A Coach's Notes[1]

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This House supports a policy of containment with respect to China.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the March 25, 2023, CDA State Finals tournament and topic. Previous year's editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site. Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Stamford 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. 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.

"As stated in the packet…"

Debate is about using language carefully and precisely. Much of the noise in public discourse comes from people using the same words to mean different things and talking past each other. You can't have a serious discussion unless all agree on what you are talking about.

In a debate round definitions, plan, framework, observations—there are a lot of terms in use for different parts, let's just call it all definitions—have strategic and tactical implications. At State Finals I believe that Opp lost because they let Gov get away with a vague "we all know what this motion is about" approach.

Gov defines "containment" with the phrase "as stated in the packet". They add the purpose is to "stop geopolitical expansion into sovereign, free nations". Each of these has a problem. The first part assumes the audience, particularly the Judges, know what is in the packet. While we distribute the packet for the benefit of the debaters, and there are always a few extra copies floating around, we do not distribute them to the Judges, and, in fact, we discourage Judges from reading it should they acquire a copy until after the tournament. The round should be judged on what the debaters say, not on what the Judge thinks they should have said based on the packet. So the first part is not an acceptable definition.

The second part is a statement of the goal of containment, and this does mirror the definition given at the start of the packet:

> **containment: the policy, process or result of preventing the expansion of a hostile power or ideology**

per Merriam Webster. But that isn't what the motion is about. The motion states:

> **This House supports a policy of containment with respect to China.**

This second part of the Gov definition tells us what the goal of the policy is, *but it tell us nothing about what the policy itself consists of!*

You may think I am splitting hairs here, but there is a very distinct difference between a policy and the goals of a policy. Everyone may easily agree on a goal and yet differ markedly as to the policy to achieve that goal. For example, you will get wide agreement that we should eliminate poverty, clean up the environment, insure world peace. But if your policy requires a higher tax bill, banning fossil fuels or reducing the armed forces, all of a sudden you will find your supporters drifting away.

Opp should always pin Gov down as to precisely what Gov thinks the motion entails. This is exactly what the Point of Clarification was meant for. If Gov is not specific, raise a POC, and force them to be specific. The clock stops, so no time is lost, and there is no limit on how long a POC can take, nor any prohibition on going back and forth on terms until both sides agree. As long as Opp asks informational and not argumentative questions Opp can keep going. For example:

> *Opp: I'm not clear on what a "policy of containment" is. Can you be more specific?*
> *Gov: As in the packet, "the policy…"*
> *Opp: That tells us what the goal of the policy is, but not what the means are. For example, does containment require we send troops to fight a war?*
> *What about arms sales?*
> *What about trade restrictions?*

What about limits on technology?
What about propaganda campaigns?
Are these actions limited to the country we are trying to contain, in this case China?
Is it containment if we simply spend on our own military?
Is there any action we can take that isn't containment?
And so on…

Don't be afraid to run through a list, especially where we are talking about a policy that the US followed for 40+ years that ended 30 years ago and was used against a very different foe in a very different world. Again, there is no time limit on a point of clarification, so long as the questions asked are about the details of the Gov case, not arguments against it (though you do want to avoid annoying the judge).

It is very easy for Opp to think, "'as defined in the packet'. I read the packet, I know what that means!" ***No, you do not know***. And neither does anyone else in the room besides the speaker. You don't know that Gov read or understood the packet the same way that you did. You do not know what if anything the Judges and the audience. Worse, you don't know how the terms will evolve in the minds of each party as the speeches proceed.

Vague or incomplete definitions work to Opp's disadvantage as they give Gov the ability to shift ground later in order to counter the Opp case. This is exactly what happened at State Finals. Gov talked about threats and democracy, but the only examples of concrete actions were sending arms to Taiwan and Ukraine. Opp replied that containment requires an expensive trade war that is unlikely to be successful, and that an alternative policy of investing in the US and foreign countries to maintain US power was a better policy. The MGC simply said Gov never argued for tariffs or a trade war, and US investment in itself, its military, and in foreign countries were all part of a policy of containment. If you look at your history, this is not containment. But I think the Judges bought it.

Solvency

Identifying problems is easy. Solving problems is hard. Gov will often try to win the round by presenting problems and skimping on solutions. Sometimes, as in this case, Gov will assume solvency: *containment is a policy of limiting China's power, therefore a policy of containment will limit China's power*. Isn't that what the words mean? Consider this analogy: a policy to control the weather does not mean that it is possible to control the weather, or that it would be a good idea even if we could.

In this round, the first two Gov contentions are about harms: China is a threat to the US; the US has a duty to uphold democracy (a "benefit" or a negative harm). Note Opp need not contest these. The LO can stand and say:

> *We agree that China is a threat to the US, and that one goal of US policy is to uphold democracy. Neither of those are reasons to adopt the motion. Only the third Gov contention, "containment is the best policy" (presumably, to deal with these issues), can determine the result of the round, and only if Gov shows it is in*

fact the best policy to respond to the threat from China and promote democracy. We will show this is not the case.

Further, as discussed above, Gov is never clear what actions are included in a policy of containment. There are no concrete measures in their definition, and no plan is given. In their contentions, the only examples are military aid to Taiwan and the Ukraine. In the MGC Gov tries to co-opt the Opp contentions by claiming investment is containment (but goes on, in the PMR, to dismiss this by saying investment is the same as Quantitative Easing, a Fed monetary policy that has nothing to do with the Opp case or the round).

Even if Gov presents a mechanism, they must further show that the means solve according to some metric. Gov's framework here is the promotion of democracy, but there is never any explanation of how sending weapons fosters democracy. Opp does not exploit this in this debate, but could have noted that during the Cold War, the US sent arms to many countries that were—sometimes brutal—dictatorships, such as Taiwan and South Korea. Gov might have been better off with self-determination rather democracy, or rather that world order guided by US principles would be better than one guided by China's principles. That would be a different round.

Opp does a better job by insisting that containment implies a policy of confrontation, and that any containment policy towards China would have to include economic components, such as tariffs and trade sanctions, as well as military. (They could also add it would also include diplomatic, cultural and other factors, and this is briefly mentioned later in the round.) Opp's offense is that such actions are going to be expensive and likely to reduce the growth of US and global GDP. Given China's economic importance, it is likely to be unsuccessful in the long run.

And this explains why Government teams will try and avoid plan/solvency specifics: containment is a policy of confrontation and will come at a cost. It's easier to talk about the benefits of a successful policy. It's hard for Opp to pin down the costs of a policy when they don't quite know what it is, or if Gov shifts the definition to avoid the costs that Opp brings up.

What If We're Wrong?

Joseph Nye, a political scientist and government official, is said to have ended every policy meeting with the question, "How could we be wrong?" Debaters and judges should always be asking themselves this question after a tournament. Most debates only have one judge, and the debaters are engaged in their own cases. It's easy to drift off into your own idea of what correct reasoning and good arguments are.

Final rounds—and elimination rounds in general—offer a useful corrective. As a debater you can watch the round with the other members of your team, or friends on other teams, and compare notes. As a judge you serve on a panel and can compare your vote. National tournaments often have the judges give their decision along with a (sometimes not so) brief RFD verbally to the debaters, other judges and the audience.

At State Finals the decision went 2-1 in favor of Gov. I voted Opp. After the awards ceremony I went and spoke to the two other judges to hear their take on the round. I had some ideas as to what the grounds might be to vote Gov. Some of this was confirmed, and I got some new ideas on the relative importance of the arguments. I won't go over these, other than to say that I am still comfortable with the basis for my own vote. The point is, even when I am in the majority or the decision is unanimous, I seek out the opinion of the other judges: I could be wrong, and I certainly could learn something new.

Learning to correctly analyze your own performance is a valuable skill that requires practice. Flowing and evaluating a public debate round, and then comparing your opinion with others, is one way to do that.

Side Stats

Every tournament on the last page of the trophy winners, CDA publishes the side statistics for the day. These are the percentage of Gov wins, given by round and by Varsity and Novice. The hypothesis is that if the motion is fair, offering approximately equal arguments that would allow either side to win, the percentage should be close to 50%. Each team must support both sides in different rounds, so skill differences should wash out. Note there could be a bias for one side or the other among judges, but the hypothesis includes this in the idea that the motion is fair: a motion where most people a priori favor one side or another is probably unfair from the perspective of arguments.

Random factors make it unlikely the number will be exactly 50%. One can use a statistical test based on the total number of rounds to evaluate whether the difference is more likely due to chance or bias. Generally, the closer to 50% the better—you get the idea.

The Varsity stats for State Finals were curious:

	Novice	Varsity
Round 1	54%	43%
Round 2	46%	71%
Round 3	62%	29%
Round 4	54%	57%
Total	54%	50%

Rounds 1 and 4 look reasonable, but the swings to 71% and 29% in rounds 2 and 3 are quite unusual. No idea why. All rounds after round 1 are power matched, but that is just what we do, not an explanation. And it all comes out to 50% in the end. I have no explanation, but this isn't what we usually see. Curious!

Final Round RFD

This is the RFD I wrote for the final round at Stamford:

This is a very sloppy debate because neither side takes the time to make clear what the debate is about, that is, what a policy of containment is. Gov says "as defined in the packet", and Opp accepts the definition, but neither side reads the packet definition aloud or explains what it means for policy. (Remember we don't give the packet to the judges. Unless you tell them what is "defined in the packet" you can't assume they know what you are talking about.) The best we get from Gov is that containment is a policy "to stop China's geopolitical expansion into sovereign free nations" but nothing explaining what actions such a policy includes. Gov tries to use this lack of definition later to basically say that anything that strengthens the US or another country other than China is containment, but this would be abusive if explicitly given as a definition.

In the PMC Gov says that China is a threat, citing the supply chain and technology, that the US has a duty to uphold democratic ideals, and that containment is the best policy. But the only action steps--given as examples not part of a clearly articulated plan--are giving arms to Taiwan and the Ukraine. Opp correctly notes sending arms to an ally under a treaty is status quo and not necessarily a policy of containment, and that Ukraine isn't a China issue.

Opp's case is basically containment is a losing strategy because of the economic costs and the disadvantages of increasing hostility between two economically linked military powers. The arguments that containment requires confrontation is well taken. Opp's counterplan (never explicitly identified as such) is for the US to focus on strengthening its economy to meet any real threats, and on investing in other economies to continue as a global power. This is competition, clearly not containment, as it has been status quo policy for the last century or more.

At this point, the MG tries to hijack to Opp case—see the definitional point above—by claiming US investment in itself and other economies is a form of containment. As Opp points out, this is an absurd interpretation, in that it makes anything the US does, for example, spending on the US military, an act of containment. Simple knowledge of history, or reading the first article in the packet, confirms Opp is correct here.

So on my flow Gov has no offense, and the MGC basically agrees that the Opp case is good policy by trying to co-opt it for their own. That's an easy Opp win.

Note the PM tries to collapse the debate onto their framework of "democracy" at the top of the PMR, when they say Opp hasn't mentioned the word once in the 12 minutes of the Opp block. More correctly, no one had mentioned democracy since the PM stated it was the Gov framework at the top of the PMC, a total of 34 minutes. We have several mentions of "self-determination", but that is not the same thing. I would have preferred Opp to have told me in the LOR that Gov never presented any arguments showing how containment supports democracy, i.e., Gov has no solvency. But I can't credit Gov for winning on framework simply because Opp never told me they didn't.

Solvency is usually the weakest point in the Gov case in a policy round. The first two Gov contentions, that China is a threat and that the US should uphold democracy, can be agreed by both sides but provide no guidance as to policy or whether to adopt the motion. Only if Gov wins its third contention, containment is the best policy, does a judge have a reason to accept the motion. (Actually Gov only has to show that containment is an effective policy, and at least better than anything Opp might propose, either the status quo or as a counterplan. But effectiveness has to be measured using their framework metric, supporting democracy.) Opp's position would be stronger and clearer to the audience if they had stressed what was missing (they briefly note Gov's plan is not containment) but also why what was missing was important.

This was the best final round of the year, as each debater gave a strong, well-organized presentation advancing their side. Still, many useful lessons from a detailed review.