

A Coach's Notes¹

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Connecticut Debate Association

State Finals

Amity High School

March 29, 2008

Resolved: U.S. federal budget funding for NASA (National Aeronautics & Space Administration) should be substantially decreased.

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Introduction

This is the seventh edition of the 2007-08 CDA season. If you would like to receive the previous editions of these Notes, please email me and I will send them to you.

Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round in two formats, transcript and flow chart, and a copy of the packet from the tournament. I try to email these to CDA coaches within two weeks of the tournament.

These notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. So if you'd like to sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, send me an email.

The Persistence of Topics

As Yogi Berra said, "This is like *déjà vu* all over again!" The CDA topic in March 2003 proposed banning manned space flight following the February 2003 loss of space shuttle

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Columbia.² I also believed the CDA visited space again in February of 2004, although I do not have the exact resolution. These tournaments are just beyond the horizon for the seniors graduating in 2008. But it illustrates that good debate topic areas tend to repeat over time—sort of like SAT questions. Therefore a list of past resolutions not only gives you fodder for your practice sessions, but provides a study guide for ambitious debaters interested in improving their background knowledge.

One of the most important exercises you can conduct at your weekly or even more frequent team meetings is a debriefing of the last tournament. To “debrief” is defined as “to interrogate in order to obtain useful information (as, for example, a pilot on return from a mission).”³ There are several things you might want to discuss:

What was the resolution about? You know a lot more about the topic after you’ve debated a few rounds. You should discuss how your appreciation of the resolution changed between the time you first saw it and your discussion. Even though you will still have only one hour to prepare at the next tournament, reviewing a resolution in depth after a tournament improves your ability to do so quickly when needed for the following tournaments.

How did your contentions and arguments compare to those of your opponents? Arguments can be better or worse, or maybe the same but more aptly phrased. Arguments have to be adapted to the flow of the debate. You should discuss your rounds, what arguments were effective, and why. Be sure you understand why you won or lost each round, even if you believe the decisions were incorrect. While no round can be re-argued—if you had spoken differently then your opponents would likely have adapted in some way—every round could have been argued better. To improve you must study your successes as well as your failures with a critical eye.

Who won the final round and why? The final round is one of the most important teaching tools in debate because it is the only round that the entire team observes together. Every debater should flowchart the final round so that they can discuss it with their teammates and coach afterwards. You should evaluate the quality of the arguments and compare them to those you used and others you heard during the day. List what each team did successfully, and what didn’t work so well. Try to identify missed opportunities by each team: questions they didn’t ask or didn’t follow up during cross-ex, arguments stated or presented poorly, arguments misinterpreted, and arguments never presented. Essentially you should put together a critique of the round which supports the decision that you would have made as judge.

Finally, what are the lessons to be learned and things to follow up after the tournament? Every tournament and topic should teach you something you can carry on to your next debate. After every tournament you should have a list of items to research that will

² I have endeavored to collect the CDA tournament resolutions going back as far as possible. I have complete records back through the 2004-05 school year. For 2003-04 this is the one tournament for which I do not have the precise statement of the resolution, and for 2002-03 one for which I am missing both the resolution and the topic area. Prior to this, my records are a bit spotty going back to the 1996-97 season. Any help in filling in my records would be greatly appreciated. I email a copy of all past resolutions to all CDA coaches at the start of each school year along with a variety of other educational materials, and I am happy to send them out at any time on request.

³ Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition, 1994.

provide useful knowledge that can be used in other debates. You may not debate the space program again, but you will certainly debate topics where certain related issues come up. For example, from this topic you might want to investigate:

- *What does the Federal budget look like, in terms of spending priorities?*
- *How does the Federal budget and spending process work?*
- *How does government spending affect the economy?*
- *How does technological change work? What is the relationship between research and innovation?*

I'm sure you can think of other relevant questions.

Substance and Significance

I believe that the primary reason the Negative lost the final round was because they accepted the Affirmative's "definition" of "substantially decrease." No debate is that simple of course. There were arguments that others might have thought more important. It's also easy to see in hindsight things that may not have been at all clear to the debaters themselves. But as I look at my flowchart, the Affirmative was able to fend off the Negative largely by saying the Affirmative definition would continue to fund any NASA program the Negative argued was beneficial. If the Affirmative can blunt all the Negative disadvantages this easily, they are in a very strong position.

Definitions and the Affirmative Burden

We all know that the Affirmative has the burden of proof, and in compensation gets the first and last word, and has the right to a reasonable definition of terms. One test of reasonableness is whether or not the burden of proof is significant. There is no point in arguing over a trivial matter. If the Affirmative definitions reduce the resolution to a trivial matter, then they are arguably unreasonable.

For this resolution, and the resolution from February 2008,⁴ this issue is explicitly present in the resolution in words like "substantially" or "significantly." But it is implicit in every resolution. For example, the March 8 topic was "In the U.S., state-sponsored gambling lotteries should be abolished." If the Affirmative had defined this as meaning that a single particular scratch card game in Connecticut should be banned would you have accepted this definition? It would, after all, be abolishing a state-sponsored gambling lottery. But given the lottery comes in dozens of different forms in both Connecticut and the other 49 states this sounds a little thin.

The Negative always needs to think carefully before accepting the Affirmative definition of terms. If the definition isn't essentially neutral—a clear, straightforward plain-English rendering of the essence of the controversy—then most likely the Affirmative is trying to tilt the debate in their favor, if not setting a trap outright.

⁴ Resolved: That the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) should be significantly expanded.

Never Accept a Definition that Isn't a Definition

Looking at my notes from the final round, I believe that the First Affirmative defined “*substantially decrease*” as “*to hold hearings to select pure science programs with no immediate benefit to be reduced or cancelled.*” Say this out loud once or twice, let the words hang in the air a bit. Then pick up your copy of Webster’s and see if you can find anything under “substantial” or “decrease” that you can twist into the Affirmative’s definition.

You aren’t likely to succeed, because what the Affirmative presented wasn’t a definition, it was a plan. By defining the resolution as their plan, the Affirmative can try to avoid all questions of topicality. By accepting this sort of definition the Negative gives away any chance to argue that what the Affirmative is proposing does not square with the resolution. Even if the Affirmative shows it’s reasonable to cancel NASA’s pure research programs, is that really a “substantial decrease in federal budget funding?”

Does the Definition or Plan Match the Resolution?

The Affirmative must convince the judge to adopt the resolution. If the Affirmative convinces the judge to accept all of the Affirmative contentions, but those contentions don’t support the resolution, then the Affirmative has failed. If the Affirmative convinces the judge to accept the Affirmative plan, but that plan doesn’t embody the resolution, then the Affirmative has failed. Negative arguments that the Affirmative contentions and plan don’t address the resolution can be extremely powerful.

So what’s wrong with the Affirmative “definition” in this instance? First, it is a proposal to hold hearings, not to actually cut any spending. The resolution says the Affirmative must propose a substantial decrease in Federal budget funding for NASA, not hearings. Who knows what cuts hearings will produce, perhaps none. The hearing could just as well decide every NASA pure science program has enough chance of producing tangible benefits that none should be cut.

The Affirmative may offer examples of programs that could be cut. The Affirmative may say they aren’t experts and the decision will be made by experts. The Affirmative may say that they don’t have to provide a list because they don’t have to present a plan. But at the end the Affirmative must show the result will be a substantial reduction in funding.

Having raised the issue, having presented a specific plan, “to hold hearings,” the Affirmative has actually increased their burden in this case. They have to show this process is likely to produce a substantial decrease in funding. Why, the Negative might ask, would the same scientific community, President, congressmen and senators who approved the existing NASA pure science programs, now decide these programs have no immediate benefit?

Suppose the Affirmative were to tighten up their “definition” to a simple call for the end to all of NASA’s pure science programs. That gets past the problem of “hearings” that exists in their actual definition. But it still begs the question of whether such cuts would “substantially decrease Federal budget funding for NASA.” There are obvious questions the Negative should ask. How many programs will be cut? How much will funding be reduced? How big is NASA’s budget? Is the total “substantial” relative to that budget?

I will briefly discuss the NASA budget below. And “substantial” could be interpreted in qualitative, rather than quantitative terms. But you get the idea.

These points highlight the difference between a definition and a plan. The Affirmative has presented an interesting plan, one worthy of debate in its own right. The resolution could have read “That Federal funding for NASA’s pure research programs should be abolished.” But this resolution is a bit different. The Negative should question, and the Affirmative must show, whether the Affirmative plan falls under a reasonable interpretation of this particular resolution.

Always Pin the Affirmative Down

The other thing that I observed in my flowchart of the final round was that the Affirmative definition/plan shifted depending on the argument the Affirmative wanted to make. One of the hardest things for debaters to learn when on the Negative is to force the Affirmative to be specific about what they are advocating, and then hold them to it. At times this may seem like trying to nail Jello[®] to the wall but it’s critical.

If the Affirmative is allowed to shift the meaning of the resolution, the Negative is faced with a moving target. This makes it easier for the Affirmative to dismiss Negative objections one by one, with slightly different arguments each time. How often have you heard an Affirmative say every program or activity cited as a disadvantage by the Negative will continue after the resolution is adopted? In that case it’s almost certain the Affirmative is shifting meanings with each argument. The Negative needs to figure out how they are doing this and explain it to the judge. The Negative can’t let the Affirmative act like a politician, promising everything good and insisting nothing bad will follow.

Let’s take a look at how the Affirmative used their definition/plan in this final round. The Affirmative starts with a call “to hold hearings to select pure science programs with no immediate benefit to be reduced or cancelled.” We’ve already noted that “hearings” are not “funding cuts.” But the Affirmative quickly shifts to cutting programs:

- Later in her constructive, the First Affirmative wants NASA to focus, to eliminate extraneous spending, and to produce “useful information not trivia.”
- Under cross-ex, the First Affirmative can’t say how much of NASA’s budget will be cut, but names a few programs, including Constellation, the new moon landing program.
- When questioning the First Negative, the Affirmative says that cancer research programs on the International Space Station will be kept.
- The Second Affirmative, in his constructive, says that only programs with “no tangible benefit” will be cut, and in particular projects of discovery within the solar system will be kept.
- But under cross examination, the Second Affirmative says that all pure science programs will be cut.

- When questioning the Second Negative, the Affirmative notes all the benefits of NASA programs cited by the Negative are tangible. The Affirmative suggests that this means all these programs will be preserved by the Affirmative definition.
- In the First Affirmative Rebuttal, the differential is keep “vital programs with tangible benefits” and cut “pure science.”
- Finally, in the Second Affirmative Rebuttal, it’s “hard science is necessary; pure science can be cut if there is no benefit in the next million years,” and “the Affirmative favors useful programs.”

So, the Affirmative will cancel all pure science programs. Or the Affirmative will cancel all programs with no tangible benefits. Or the Affirmative will only cut programs directed outside of the solar system. Or the Affirmative will only cut programs with no benefits in the next million years. But the Affirmative will keep any program the Negative mentions which has produced anything useful.

I’m not saying that there is no overlap in these various phrases. But it is arguable whether cutting pure science is the same as cutting programs with no tangible benefits. And neither of these is the same as cutting all programs directed outside of the solar system. Pure science may have immediate tangible benefits. Some hard science programs may fail to produce anything useful. (And, by the way, did anyone define “pure” or “hard” science? Or “tangible”? Or “useful?”) Since you don’t know which programs will be successful, you can’t easily identify those that will produce tangible benefits. Some NASA space activities within the solar system are pure research, and some are practical programs that may or may not pay off. Who knows what benefit may come from even the most obscure pure research activities in the next million years. Finally, cutting only those pure science programs directed outside of the solar system that have no immediate tangible benefits in the next million years may not save enough to pay for a single school lunch!

The Affirmative uses its shifting definitions to draw a crooked line that manages to keep all of the Negative arguments off sides, depending on the type of defense it needs. Any one definition alone is vulnerable, as are all the definitions combined together. But used one at a time they just seem to retain anything the Negative suggests might be good about the space program. Shifting their definitions gives the Affirmative the initiative.

The Negative has to pin the Affirmative down early, and not let the Affirmative wriggle around. This is what cross-ex was designed for. If you don’t know precisely what the Affirmative means by the resolution, ask. If they aren’t precise, ask again. If the Affirmative says that they aren’t experts, or they aren’t required to present a plan, they are trying to avoid the questions. Ask again. Focus on different parts of their definition: what’s pure science? What’s a tangible benefit? How do you decide? Who decides? Ask for specific examples. Present your own examples and ask the Affirmative to classify them. Ask why those examples fall on one side of the line or another.

The Negative has to force the Affirmative to draw a bright line, and then use that bright line as a weapon. The Negative has to do this early in the debate, before the Affirmative knows what the Negative contentions are and can adapt their definition or plan to them. If there is a bright line, the Negative can hold the Affirmative to it, and cry foul if the

Affirmative tries to shift it or step over it. If there are desirables on the wrong side of the line, there are disadvantages to the Affirmative case. If there is nothing on the wrong side of the line, the Affirmative reading of the resolution is trivial, and their definition and likely their case are not valid. If the Affirmative cannot draw a bright line, then it is not in favor of anything. Any one of these is a strong argument for the Negative.

Wasn't Something Missing?

Both sides were missing one fairly critical piece of information in this tournament. I'm not sure how I'd debate "substantially decreasing federal budget funding for NASA" without knowing what that budget is. The Washington Post article in the packet talks about the "proposed NASA discretionary budget" of \$17.6 billion. It isn't clear if that is the entire budget, and whether it's for one year or several, or which particular year. The other figures in the packet are for particular programs, or are changes in programs spending from one year to another or are changes from authorized as compared to appropriated levels.

Often an almanac provides information like this. My *New York Times Almanac* lists the number of NASA employees in 2006, as well as total spending for 1990, 2000, 2006 and 2007. There is also a section listing unmanned and manned space missions, their dates and accomplishments. My *Time Almanac* also lists spaceflights, but I could find nothing on NASA employment or spending in its breakdown of the Federal budget.

NASA's web site is quite approachable, and a budget summary easily found.⁵ It provides the actual 2007 funding as well as proposals for 2008 through 2013. The 2007 budget authority totals \$16.285 billion. You can read this at your leisure, but one interesting thing to note is that the only component that seems to fit the Affirmative category of "pure science" is the line item for "Astrophysics" at \$1.365 billion or about 8.4% of the budget.

Suppose all of Astrophysics is pure science directed outside of the solar system (which it seems to be if you read the NASA definition). Is cutting NASA's budget by 8.4% a substantial decrease?

Substance and Significance Again

Note that "substance" and "significance" need not be measured in numbers. Funding for pure science programs has always been an important part of NASA's mission and budget. The listing of various space missions and accomplishments in the almanacs provide many examples. Eliminating pure research and limiting NASA to "practical" science could be considered "substantial" in a qualitative sense. One could argue that without pure science, the purpose and culture of NASA would be substantially decreased, even if the actual dollars involved were small. Of course, you'd have to clearly define all of this.

⁵ NASA's web site is <http://www.nasa.gov/>. If you search on "budget" within the web site you will quickly find what you need. I recommend the *FY 2009 Budget Request Summary*.

How Do Budgets Work?

I heard a number of misconceptions about how government budgets and funding work. Many debates will revolve around issues of how government money should be raised and spent. It is worth spending some time understanding this process as background knowledge.

I would suggest you do three things. First, educate yourself as to the Federal budget process. An easy place to start is Wikipedia, which has an article on “The United States Budget Process.” You may then want to move on to the Congressional and White House web sites and see what is available. The internet provides a wealth of informational resources at little or no cost. You will want to understand the difference between revenue raising and spending processes. For spending, you will want to understand the difference between authorizations and appropriations, and how they are related and managed. It’s also useful to know who is responsible for each, and what the limitations are.

Second, take a look at a real budget. It is useful to be familiar with the Federal budget, and this is most likely to figure in your debates. But the structure of a budget tends to be the same whether it is Federal, state, local, corporate or your school’s. You will want to understand the concept of a line item, and what is required to re-allocate spending from one line item to another once the budget has been set.

Finally, fiscal policy, both taxation and spending, have an impact on the economy. These come in part through direct spending, in part through indirect spending (multiplier effects) and in part by changing incentives.

An understanding of these issues can be the basis for many Affirmative and Negative arguments.

A Final Word on State Finals

Let me extend my congratulations to all of you who qualified for and competed in State Finals. The level of competition and the quality of the debates is materially better in this tournament than in those earlier in the year. Your talent and hard work shows.

I thought that the final round was particularly well argued. The winning team from Joel Barlow and their opponents from Glastonbury deserved to be there, and were among the best teams I saw all year.

If I seem to have taken issue with the Affirmative in this edition of my notes, I mean them no disrespect. The Affirmative team presented a very strong case in the final round and argued it well. While I suggest weaknesses in that case, remember every case has weaknesses. We learn as debaters by analyzing strong cases for their weaknesses in the hope of leaning tactics we can use later on.

Let me emphasize the word “analyze.” You can analyze a debate, but you cannot re-argue it. Do not think that if you had made the arguments that I suggest in these notes that you would have won this round. Good teams are noted for their ability to adapt rather than the quality of any single argument. They are not “locked in” but change to suit the debate. If you had made these arguments in the final round, these teams would

have responded differently—it would have been a different debate. Good teams find a way to win regardless of their opponents' arguments.