disappear.

*(Jason Baldwin, one of the great L/D Debaters won the TOC L/D Championship debating for Marilee Dukes at Vestavia Hills. He was later a member of the L/D Topic Wording Committee.)*