

A Coach's Notes¹

Everett Rutan
Connecticut Debate Association
ejrutan3@ctdebate.org

**Connecticut Debate Association
New Canaan High School and St. Paul Catholic School**

This House opposes delegating lethal military decisions to artificial intelligence.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the February 7, 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.

What Is This Debate About?

Weather cut both tournaments short on Saturday. There was no final round at either location. I did judge two preliminary rounds at St. Paul. In both the Government teams spent little time on definitions. One team defined “lethal autonomous weapon systems”. The other defined “artificial intelligence”.

Debaters likely defined these terms because the packet starts with a definition of AI, and the second article begins with a definition of LAWS. This is misdirection. Just because something is in the packet doesn’t mean it is important.

The most important part of the motion are the two words “delegating decisions”. Even “lethal military” are less important. Unless you know what it means to delegate a decision, you don’t know what the motion or the debate is supposed to be about.

World Building

In a lecture two years ago, I listened to another debate coach explain that debate was about comparing worlds. Debaters often “compare worlds” as a summary technique in rebuttal, but this coach emphasized it had to start much earlier in the round. To have a good debate the Gov and Opp worlds must be sharply defined. This allows each side to explain what happens in their world, why it happens, and why it won’t happen or is less likely to happen in the other world. If there isn’t a bright line between the two sides, much of the debate will be “yes it will, no it won’t” conflicting assertions.

The Wrong Way

Debaters most often build worlds is simply to assume everyone knows what they are talking about. For this month’s motion, that means Gov is probably thinking about a soldier with a rifle deciding whether to shoot at an enemy combatant versus a *Terminator*-like scenario where the computers all get together and decide to wipe out mankind. Opp is probably thinking about a soldier who will live if AI can rapidly detect and destroy an incoming drone, or who will die because the soldier can’t read the radar screen and push a button quickly enough after an alarm goes off.

I am not saying that Gov or Opp explicitly tells you these are the worlds behind their arguments and comparison. The point is they don’t tell you anything at all. But if you think about the arguments they present, those arguments tacitly assume worlds that are similar to those I briefly described above. Why? Because if you accept the Gov worlds described above you will almost certainly vote Gov. If you accept the Opp worlds described above you will almost certainly vote Opp.

Teams that do not spend time at the top-of-case making clear what the two worlds are—one where the motion is adopted, one where it is not—almost always have arguments based on worlds that are biased in favor of their side. Debaters that do spend time

describing the two worlds often do the same thing, but when the bias is explicit it is easier to see it and to deal with it.

The Right Way

In a good debate, the two worlds are described in a way that provides an even playing field for arguments. There are good reasons to adopt the motion; there are good reasons to reject it. The debate turns who which side does the better job explaining why their side is superior. A good motion encapsulates an issue for which such worlds exist. Debaters can be judged on how well they discover and describe those worlds, and how well they argue in favor of one versus the other.

A good Prime Minister's constructive will spend time describing both of those worlds, and what the primary differences are between them that will be argued in the round. The PM and the Gov team should be judged in some part on how well they frame a debate that is fair to both sides, as opposed to one that is slanted in their favor, or worse, one that is poorly defined.

This is reason we allow a "point of clarification" to be raised or offered after the PM finishes their top-of-case and before the PM begins Gov's substantive arguments. If offered, the PM is asking Opp whether they think Gov's framing is fair and reasonable. If asked, Opp presses the PM for more certainty or raise doubts the LO will discuss at the top of the next speech.

Given how little time I see high school debaters spend on framing the round, I would love to see a point of clarification more often. Time stops, so it is essentially a free opportunity for either or both sides to show their understanding of the topic. And it can make for a better debate overall.

If the PM's framing is slanted to their side, or simply sparse, a good Leader of the Opposition will address this at the top of their constructive. If the PM is fair and reasonable, the LO should acknowledge that. If sparse, the LO should build on what the PM has presented, both explicitly at the top of the PMC and implicitly in their contentions. (Even if the PM omits the top-of-case entirely and moves right into argument, it is both ungracious and unfair to ignore the definitions and framing implicit in those arguments.) If biased or unreasonable, the LO has an opportunity to identify the problems, explain them to the judge, and set the round on a better course.

Both sides have an interest in working together to have a good debate. Win or lose, a good round likely earns all speakers higher scores. Win or lose, a good round is more exciting and enjoyable, both for the participants and the audience.

Finding the Line

There are various ways discover the two worlds implied by the motion. For this month's motion I want to discuss the process of walking through various gradations of decision making, both by humans and by AI. The trouble with the soldier/*Terminator* scenarios

above is that they are too far apart. We have to find two examples where the only difference is who or what makes the decision to select the target and fire the weapon.

Modern warfare collects large amounts of data from a variety of sensors. Computer systems are required to compile and analyze that data; it is rarely presented unfiltered. AI is likely used to analyze that data and present recommendations. An obvious bright line is whether we require a human “to push the button” or allow AI to do so.

What Is a Decision?

“Who pushes the button” seems like a clean line, but is it? Is a soldier simply responding to a computer’s target recommendation really “making a decision”? An informed decision? How much information has to be provided to the soldier, and how much analysis does that soldier have to do before it can be said they are “making the decision”?

Assume a soldier in a base protected by a defense system. Rather than shooting down an incoming drone or missile which is likely unmanned, let’s assume the question is whether to strike at distant locations suspected to be the source of an attack. Consider the following possibilities:

1. Soldier receives raw sensor information, reviews that data, selects targets, and decides whether to fire.
2. Soldier receives target recommendations from a computerized analysis system and decides whether to fire, with the option to review data and analysis behind the recommendation.
3. Soldier receives target recommendations and decides whether to fire but has no option to review the data and analysis.
4. Soldier is ordered by their superior, who has confidence in the system, to approve all recommendations to fire.
5. Soldier, concerned about his own or his comrades’ lives, confirms all recommendations out of an abundance of caution (or simply, panic), regardless of orders.
6. The system is placed on automatic at the discretion of the commanding officer.
7. The system is always on automatic once deployed by design and policy set by the high command.

Where is the line now?

It gets worse. In many situations in modern warfare weapons move much faster than humans do, and the amount of information that needs to be processed is more than a human can grasp in the time available. In the first case above the soldier is likely dead. Would you be the calm decision-maker of scenarios 2 and 3, or the worried combatant of 4 and 5? Are any of scenarios 2-5 “delegation”? In 6 and 7 humans are ultimately responsible for building, deploying, and arming the system. Is that enough to credit humans with having “decided”, or is a clear case of delegation to AI? Is the *Terminator* scenario the only one Gov need oppose?

A Poor Choice of Motion

A good motion is one that provides a clear issue that allows a fair debate assuming all debaters have full knowledge of the subject matter. High school debaters in parliamentary debate with limited prep time, research resources, and background knowledge will often not realize one side is heavily favored. In that sense a poor motion may allow a “fair” debate. But that is not ideal.

As a Policy Motion

As a policy motion, this month’s motion is a poor one. Modern warfare is rapidly moving from scenario 1 to scenario 7 above. The soldier in scenario 1 is probably dead; in scenarios 2 and 3 at great risk; scenarios 4 and 5 becoming more common. Gov has to oppose scenarios 6 and 7 or the debate devolves into arguments over definitions. But a good Opp should note there is not much difference in outcome between scenarios 4 and 5 versus scenarios 6 and 7. Likely Gov loses on solvency.

The articles in this month’s packet slant heavily to combat situations like the war in Ukraine, battlefield situations with swarms of killer robots. The war in Ukraine demonstrates the technology is very effective on the battlefield, and likely to become more so. The pace of attack and response is likely to get faster and less amenable to human intervention. In addition to showing a soldier would survive in their world, the Gov team would have to explain why both sides would observe one, given the side that did would likely lose.

Historically, weapons bans have only worked when both sides felt the weapon in question was ineffective. Poison gas was banned after World War I, and neither side used it in World War II. But the reason wasn’t the ban. Both sides built up stocks of gases to retaliate if the other side used them first. Rather both militaries, reviewing the first war, concluded the weapons were not very effective. Still, poison gas found use in the Iran-Iraq war and in Syria when the user knew the victim could not retaliate. The ban on land mines and cluster bombs is another example where the effectiveness of a ban depends more on the military situation than any agreement. There is no such disincentive to use automated AI, especially as it becomes more able to discriminate among targets and react appropriately.

If you know a bit more about military weapons history, nuclear weapons provide more grounds for a good Gov case. There is some time to review sensor information and consider the appropriate response between the time an incoming missile is detected, and a retaliatory strike needs to be ordered. Some parts of the “nuclear triad” are believed immune from a first strike. Missiles are unmanned, so Gov can allow AI control of anti-missile defenses. A President and the military command might choose to take time to evaluate the situation before ordering a retaliatory strike. Gov might frame the debate around the issue of strategic nuclear weapons rather than battlefield systems. But none of that is in the packet.

As a Value Motion

The NSDA Lincoln-Douglas debate motion for January/February 2021 was “Resolved: States ought to ban lethal autonomous weapons.” There are a few differences from 2021 and the CDA in February 2026:

- Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, so most of what we know now about drone warfare and AI was only speculation 5 years ago.
- L-D topic areas are announced in June of the previous year, 2020, so L-D debaters were able to consider the topic for 6 months before having to debate it.
- L-D is intended to be value debate, about the ethics of an issue rather than a policy debate about problems and solutions.

Of the three, the last is the most important. While the motion is phrased as a policy issue, L-D is supposed to be a values debate. A value debate over autonomous weapons, nuclear weapons, poison gas, land mines, treatment of prisoners, treatment of civilians, etc., is simply a variation of “just war” theory which goes back at least to Saint Augustine in the sixth century. The question isn’t “can we do it” but “should we do it”, even if we may not be able to implement a ban.

As the value debate I think the topic works. There is one short article in the packet—less than a page—which mentions concerns like safety, control, responsibility, blame, rationality, ethics, morals. But Gov offering and Opp accepting a value debate on this month’s topic is problematic in a CDA context:

- CDA debaters tend to be swayed by the packet, and the packet is overwhelmingly policy oriented.
- CDA’s origins are in policy debate, and its motions over the years have leaned strongly to policy, so debaters are conditioned to have policy debates.
- CDA has never done much to teach value debate. I’m at fault here in that my Coach’s Notes pieces have rarely done more than touch on value debate.

It’s a gap we should consider remedying.

