

# A Coach’s Notes<sup>1</sup>

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Fairfield College Preparatory School and Fairfield Warde High School  
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***This House Supports (THS) US efforts to remove the Maduro Government in Venezuela.***

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## Introduction

This edition relates to the January 10, 2026, CDA tournament and topic. Previous year’s editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site.

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. 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. If you would like to reply to my

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comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

## **Overrun by Events**

When this topic was being discussed in December, the question that arose was, “What if Maduro decides to hop a plane to Moscow?” The US was applying pressure to Venezuela, and dictators have been known to take their ill-gotten wealth and go while the going was good. A kidnapping isn’t the same as a Maduro skipping town, but close enough. Current events passed the topic by, at least as originally anticipated.

## ***A Fair Debate***

The Government team has the right to define the terms of the debate, but importantly those terms have to be fair. In debate this means the central issue must be chosen so that both sides have grounds to persuade the judge to vote for their side.

Prior to the kidnapping, there was no question the Maduro Government was in place. The debate would revolve around competing interpretations of international law and US law, balanced against foreign policy considerations and the right of the Venezuelan people as well as the rights of citizens of other countries that might be affected. These would be used to evaluate the current situation in Venezuela. There is plenty here to support an argument for both sides given the status quo prior to January 3.

## ***Post-Kidnapping***

On January 3 the US sent its forces into Caracas and captured Maduro and his wife. Our January tournament was set for the 10<sup>th</sup>. The packet had been printed and sent to the host schools. The decision was made to proceed with the topic.

A Government team paying attention to the news might have argued as follows:

- The “Maduro Government” is clearly one headed by Nicolas Maduro.
- This Government ended on January 3 with his arrest by the United States, and so was successfully removed.
- The costs of this action were minor, primarily Cuban and Venezuelan security forces defending Maduro. US casualties were minimal.
- The benefits are obvious, especially the return of Venezuelan oil to the world market, greater freedom for the Venezuelan people, and reduced drug trafficking.
- US efforts are a “done deal”, clearly successful, so the only choice is to decide for Gov.

This interpretation heavily biases the debate in favor of Gov and limits Opp grounds. Gov tries to make the debate primarily about “removal”, which is a *fait accompli*. In the extreme, Gov could even try to argue that the Opp position is “unpatriotic” given this US success.

## ***Policy Motions and the Status Quo***

The above Gov interpretation of the motion has Gov defending the now, post January 3, status quo. Generally, policy motions should be written so that Gov is arguing for a change in the status quo. One could dismiss this is merely convention, but like many conventions, there are good reasons for it.

A motion written so that Gov is defending the status quo (or a Gov interpretation of the motion that leaves it defending the status quo) may seem to give Gov the advantage. The opposite is true. The first speaker for Gov has no option but to explain why the status quo is good. The status quo is known to both parties, so Gov's arguments can be more easily anticipated than if Gov is arguing for a change.

A clever Opp team will do it's best to bypass the arguments in the Prime Minister's Constructive. "We agree that the Gov reasons favoring the status quo are good, but the real reason it isn't—and what this debate will be about—is [something else entirely]" Gov (or the motion) may give Opp the power to redefine the debate and negate one of the Gov's constructive speeches. This gives Opp two constructive speeches to present and defend it's case, while Gov has only one left to oppose it!

When Gov is arguing for change, the round is fair. Gov frames the debate, describes the change it is advocating for, and presents it in the first constructive. Unless Gov's interpretation is incorrect or provides no grounds for Opp, the Opposition must accept Gov's framing and argue against the case presented. Gov has two constructive speeches to present and defend its position, and Opp has two constructive speeches to oppose it.

## ***Argue Definitions?***

An obvious Opp response is a definitional one: the "Maduro Government" should not be defined simply as one headed by Nicolas Maduro. Rather it continues in place, as the current regime is the successor of that established by Hugo Chavez, after his election in 1998. Maduro was chosen by Chavez to succeed him and has largely continued Chavez's policies. There is no indication as yet that the removal of Maduro has changed anything other than leaving Delcy Rodriquez, committed to the same policies, in charge.

This approach makes the debate first about definitions. Squabbling over the meaning of "Maduro Government" isn't likely to be productive. It also keeps the focus of the round on the factual issue of removal, which is not necessarily to Opp's advantage. Before replying, Opp should consider what a fair debate would be about.

Definitions only matter to the extent that that provide a scaffold for argument. Arguing about definitions always sounds petty and does little to advance a decision in your favor. Arguing about issues both sets the debate on a higher plane and builds support for your case.

## ***The Right Issue***

If the debate is about whether or not the Maduro removal was successful, Gov likely wins. The operation appears to have met its objective with low casualties. There has

been little negative response from the international community. The Venezuelan opposition appears encouraged and the remaining regime under Delcy Rodriguez appears less defiant. This may change with time, but so far so good.

A fair debate on this topic should be about whether the US should try to remove the government of another country, and, if so, under what circumstances. A debate on that issue is a version of “just war” debate that goes back to Saint Augustine in the fourth century. Are such actions moral? Allowed under international law? Allowed under US law? In all three cases, why would the action be moral or legal, or not? What are the facts about the Venezuelan case that apply to justify the action, or not?

Under this interpretation, the success or failure of an intervention is a secondary concern. Suppose the attempt on January 3<sup>rd</sup> had been a bloody failure, with high casualties on both sides, including many bystanders. That would have biased the round in favor of Opp, just as the success biases it in favor of Gov.

Only by making it clear that the debate should be primarily about whether the action is justified, both in general and in the specifics of this case, does the round become a fair one. It also limits the impact of January 3 on January 10.

### ***Whose Responsibility?***

It is in the interest of both Gov and Opp to have a good round. An interpretation that strongly favors one side may help that side win, but they are likely to suffer lower point scores: the debate just won't be that interesting. Neither side will have a chance to demonstrate true skill.

Ideally Gov would start by recognizing the events of January 3<sup>rd</sup> and ceding those arguments. The PM might begin with something like:

*“We note the recent US action capturing Maduro seems to have been a success. However, we do not feel that is the central issue here. Today’s debate should be about whether that particular action, or similar actions by the US or any country, are justified. After setting the framework of the round, we will present several reasons that do justify such actions.”*

Why give up a perfectly good argument? Because it isn't really that good. Suppose Gov presents a case focused on the event rather than the larger issue. A good Leader of Opposition will note that at the top of the LOC:

*“You have just heard our opponents present a case based on the supposed success of what we will show you was a highly illegal action. One doesn't applaud a bank robbery simply because the thieves got away with the money. We want to stress that the event of January 3<sup>rd</sup>, good or bad, is not the central issue in this debate. I will first explain why legitimacy is the more important concern, and therefore why you should dismiss much of what Gov has said. I will then present disadvantages to a policy of removal if it were broadly accepted by the international community.”*

Done well, Opp is able to sidestep most of the PMC: you don't need to reply in detail to arguments that you can show don't matter to the outcome of the round! This gives the LOC more time to build the Opp case and leaves the MG with a great deal to do to pick up the pieces.

### ***A Better Motion***

Motions built around particular cases are tricky. It's unusual for them to be overtaken by events, like this one was. The bigger risk is that the case will have been poorly researched, and there is some detail that will strongly favor one side. With limited time and research resources, debaters may not become aware of this detail, but some might. Motions should be written to avoid the risk that one side might be favored.

This motion has a clear central issue that provides grounds for both sides: whether and under what circumstances can one country legitimately intervene in the affairs of another, even to removal of the government. The US—as do others—has a long history of intervention. In Latin America alone one can name Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Panama, Haiti, and Chile, and some of these countries more than once. There is a long debate over whether these were justified and/or successful.

The motion might have been: *“This House supports US efforts to remove foreign governments.”* Debaters would have been forced to consider the wider issues of law and ethics as well as those of effectiveness. Venezuela might still have been the primary example used in the packet, but it should not have been the only one.

When a motion is framed around a specific instance, debaters should avoid the obvious. Step back, think about what central issue is involved, and frame your case around that issue. Treat the specifics as an example, but not the only example. Your case will be stronger, and the round will be better.

### **RFD**

*This is a slightly edited version of the RFD I wrote for the final round at Fairfield Prep. I voted for Opposition. The Opposition team won on a 2-1 vote over their teammates from Pomperaug.*

I voted for Opp primarily on the issue of solvency. In debate, Gov can fiat an action, but not a result. In this case Gov can fiat the removal of Maduro (which has already happened) and that the US will press for elections to be held. Gov cannot fiat that those elections will in fact be held, will be free and fair, and that sensible parties will be elected who have the intention and the ability to remedy the list of problems facing Venezuela. Gov needs to explain how US efforts will lead to these results. Gov presents convincing reasons why Maduro is a bad ruler, why Venezuela is a basket case as a result, and that US power and ideology might justify acting. But nowhere in the three Gov speeches is there anything to show how US actions will be effective.

From Opp I get several arguments in their second contention why US efforts will fail. First, Venezuela is in such bad shape that more than just the US will be needed. Gov

replies that diplomacy alone is not enough, and global action hasn't happened yet, but these don't counter the argument that they will be needed for success. Second, that removal of Maduro will not necessarily lead to a stable democracy, especially given that US actions are more authoritarian than democratic in nature, and that the US seems more intent on taking Venezuelan oil than anything else. Gov never provides any answer other than that a stable democracy is the Gov plan, i.e., Gov is fiat-ing this result. Gov also never responds to the point of oil, other than saying taking it is not incompatible with responding to humanitarian issues (see previous sentence). Third, Opp cites a number of examples of failed US intervention in Latin America in the past. Gov calls out the Opp examples as off point as they were cases of the CIA attempting to destabilize any country that supported Cuba, and we don't hear any more on these examples for the rest of the debate (more on this tactical issues below). I felt that weakened, but did not necessarily remove the examples from consideration: the situations may not match as well as one might like, but they still show that US intentions and actions may not lead to US desired results, which does support Opp's solvency argument. Opp's final point on solvency is that Venezuela voted and otherwise got themselves into their current situation, and there is no guarantee they might eventually do so again in the future even if the US succeeds. This is more of a "in the long run we are all dead" argument that doesn't really count.

Opp also provides a strong disadvantage, that US action sets a precedent that other countries, especially Russia and China, can use to justify much less well-intentioned actions. Gov's response that the US is justified by humanitarian motives and the others not so much doesn't really answer the point, any more than saying it's okay to go after the oil as long as we do some nice things on the side answers Opp's argument that the oil focus undermines the entire enterprise. Opp's third contention might have provided a second strong disadvantage, but the harms are never really developed. The contention argues the US has no true justification--kidnapping is immoral, no Congressional authorization, international or NATO support would be better--but this is all a bit confused. The Congressional point might have been developed into a discussion of harms to US democracy. Gov's "Trump was elected so it's okay" is a very weak reply (though very much in keeping with his recent New York Times interview that he sees no limits on his actions other than his own sense of morality!). The idea of international or NATO support might have become a counterproposal (but proposing a counterplan requires a very different Opp case), and it, along with kidnapping, seem better positioned as counters to Gov's third contention that the US is obligated to act and its actions are legitimate.

This was a very strange debate in that the clash was disjointed and limited. The PMC was all Gov case; the LOC was all Opp case; the MGC was all Gov reply to Opp case; the MOC was all Opp reply to Gov case. I get a presentation and a reply on each contention, but no sustained clash that flows through the round from speech to speech. I never hear a third word specifically directed to any named argument. The four major issues--is regime change justified, is specifically US action justified, will US action be effective in Venezuela, will US action have significant negative consequences elsewhere--are never

clearly identified by the debaters, and bits of them are mixed in with the various contentions. This forces me to tie things together and to decide whether and where to apply certain points, something I (and you should) prefer a judge not to have to do.

The LOR offers a moment of clarity by reducing the debate to two points, which the LO names as "democratic sustainability" and "the Venezuelan people". But both are solvency arguments. The first summarizes a number of reasons why Maduro's removal and elections will not necessarily succeed in fixing the problems. The second is mislabeled as it really states US is only acting for oil, further undermining prospects for success. This speech sealed my vote. The PMR summarizes by arguing the existence of harm justifies taking action but never speaks to whether the action will be effective.

Debate is about clash: argument, reply, rejoinder. I am not sure where the two teams came up with the stark compartmentalization of argument seen in the four constructives-- Gov, Opp, Opp, Gov--but as well structured as each speech was it was not good debate. I never heard a good comparison of the two positions, and I never hear a third word on any point.

The PMC should always spend more time solving the problem than describing it. The LOC, MGC, and MOC should each spend approximately equal time on the Gov and Opp side of the debate. Review your notes--if you don't flow all the speeches, including your partner's you are making a mistake--and think about how you might free up time. The PM and the LO were very careful about listing their multiple warrants, but how many do you really need, and which might be better used in the Member speeches as replies or extensions?

Most of all, it is always easier to describe problems than to solve them. Work on your solvency analysis and arguments!