

A Coach's Notes¹

Everett Rutan

ejrutan3@ctdebate.org

Connecticut Debate Association

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Resolved: The US should resettle a significant share of Mideast refugees.

Contents

- Introduction
- A Negative Case
- My Reason for Decision
- Why Neg Lost
- Did Aff Uphold the Resolution?
- An Affirmative Case

Introduction

This is the State Finals edition of the 2015-16 CDA season. 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 Wilton 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.

A Negative Case

The Aff/Neg statistics for State Finals are a bit lopsided, 65% to 70% in favor of the Aff. I also had several questions as to what would be a strong Negative case for this resolution. I thought that the Negative in the final round—see my flow—had it about right. Let me state it here in a better form.

The first contention considers the consequences of the US announcing it would accept a large number of refugees. If the US did so, it would, as Germany has, serve as a "great attractor" not only for the numbers already in transit but for many more who haven't decided to leave yet. The result would destabilize the Middle East through depopulation

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and destabilize the US as the large numbers trigger a negative popular reaction. This has already happened in Europe, and, as indicated by the statements of many politicians, would be likely in the US. Because nothing is done to deal with the root of the problem, what results is a downward spiral: the nicer the refuge and the easier it is to come, the larger the numbers get and the problem spirals out of control. The negative effects increase the larger the numbers and the longer the program.

The second contention is the numbers would be huge and impractical to resettle in the short run. The graph on the last page of the packet shows 1.8 million entered Europe illegally in 2015. Given point one, we can expect that many or more in each of 2016 and 2017, so “significant” probably means 1/3 to 1/2 of those. Solvency by resettlement requires taking millions in a very short time frame. That leads to massive problems in the US: resentment, unemployment, infiltration by terrorists, massive costly burdens on social services and education and so forth.

(Note Aff in the final round defined “significant” as taking 200,000 by 2016. That’s only 1/9th of the ones who’ve come to Europe in 2015 alone! It’s also barely more than the White House is proposing to take according to the front page of the packet. Aff in this round probably fails to uphold “significant” in the resolution, though Neg doesn’t raise this point. I discuss this in more detail below.)

The third contention is that the US already has millions of illegal immigrants from all over the world, particularly Latin American, but also Africa, Asia and the Middle East. On the front page of the packet, the US has taken 745,000 refugees since 9/11 and has promised to take more. Neg can argue we are doing our fair share under any traditional or international obligations. The US contribute to relief in the MidEast, the US is working diplomatically to solve the problem, and the US is taking the greatest share of the military burden to solve the root of the problem. It’s Europe’s turn to step up.

II would not have run a counterplan. I think the counterplan is what lost the final round for the Neg. I discuss this in more detail below.

Note that I heard comments from some that Neg felt they had to make racist arguments to win, or that some Neg arguments sounded racist. I don’t believe any of my arguments above are racist: there is a difference between saying the US should not take too many refugees and saying the US should not take any Muslim refugees. Current US policy takes refugees and other immigrants from around the world. Neg need not change this or feel shamed if they argue that there are good reasons the US cannot and should not have to take everyone.

My Reason for Decision

I voted for Neg in the final round, and was out-voted 4-1. Since I’ve presented a stronger case above than Neg actually made, I feel it’s important to explain my reason for that decision. I don’t want you to think I gave Neg credit for things they never said. You can also check my flow to see if I’m being consistent.

My RFD is relatively simple and technical. The Negative presented three contentions that do not really depend on the counterplan and were largely ignored by Aff. They are:

NI: The refugees don’t want to permanently relocate and are harmed by resettlement and assimilation.

N2: Resettlement damages the future of the MidEast by depleting the educated workforce and it will likely never recover.

N3: Resettlement doesn't solve the root problem, and there will be a continued drain of refugees until that occurs.

The 2AC spends a minute dismissing the Negative counterplan, but never mentions these contentions. The 1AR covers them briefly, but leaving it to the rebuttal to answer your opponents' contentions for the first time is too late in my book. Since Aff could have replied in the 2AC, some of the responses are technically new arguments in the rebuttal and should be discounted. On the other hand, Neg does respond to each of the Aff contentions directly in the 1NC and the 2NC.

Most of the clash in the debate is the two teams going back and forth on the Aff contentions. I accept A1 that there is a precedent and obligation for the US to take refugees but that doesn't necessarily justify taking more than we do currently. And Neg is probably right that large numbers will cause a backlash in the US. For A2 Aff argues immigrants are good in the long run, but never counters Neg's argument that they cause unemployment in the short run, so this is a draw. Neither side spends much time on A3 (refugees are at risk to be victimized) and A4 (it would relieve the strain on Europe), though A4 could have been significant if Aff had chosen to stress it. Aff may have a slight edge with it's case taken along, but Neg carries all of its contentions.

So at the end of my flow, I have no persuasive reason to accept the resolution, and three largely untouched reasons to reject it.

Why Neg Lost

So, why was I decisively outvoted? I haven't spoken to any of the other judges, but I think it's primarily the counterplan.

First, from a simple theoretical perspective, a policy debate is between the world with the resolution and the world of the status quo. If the Negative presents a counterplan, that shifts the debate to the resolution versus the counterplan: both sides have abandoned the status quo and both sides now have some burden to solve the problem. Often a judge will require the Neg to show the counterplan is better than the resolution, so Neg ends up with more burden than they really want or really deserve. Unless your counterplan is a strong alternative, you may be shifting the burden of proof away from the Aff and onto yourself!

In this case the counterplan really is the status quo: we spend money to support refugee camps, and use diplomatic and military means to stabilize the countries involved to permit eventual return. Aff pushes this point in cross-ex, and Neg doesn't resist other than to insist "communities are better than camps." So the counterplan is at best marginally distinct from the status quo. The three Neg contentions don't really rely on the counterplan. All in all, the counterplan is more of a distraction than an aid to the Neg side.

Second, a counterplan should be mutually exclusive with the Aff interpretation of the resolution: if we can do both, then Aff can agree with Neg and absorb the Neg advantages. Aff briefly suggests the counterplan isn't mutually exclusive: we can resettle some and still spend more on camps for those we don't resettle and we can work to resolve the situation in Syria. Neg briefly suggests that resettlement is distinctly

different from keeping refugees in camps. Neither side fully explains or presses this argument.

It's pretty clear to me that for any given refugee, resettlement and leaving refugees elsewhere are distinct and mutually exclusive. The resolution doesn't require Aff to argue the US take all refugees, or for the Neg to argue the US should take none. The US currently takes some refugees as well as provides aid to refugees who are still in the Middle East. The issue is one of scale. The two (or three—resolution, CP and the status quo) are effectively exclusive for the purposes of this debate. But it's one more distraction.

Third, in the 2AC Aff says the counterplan defies logic and just condemns refugees to an indeterminate limbo (or worse) in camps. On my flow the 2AC does not review the three Neg contentions; neither does he say that the contentions fall because they depend on the counterplan. The 1AR goes over the counterplan and all three Neg contentions individually, but also does not say the contentions depend on the counterplan. But if you believe the counterplan falls and the Neg contentions depend on the counterplan, then Neg has no case and you have to vote Aff.

Tactically, the 2NC did the right thing by spending most of his time replying to the Aff case. But the 1NR would have been better spent re-establishing the counterplan and reviewing the Neg contentions rather than prematurely summarizing the debate down to two voting issues—voting issues which the 2NR did not use! A Judge wavering on the counterplan could see the Neg dropping its defense at this point.

Finally, what you say and how you say it matter in a debate. Anyone aware of the world over the past 50 years knows that refugee camps are not happy places. They also seem to grow deep roots: there are third and fourth generations growing up in some refugee camps as we speak. No reasonable person believes they can be “communities” with jobs and education and safety, where refugees can productively wait out the storm. “Communities not camps” was probably too Pollyanna for the judges. While reducing emigration, improving refugee camps and stabilizing the Middle East may be the best policy, Neg's phrasing is simply not believable, and it sours the rest of their case.

Remember Neg doesn't have to solve the problem! All they have to do is to show Aff doesn't solve the problem or that Aff makes things worse even if it does solve. Neg's contentions (or my case above) don't depend on a counterplan. Most of what Neg wants to do—aid, diplomacy, military pressure, limited resettlement—are happening now and Neg can argue for more of the same within the scope of the status quo. Neg's strongest argument simply recognizes that the refugee problem in the Middle East is going to be around for a long time, and there are a lot of reasons why Aff won't solve that, and offering to take large numbers may simply make it worse.

So there is plenty of ground for a Judge to vote Aff.

Did Aff Uphold the Resolution?

A word like “significant” in a resolution is a red flag: what does it mean? “significant” relative to what?

In this round Aff says they plan to resettle 200,000 refugees by 2017, two years from now. 200,000 is a big number, but is it “significant”? The first page of the packet says the US has been taking just under 70,000 per year, so if we continue on course, we’d take 140,000 over the Aff time frame: the Aff proposal isn’t even a 50% increase. But wait, there’s more! The first page also says the White House has raised its target to 85,000 in the next fiscal year, and 100,000 the year after that. Now Aff is only 15,000 above current plans, a less than 10% increase. But wait, there’s more! The last page of the packet shows that 1.8 million entered Europe in 2015 alone, and there are more coming. Aff’s proposal is to take only 1/9th of the number Europe took last year, and an even lower fraction if you consider how many might come over the next two years. Do you still think resettling 200,000 refugees over the next two years is significant?

(A brief aside is in order. I often wonder if they teach math in school any more. I don’t mean calculus or trigonometry. Simple addition and maybe a figuring a percentage here or there would be enough for me. I’d even be happy to see debaters counting on their fingers. In 18 years in CDA I have yet to hear anyone make a numerical argument like the ones I’ve made in this piece. Have you?)

One way to think the issue of significance goes back to the idea of the stock case:

- Harm—there is a problem that needs to be solved.
- Significance—it’s a serious problem.
- Inherency—what we are doing know isn’t and can’t solve the problem.
- Solvency—adopting the resolution will solve all or most of the problem.
- Advantages—other good things may happen if the resolution is adopted.

Fifty years ago when I debated everyone always presented a stock case. I realize I’m old fashioned and nobody talks this way anymore. But it provides a useful framework for evaluating an Affirmative case. What problem does the resolution address? How does what Aff claims to accomplish compare to the underlying problem? Change always has a cost and a risk of failure. How do the benefits argued by the Aff compare to those costs and risks? Is the Aff doing enough to make any difference?

Most Aff cases advocate doing something good, and there is nothing wrong with doing something good. But even doing something good for 200,000 refugees isn’t significant if there are 17 million people in Syria, 37 million in Iraq and 32 million in Afghanistan, all of whom might like to leave, especially if the US is already doing something good for 185,000 of them. Measured by the problem behind the resolution the Aff proposal in the final round is probably not significant.

Affirmative teams often try to minimize the negative impacts of the resolution by proposing to do as little as possible. One duty of a good Negative is not to let them get away with it.

An Affirmative Case

Much of what I’ve said above is directed against the Aff case presented in the final round. It probably works against the Aff case most debaters ran at the tournament. So here is an Affirmative case that I think meets my objections.

- *Definition/interpretation of the resolution/plan: we interpret the resolution to mean that the US should accept for resettlement a reasonable share of the MidEast refugees that reach Europe.*
 - *This would be done in cooperation with the European governments, and might be determined by things like relative size of our populations and economies.*
 - *We measure significance relative to the problems being caused in Europe, which are currently manageable, and not necessarily the Middle East, which may persist for a long time.*
 - *This is not inconsistent with efforts to solve the underlying problem and minimize the numbers who leave.*
- *A1: Adoption will significantly relieve pressure on the EU*
 - *Directly by resettling refugees.*
 - *Indirectly by encouraging European unity and thus a managed approach to the problem*
 - *Indirectly, because an organized approach provides justification and support to return those who aren't true refugees.*
 - *This is significant because NATO/EU are our most important military and economic partners, and could otherwise weaken or unravel*
- *A2: Adoption will demonstrate global leadership*
 - *We, and many other countries, have laws and treaty commitments, especially through the UN, for the proper treatment of refugees.*
 - *These are often ignored.*
 - *This is significant because US action fulfills our stated commitments, encourages others to do the same.*
 - *It also gives us diplomatic leverage to shame others into action.*
 - *It also gives us leverage in the Middle East to develop a long-term solution.*
- *A3: Adoption will directly help refugees and ourselves*
 - *We directly resettle refugees in the US, benefiting them in the short-term and our economy in the long-term.*
 - *We indirectly help resettlement in Europe, with the same benefits for refugees that stay there and the countries they settle in.*
 - *We indirectly help those in affected countries in the Middle East through our influence on other parties and eventual solution*
 - *The humanitarian and economic significance of these should be obvious.*

I have had more time to think about this issue than you have, so this case is probably more than you could come up with in one hour. But most of the elements exist in the Affirmative case presented in the final round. In particular, this case takes the Aff fourth contention—US resettlement would relieve pressure on Europe—and takes it from being an afterthought to the centerpiece.

More important, this case doesn't avoid the burden of the resolution. A good Neg will not it proposes taking perhaps a million refugees or more. In the short-run that will be expensive and put pressure on support services to integrate them. There is an increased risk the program could be used by terrorists. But there are ways to answer these and plenty of suggested benefits to balance against the harms.