

A Coach's Notes¹

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Connecticut Debate Association

Pomperaug High School, Warde High School, Weston High School

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Resolved: The US should not target and kill foreign government officials.

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Introduction

My notes over the years can be found through the [Training Materials](#) page on the [CDA web site](#), along with the information packet provided to the debaters at the beginning of the day. Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Pomperaug High School, presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

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. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

RFD for the Final Round at Pomperaug

I received an email regarding my decision in the final round at Pomperaug between Simsbury on the Affirmative and Amity on the Negative. We don't fill out formal ballots for finals, but the following explains my decision. This is much longer and more detailed than what I would have been able to provide on a paper ballot in the limited time after a round when a decision is due.

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The round was decided by three judges on a 2-1 basis, one of the other judges voting Negative with me the other Affirmative. Their analysis may not agree with mine.

My RFD is as follows:

The Simsbury team started the round with the following case:

Definitions: we interpret the motion to forbid the US from assassinating or toppling any appointed or elected official of a sovereign state recognized by the UN.

(Note they offered no specific plan to do this.) Their three contentions were:

- A1. Such a ban would hold US leaders accountable for their actions*
- A2. Assassinations create instability that require further US intervention.*
- A3. The US are not and should not be the "world police".*

The Amity team on Negative accepted the definitions and presented the following contentions:

- N1. Targeted killing is needed to fight terrorism.*
- N2. Having the ability to target opponents is a form a deterrence, i.e., if we can't do it, others will feel emboldened to do it to us.*
- N3. It's a policy option that is needed.*

(I would have objected to the “toppling” portion of the definitions, as I don’t believe that removing a government after a war falls under the terms “target and kill”. For example, Hitler died by suicide rather than be captured, but the Allies would have preferred to capture him for trial. The US captured but did not kill Saddam Hussein after the 2003 Iraq war, turning him over to the new Iraqi government for trial, which led to his being hanged. However, while this portion of the definition seemed to be the basis of later claims by Aff that their plan was to permit the US to act as part of a coalition, it was never cited as part of that shift, and never specifically used to justify any line of argument by either side, so is moot.)

The debate didn't turn precisely on these contentions. In the 2AC Aff began shifting ground and arguing the problem wasn't assassinations per se, but the fact that they were done by the US acting alone based on poor, biased or falsified intelligence. In defense of their first contention, they introduced the idea that Aff didn't want to abandon targeted killings, but simply put the decision to kill in the hands of the international community. That is, it's okay to assassinate someone if an international coalition approves it. As the 2NC pointed out, this concedes a major part of the issue: assassination is good in some circumstances. Neg then closed the deal by pointing out that the US has dominated most international coalitions of the past century, and so would still be violating the resolution under the new Aff interpretation. In fact the US would probably be the party actually carrying out the assassination on behalf of the coalition. That pretty much loses the round for Aff.

The question of whether Aff shifted ground (2AR comment, "we have argued for a coalition all night") really doesn't matter. While I believe they did shift from their initial position, the coalition argument is fatal to their case however it arises and Neg successfully points this out.

(Would it have made a difference if Aff had begun the round by interpreting the resolution as simply forbidding unilateral US action? I cannot predict how an alternative debate would have gone. However, I think conceding assassination is acceptable in some contexts significantly weakens any Aff case. I discuss this idea in more detail below when I explain my preference for Aff arguing a clean, direct interpretation of a resolution, what I call a “straight case”.)

I try to decide a round on the primary line argument in a debate—top down—but some prefer to look at it from the bottom up and weigh individual contentions. Approaching the round from that direction: by shifting to the coalition argument, Aff essentially concedes the three negative contentions on the necessity for having and using the option to assassinate. Neg points this out in the 2NC and rebuttals, and so makes the arguments necessary to win all three Negative contentions.

Neg also points out that, as Aff never presents a plan, the first Aff contention falls as they have no mechanism to hold the US leaders accountable. Aff and Neg both argue that Presidents regularly circumvent the law; Aff simply says this isn't their problem. (There is an easy and better response—generally, US government employees and military will not disobey the law despite a Presidential order--but Aff never makes it, and it plays no part in the round or my decision.)

On the second and third Aff contentions, that assassination creates instability and the US shouldn't be the world police, Neg notes that even without the assassination option, the US still creates instability and can continue to act as world police, using other forms of intervention. This is what Neg was saying when they said the harms asserted by Aff were not unique to the Negative side. (They also could have said the Aff had no solvency, which is pretty much the same thing in this case.) If the US continues to create instability and act as world police whether or not we adopt the resolution, Aff provides no net benefit and there is no reason to adopt. Aff suggests that international control will solve the problem, but not convincingly.

My decision was based on the first, top down analysis. The second, bottom up analysis is how I think a different sort of judge might have weighed the contentions. I do not know how the other judges evaluated the round.

Comments on Debating This Topic

Before announcing the result, I made several comments from the podium regarding how to debate this topic. These had nothing to do with my decision, as I think a comparison of what I have written above and below will show. Our purpose is to teach and promote good argumentation.

The first comment was that word choice is important, and the teams should take care of the terms they use. "Targeted killing" and "assassination" carry different moral and emotional freight. If you are trying to be persuasive, use the term that best supports your side. Note that the US government describes the attack on Qassem Suleimani as a “targeted killing”, not an “assassination”, for what I hope are obvious reasons.

Second, analyzing policy choices posed in resolutions like this should appeal to broader reasoning than I saw in this round. We penalize certain actions in sports, even when they

have caused no harm nor helped the team that committed the foul because of the risk of harm or unfair play. There may be instances when killing civilians or using poison gas might be warranted and effective; we have decided they are not legitimate options regardless of the circumstances, justification or advantage provided. The articles in the packet note that the issue of assassination has become murky over the past 20 years with the rise of terrorism. The nature and conduct of war have changed, and this suggests more sophisticated arguments than those used by either team in the round.

Third, the fact that an action may "sometimes" seem justified should never carry a round for either side. Every debatable policy has arguments—and therefore examples—that support and oppose it. Neither side has the burden of demonstrating that every single instance works to their favor. I often hear teams arguing “if we can show one example...” or “if we can save one more life (or one more dollar)...” “then the judge should vote for us. Nonsense!

For example, one can agree that we are better off with Qassem Suleimani dead, yet still deplore the means used due to the precedent set, the uncertainty of information used, the chance the attack could have misfired, etc. Similarly, the fact that some actors lie and break laws does not void having a those laws, unless it is generally unenforceable or causes more problems than it solves. Debaters should base their case not only on examples, but also on broader analysis, and provide weighing arguments as to why, on balance, the decision should favor one side or the other.

Argue a Straight Case

I have a list of mistakes debaters make, and near the top is the Affirmative team trying to write a “safe” case. A safe case is one that shades the interpretation of the resolution to pre-empt obvious Negative attacks. My definition of a “straight” case is one that takes the obvious meaning of the resolution, warts and all.

A good example is the ultimate Aff interpretation of the resolution in this case, which was essentially that the US should not target and kill foreign government officials *unless it does so as part of an international coalition*. The intention was to avoid arguments that sometimes targeted killing seems warranted, even optimal.

The strategy didn’t work in this case in part because the Aff was not clear about their interpretation from the beginning. But I don’t think this interpretation would have worked well even if better handled, for the primary reason that, as Neg noted, it accepts the legitimacy of assassination in some circumstances. That is a hole in the case, and a good debater will take any hole offered and proceed to drive a truck through it. Most “safe” cases present similar holes.

What are the reasons Aff should opt for a straight interpretation of the resolution? I’ve just given you one reason: it weakens the Aff case by rejecting the resolution in some part. The Aff interpretation is essentially, “we support the resolution except in the following cases...” Those exceptions can be exploited by Neg.

A second, and I believe more important reason, is that it is an attempt by Aff to avoid clash, and clash is the essence of debate. Debatable topics provide strong grounds for both sides. One reason to reject Aff’s interpretation of the resolution is if it does not

leave Neg sufficient grounds—arguments—to support a good debate. A safe case is at least a half step in the direction of denying Neg a fair round.

You don't win rounds and get high speaker points by excluding the tough arguments. You win rounds and get high speaker points by finding counters to those tough arguments and showing that your arguments are superior: counter, compare, contrast. So a third reason is that by watering down the debate, Aff limits its chances of doing well.

Finally, a safe case is harder to construct and more likely to lead to mistakes in the round. It takes effort to be subtle and maintain that subtlety for a full hour. Instead of only a half-step to the Negative side of the resolution, it's easy to slip and find yourself all the way over the line, as Aff did in this debate.

On Aff, you should go for the most obvious and direct interpretation of the resolution. You will find it easier to build a solid case, and easier to stay on it during the round. There will always be examples that justify the Negative side.² If there weren't, there'd be no reason to debate the topic. Your task is to support your side, warts and all, and to explain why the exceptions don't justify abandoning the rule, even some of the time. That clash will force you to become a better debater, win more rounds and improve your speaker points.

On Neg, watch for any limits Aff puts on the resolution. Exceptions where the resolution should not apply are obvious points of attack. Note them to the judge and explain how they implicitly support your side. Push Aff in cross-ex. The exceptions can often be exploited in practice to make the resolution unenforceable. Bright lines are harder to avoid. The inability to distinguish clearly between permitted and forbidden uses make it unlikely that any advantage or solvency will be obtained. Finally, the exceptions may also point the way for the status quo to improve without adopting the resolution. These all provide grounds for a Negative ballot.

Alternative Aff and Neg Cases

Neg won my ballot in the final at Pomperaug not so much due to the strength of their case, but by exploiting an Aff mistake. I'd like to look at the two cases on their own merit and suggest some alternatives. I've summarized the contentions in the table below. As per the previous section, I assume Aff has offered and Neg has accepted a straightforward interpretation of the resolution.

Affirmative	Negative
A1. Such a ban would hold US leaders accountable for their actions	N1. Targeted killing is needed to fight terrorism.
A2. Assassinations create instability that require further US intervention.	N2. Having the ability to target opponents is a form a deterrence, i.e., if we can't do it, others will feel emboldened to do it to us.

² Just as there are always exceptions to my advice, in this case, that there are resolutions where a more sophisticated interpretation is a better course of action.

A3. The US are not and should not be the "world police".	N3. It's a policy option that is needed.
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One question I find useful is to ask yourself when analyzing cases is: “If each side wins all their contentions, who would win the debate?” When applied to the two cases above, I think the answer favors the Affirmative. The Negative contentions are non-specific. They would justify any number of tactics we and other nations generally do not use: nuclear weapons, poison gas, bombing cities, killing civilians, seizing diplomats.

If I were giving the 2AC or summarizing the round for Aff, I would agree that targeting and killing foreign government officials can be used to fight terrorism, and may provide a form of deterrence, but that doesn’t imply that it is needed. The US has plenty of other weapons to accomplish these goals, and second and third Aff contentions show this particular weapon does more harm to us than good for us. (The first Aff contention is pretty lame. I don’t see how the resolution holds US leaders accountable.) I’d note there are similar policy options we don’t use for similar reasons.

Remember that every debate turns on how the cases are argued in the round. I’ve seen inherently weak cases well-handled against inherently stronger cases, and I would vote for the side that performed better in the round. What I mean by the analysis above is that, if I were given the option of defending one of the two cases above, I would pick Aff because I believe it is stronger hand.

Neither case gets to what I think are the key issues in this resolution. Consider the following alternatives, again both assuming a straight interpretation of the motion.

Affirmative

A1: Assassination is immoral

- *These are not military targets that pose an imminent threat, especially if there is no state of war*
- *This is recognized by international agreements at The Hague and Geneva, and by some interpretations US Law*
- *The impact is that it weakens our position internationally.*

A2: Assassination sets a bad precedent

- *The US may have better tech than other countries today, but they will catch up*
- *We cannot effectively condemn others for what we ourselves do*
- *It puts other governments and our own officials at risk by “blessing” this policy choice*

A3: Conflict reduction and resolution

- *Assassinations are as likely to strengthen our enemies’ resolve as end the conflict*
- *It makes opponents less willing to negotiate: why negotiate with a party that believes it is okay to kill your government officials?*
- *Most likely result is increased violence, longer conflicts, and more difficult peace processes*

Notice that each of these contentions applies specifically to assassination and is a reason to adopt the resolution. It distinguishes assassination from legitimate combat and notes

the precedents for that distinction. Finally, it recognizes that our most recent use of this tactic was not against an active combatant.

Now to the other side:

Negative

N1: Nature of warfare has changed

- *Nations do not formally declare war, they simply attack chosen targets*
- *“shadow war” is prevalent, where nations use proxies and asymmetric tactics*
- *We must adapt to these new circumstances*

N2: Targeted killing is a legitimate tactic given N1

- *In a declared war, all enemy combatants are legitimate targets*
- *Terrorism or arming, training and directing proxies who use direct or asymmetric tactics is war in the modern sense*
- *This expands who should be considered a combatant and therefore a legitimate target*

N3: Targeted killing is an effective tactic

- *It is one means of degrading our enemy’s forces and deterring attacks, no less than attacks against direct combatants in regular war*
- *Its effectiveness must be seen in the context of the entire conflict*
- *Declaring legitimate targets off limits enables and emboldens the enemy, prolonging violence*

On the Negative side, I think recognizing that the nature of warfare has changed is a key consideration. If we were at war with Iran in the traditional sense, General Suleimani would have been a legitimate target. That we are in indirect conflict with Iran is hard to deny. Whether it rises to the level of war and who is a legitimate target has become at best a grey area. Neg, like current and past US administrations, needs to emphasize this justification.

I think these two cases are more evenly balanced. Each is directed to the central issue in the resolution, targeted killing (or assassination, if you prefer). Neither side is easily dismissed; neither side is obviously superior. Who would win? It would—and should—depend on the skill of the debaters in the room.

Bonus Round: The Final at Warde

I don’t get to see or judge as many rounds as I’d like, but I was sent a link to the final at Warde and I was asked to comment. Listening to a non-professional recording is difficult, so I my flow may not be as accurate as I’d like.

At Pomperaug, Aff shifts ground to its disadvantage. At Warde, Neg pulls the debate off what Aff initially seemed to intend, and Aff can’t quite pull it back. But this is complicated by a litany of incorrect or off point examples, and this is only weakly noted to the judges. The 2AR finally comes up with what I think is a strong response, but possibly too late in the round. Overall, the round highlights the importance of knowing the boundaries of your case.

Aff presents the following case:

- *Definition: “targeted killing” is assassination; “government officials” are high ranking; this excludes wartime.*
- *A1: Assassination is immoral as evidenced by international and US law*
- *A2: Assassination is ineffective as leaders can be replaced with worse, who may be more violent*
- *A3: Assassination provokes retaliation, escalation, anti-US sentiment and instability.*

Neg responds with:

- *Accept the definitions*
- *N1: US has a right to defend itself*
- *N2: Targeted killing serves as a deterrent*
- *N3: US has an obligation to protect oppressed populations*

Neg’s supporting detail is problematic. One problem with high school debate is the students don’t know a lot, and much of what they know is wrong. Here are the (paraphrased) Neg examples with comments and, in some cases, Aff replies:

- “In WWII we attempted to assassinate Nazi leaders.” I don’t believe this is true. The British considered and rejected killing Hitler. The only major assassination I am aware of was of SS officer Reinhard Heydrich who was killed by a Czechoslovakian team sent by the Czech government-in-exile and supported by the British. The Nazi’s took revenge on two villages, killing or deporting all inhabitants. Otherwise I do not believe the Allies had a policy of targeted killing of Nazi (or Japanese) government officials other than as a result of combat operations, various novels³ and films to the contrary notwithstanding. ***In any case, this was during wartime and should be excluded by the definitions.*** (The 2AC notes this briefly.)
- “Drone strikes on ISIS leaders led to its defeat.” In the 2AC Aff notes that the defeat was primarily due to “boots on the ground” and presents a revised version of their definitions that “targeted killing” is “an attack on an individual outside of military action.” That’s a minor shift in definition from “wartime” (and might be interpreted against them to permit attacks like the one on Qassem Suleimani as that attack was conducted by the military.) More importantly, ***ISIS is/was not a recognized government and so the targets were not “government officials.”***
- “Deng Xiaoping refrained from opposing the US out of fear after seeing the examples of US action in Asia.” Aff says this is unlikely; in fact it is pure nonsense. There are any number of reasons why China (and the US) had no

³ If you want a good read in this genre, consider Geoffrey Household’s 1939 novel, *Rogue Male*, written and published before the war started.

interest in direct confrontation at the time, but US targeted killing, coup attempts or military intervention in Southeast Asia were not among them.

- “The US staged a coup in Cambodia and drove out the Khmer Rouge.” The US briefly invaded Cambodia during the Vietnam war to destroy North Vietnamese staging areas. The US did support a coup at that time (as it did several years earlier in South Vietnam) but not with the intention of killing government officials or driving out the Khmer Rouge, who were not a factor at the time. The Cambodian leader toppled in a coup, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, lived another 30 years. The coup leader, Lon Nol, was driven out by the Khmer Rouge a few years later. The Khmer Rouge were eventually driven out the Vietnamese army (after the US left South Vietnam, and Vietnam was unified under North Vietnam’s control). The US, to our disgrace, diplomatically supported the genocidal Khmer Rouge because we opposed their enemy, the Vietnamese Communist government. ***This does not fall under the round’s definition of targeted killing.***
- “Maduro’s government in Venezuela has limited its actions and is collapsing due to US actions.” The US has applied sanctions, but most of damage is self-inflicted due to Chavez/Maduro economic mismanagement and corruption. Aff argues in the 2AC that the US has not changed Maduro’s behavior. ***More to the point, I am unaware of any US targeted killings of or attempts on Venezuela government officials.*** We do want some of them on drug charges.
- “While US attempts on Castro failed, they resulted in the removal of nuclear weapons from Cuba.” No. The US embargo and two weeks of the world holding its breath while the US and Russia stood on the brink of nuclear war, followed by a tacit agreement to remove US missiles from Turkey and a US promise not to invade Cuba resulted in the removal. ***This does not fall under the definitions in the round.***
- Aff makes vague assertions that the US staged coups and/or killing in Latin America, citing Cuba and Venezuela as noted above, actions against FARC in Columbia in the 2NR. While we provided military assistance—weapons, training and intelligence—to Columbia against FARC, I am not aware of any direct military action or targeted killings of government officials by US forces. While we have supported various opposition groups and militaries in various countries, and that support has led to coups or otherwise replaced governments, most of the replaced leaders went to exile or prison, Salvador Allende in Chile who reportedly died with an AK-47 in his hands is a notable exception. In cases where we have sent troops, the intent was not to kill the government leaders: after the invasion of Panama, Noriega ended up in a US jail. In most cases, US personnel were not directly involved in the actual coups, other than signaling that we would not oppose the coup and that we would recognize the new government. We did aid Bolivian government forces who captured and killed Che Guevara, but he was leading a guerrilla war against the Bolivian government at the time and was not an official of any government. We have provided military and other assistance

against drug cartels, but again, novels and films aside, not targeted killings by US forces. *These do not fall under the definitions in the round.*

So why did Aff lose?

First, I regularly hear a lot of incorrect “facts” cited by high school debaters. The motto of Faber College, “Knowledge is good”⁴, applies in debate. I have the benefit of having lived through most of the events listed above, other than World War II. Listening to the round I have no doubt that Neg presented information they thought was correct, and other than a few cases Aff did not know they were incorrect.

But Aff should have known that the examples did not fall under their definitions, which is the key point in this round!

Aff does occasionally make this point. In replying to N1 the 2nd Affirmative says the examples—World War II and ISIS—do not fall under the resolution. But he makes it only briefly, and then goes on to counter the China and Maduro/Venezuela examples in detail.

Replying to an argument in detail gives the impression that you accept it as valid, but believe it is incorrect. That may not be entirely logical, but impressions count in debate. Most of the 2AC and 1AR are spent replying to Neg arguments. In the 2AR Aff argues that the difference between a coup and targeted killing is that in the former you have influence over the composition of the new government, while in the latter you don’t know who the replacement will be. But he doesn’t emphasize that a coup is not an event under consideration in the resolution!

Replying to arguments is good. Many debaters feel the need to answer every point their opponent makes. But the objective is to win the debate, not reply to arguments. Those two are not the same thing. Some arguments don’t matter because they are not relevant to the issue. Some arguments may be relevant but have no impact on either side’s position. Countering those arguments is a waste of time; you may even be able to agree with some of them. The proper response is to draw the judge’s and audience’s attention to the key issues and the arguments that pertain to it.

Similarly, replying to contentions is a good way to organize your speech. But when the contentions drift from the basic issue that is the key to your case, you should step back from the contentions and highlight it. Mentioning it in passing isn’t enough. You need to stand on top of the podium and shout it out fifteen different ways so the judge cannot miss it or ignore it. (Not literally, but you get my point.)

The Negative case, as evidenced, was based on assuming any action against terrorists or any action against another government would be banned under the resolution. That isn’t

⁴ See the movie, *Animal House*, a 1978 movie with John Belushi and others.

true. The Aff case is (or should have been) based on narrower grounds, and they should have made that the organizing principle of their reply to the Negative.

“We agree the US has a right to defend itself and protect others, but targeted killing of government officials is a minor and ineffective weapon compared to the many others in our arsenal. Let’s review the Negative examples because that is exactly what they show...”

Judges are not logic machines. Judges are not required to understand what you meant to say. Judges are not likely to attach great importance to an argument you only make briefly. Judges are not required to take your arguments and apply them to your best advantage. Judges are not required to order arguments by importance if you don’t rank them and provide emphasis. Judges are not required to note the weaknesses in your opponents’ arguments and credit you with the refutation. Judges are not required to notice when the round drifts off point and pull it back.

Your job as a debater is to make your arguments so clear that the judge need do very little to accept them. If you expect to win debates based on the judge doing the heavy lifting, you will often be disappointed.

In my experience, the typical high school debate judge is very much influenced by the “drift” of argument in the round. They make their decision on what the debaters choose to argue about rather than what they should be arguing about. The drift in this debate runs towards the Negative. It leaves the impression that the round is about the use of drone strikes against terrorists and coups against governments that intend harm to US soldiers, citizens and interests. It doesn’t differentiate whether the US or a US-aided party is the actor. This is weak ground for Aff, and in the round Aff only half-heartedly calls out a few of the examples as not relevant. A judge really must work hard to exclude them, and lacking Aff help in doing so, may include them at Neg’s urgings.

This is a difficult round to call. I don’t like to credit facts that I know are incorrect. I also don’t like to credit arguments that I know are incorrect or don’t apply. But I also don’t like to credit a team with arguments that weren’t made. Aff appears weaker and Neg stronger on the issues they chose to debate, but they aren’t quite the ones intended. The judges voted 2-1 for Neg.