

A Coach's Notes¹

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Connecticut Debate Association

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THP (This House prefers) that Ukraine pursues a negotiated peace with Russia.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the December 2023 CDA 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 Westhill 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.

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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.

Speaker Duties

The RFD below for the final round at Westhill cites failure of the MG to engage with the Opp case as one reason for the Gov loss. Debaters should know what they need to accomplish in each speech—and why—and have a plan to do so before they get up to speak. As with most things debate, there are no rules, only best practices, which, if they are not followed, allow the other team to take advantage and win the round.

Understanding why they are best practices allows you to be the one to take advantage when your opponent fails to follow them.

“Best” practices may be too strong. There are good practices and better practices. The good practices are sufficient to win the debate on the arguments. The better practices allow you to demonstrate greater skill as a speaker and debater, leading to higher ranks and speaker points. I will start with “good”, covering the flow, and then explain ways to improve on it.

Covering the Flow

When I work with Novice debaters, one of my mantras is “the contentions are your friends.” Parli debaters have long presented their cases in the form of one or more contentions, distinct arguments supporting their side of the motion.²

The Prime Minister typically starts with the motion, definitions, and perhaps a plan providing a more detailed interpretation of the motion. This is followed by contentions in support of the motion. The Leader of Opposition will have their own contentions. While the Members may introduce additional contentions in their constructive speeches, that tactic has long been out of favor in most forms of two-on-two debate.³

Debating 101

The simplest way to give a good, solid speech at any point in the round is to “cover the flow” by dealing with each contention in turn:

- You may start with either the Gov or Opp contentions first, but you should always deal with them in the order in which the PM and LO presented them. Maintaining

² Obviously there is skill and art in constructing good contentions. That is a topic for another time.

³ When I debated 60 years ago, additional contentions in the second constructives were going out of fashion, but still common. In some forms of parli—like World Schools Debate with three speakers on each team—the second speaker on each team is expected to introduce an additional contention. In British Parli, with 4, two-person teams competing in each round, the second Gov and second Opp teams are also expected to present new arguments.

order makes it easier for you to stay organized and easier for the Judge to follow your speech.

- You should be sure to start each speech by clearly stating that you plan to review each contention in turn and which set—Gov or Opp—you plan to deal with first.
- As you move from one contention to the next you should clearly identify it and restate it as it was originally presented, for example, “Let’s turn to the second Gov contention, the US hurts more than helps by aiding Ukraine directly.”

As a beginner, this approach helps you give a well-organized speech with enough to say to fill most of your speaking time. As an experienced debater, it’s a way to make sure you don’t forget to reply to an argument made by the other side. The Judge knows exactly what issues you are dealing with at any point in your speech making it easy to follow.

What if you don’t have anything to say on a particular contention? Make something up! Seriously! Often as long as you say something, it will still help you. The Judge may think your reply is better than you do. Your opponents may fail to reply to your response or reply poorly. Almost any reply is better than no reply. Remember the Judge is trying to follow the debate, take good notes, and evaluate fairly. Good organization often makes your replies sound better than they are. And you don’t need to win every argument. A quick reply may be enough to weaken one argument enough so you prevail on the others.

Time Management

The Prime Minister has only the Government contentions to present in their constructive speech. The other constructives have to deal with the full set from both sides. It’s important to keep track of your time to be sure you cover all the arguments. Even if you have 5 things to say on one contention, it may be better to limit yourself to 2 or 3 to be sure you get to all of them in the time available. The Leader of Opposition is most at risk for misallocating too much time to the Opp case and failing to reply to all or part of the Gov case.

A good rule of thumb is to divide the length the speech by the total number of contentions in play in order to have an idea of how much time you can spend on each. The LO should adjust this a bit—but not too much—in favor of presenting the Opp case. The Members should adjust it a bit—but not too much—in favor of the more important contentions.

One important time saver is to briefly note any contention the previous speaker failed to cover. You don’t need to present an argument. Simply repeat the contention, remind the Judge the previous speaker had nothing to say, repeat your side’s previous position, and move on. (Be sure you listened to the previous speaker carefully! Telling the Judge an opponent didn’t reply on a point when the Judge’s notes say they did will not work in your favor.)

Order

Does it matter which side you cover first, Gov or Opp? I have always favored the LO presenting the Opp case before replying to Gov to be sure the Opp case gets on the flow. High school LO's who start on Gov often spend too much time there and fail to have enough to finish presenting the entire Opp case. Of course, an LO who starts on Opp often spends too much time there and fails to cover Gov. Good time management takes practice.

I'm indifferent where the Member constructives start and end. Several texts I've read on World Schools and British Parli state their practice is to always provide rebuttal to the previous speaker's case first before the turning to their own case. The rationale is that the last thing the Judge hears from a speaker are points in favor of that speaker's case and this helps sway the Judge the speaker's way. I don't believe order has any impact on a good Judge, but if this is what you prefer, or what the custom is in your league, that's fine.

The rebuttal speeches should compare the two sides and weigh their relative strength for the Judge. But doing that well is an advanced skill I will discuss below. For beginners, or if you have any doubts, a rebuttal that fairly reviews each of the contention, one side at a time, in order, is a good, solid way to conclude for your side.

The contentions are your friends. Let them help you!

Beyond the Contentions

At some point you become an experienced debater. You are comfortable using the contentions to structure your speech. You've figured out how to come up with a reply no matter the argument and present it convincingly. You can manage your time to cover the flow, avoiding spending too much time on easy or familiar points to the neglect of the others. What is the next step?

Combine Contentions

Often Gov and Opp will present contentions that clash directly or almost so. You don't have to deal with each of them separately. Name the contentions, explain how they clash, and show how the clash favors your side of the motion. It's good to name the underlying issue so your partner and your opponents can clearly refer to it in subsequent speeches. However, it is still important to remind the Judge of the underlying contentions when you do bring it up again to be sure the Judge recognizes what you have done.

Another opportunity for combination occurs when Gov or Opp present multiple contentions that say nearly the same thing. This may just be poor construction, or it may be an attempt to expand a point to fill time. Explain the similarities, why they require only a single response, and move on.

Don't assume that because you see the logic behind combining contentions that it will be obvious to the Judge or your opponents. Be sure to explain why it makes sense to combine them before replying to the issue underlying the combination. Judges are

cautioned not to complete incomplete arguments. Simply saying “X and Y are the same, and Z answers them” won’t work if don’t explain why X and Y are the same, and why Z answers them.

Some Contentions Don’t Matter

Finally, contentions may not be relevant to deciding the round. This often occurs one of two ways. The first is when the contention states an undeniable fact. The Gov third contention in the Westhill final, “Peace is the best outcome,” is true. If something is true there is no point in arguing against it. But the question in the motion rarely depends on a particular fact. The issue in the debate was whether Ukraine should negotiate or be pressured into negotiating, not whether peace is good.

The second, related to the first, is when someone presents a harm. War, poverty, bad health, ecological damage, etc., are things we all agree are bad. But the debate isn’t about the harms, it’s about which side of the motion provides the best solution, if at all.

Faced with a contention, ask yourself, “If I believe that contention, would I vote for that side? If I concede that contention, will it harm my case?” If the answers are “no”, briefly explain to the Judge why the contention does not matter to the motion and move on.

Identify Issues

The best Gov and Opp cases are based on one issue that underlie the motion, with each contention highlighting a distinct aspect of that issue. Most Gov and Opp cases lack this clarity, and only discover the underlying issue as the debate progresses.

If the issues become clear early in the debate, try to group the contentions by issue. You should state the issue, explain where the contentions fit as aspects of that issue, and develop your replies from there. Contentions that don’t fit may not be relevant to a decision and should be identified as such.

In the final round at Westhill, five contentions were presented:

Gov	Opp
G1: Ukraine can’t win against Russia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia has greater resources G2: US will hurt rather than help by aiding Ukraine directly <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History shows US will not stay the course of a long fight. G3: Peace is the best outcome <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best Ukraine can hope for is a stalemate at great cost in lives and material 	O1: US is fighting for democracy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results have global implications O2: Ceasefire is not worth the price <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukraine would give up territory • Russia has no incentive to negotiate

The central issue that emerges is “what is the incentive for each side to enter into negotiations?” Gov’s case is that Ukraine has an incentive to negotiate due to the cost of

war, low likelihood of victory, and unlikely external support for a long war. I felt Opp's case was stronger because it highlights why each of the Ukraine, US, and Russia have incentives to fight on. The LOC or MOC could have summarized the round this way, subsuming replies to the Gov case in the first point and highlighting how Gov ignores two other parties critical to any successful negotiation. Specifically the contentions used group as follows: Ukraine (parts of G1, G2, G3, O2), US (parts of G2, O1), and Russia (parts of G1, O2).

Weighing in the Constructives

The primary purpose of the constructive speeches is to present refute and defend arguments in detail. No new arguments are permitted in the rebuttal speeches⁴, so it is critical that any offense or defense be presented in the constructives. The MG and the MO should focus on answering every argument in the debate. Their comparing and contrasting should be with respect to arguments, why the Gov or Opp position on a particular point is superior. This should be done by way of explanation, examples, and direct reference to statements made by either side.

It is generally a mistake when the MG or MO spend time in their speech weighing the two sides positions as a whole in a summary fashion. This often results in dropped arguments the LO or PM can exploit in rebuttal speeches. The MG and MO are better spending their time clearing the board for their partner. It's an especially bad choice by the MO, since they will be followed immediately by the LOR. Either the two speeches will be repetitive—a waste of valuable time—or they will summarize differently and confuse the Judge.

Rebuttals Summarize the Round

The primary purpose of the rebuttal speeches is to summarize the reasons the Judge should award you the ballot. While reviewing the contentions is one way to do that, after four constructive speeches they may not be the deciding issues or equally important. A better rebuttal speech identifies the critical issues, evaluates how the two sides actually disagreed, and explains how the balance falls in the speaker's favor.

It is difficult to identify general principles here. It depends on the details of the debate. Ideally you should be able to state your case in a single, relatively simple sentence, "Gov/Opp should win because..." Then use elements of the debate to support that statement. Both should explicitly reference the contentions, supporting points, and clash from the constructives, but as tools in support of the ballot.

For example, in the final round at Westhill, Gov might have said: "Ukraine should pursue a negotiated peace in order to avoid a bloody stalemate that more likely leads to defeat." The PM would go on to explain how the costs will bring all sides to the bargaining table. Opp might have said, "Russia has no incentive to negotiate which means the costs to Ukraine and the world will be unacceptable." The LO would note Gov's position on

⁴ With the exception that the PMR can respond to new material in the MOC with new replies.

victory supports Opp's position, and the implications for democracy and global influence will result in continued US support.

Something that always dismays me is to hear the PMC and the LOC present and even argue over framework and weighing, and then fail to even mention them in the rebuttal speeches. If your framework and weighing mechanism don't figure in your rebuttal, why did you introduce them? They should be the basis for your entire case. I will deal with "top of case"—definitions, framework, weighing, etc.—at a later date.

Review rebuttal speeches and practice improving on them. Your own flow provides the material you need, whether from your own rounds or from watching others.

Consider Your Arguments Carefully III

Gov's first contention in the Westhill final is "Ukraine can't win against Russia." Opp later notes—in support of the Opp second contention, that a ceasefire isn't worth the cost—that Russia has no incentive to negotiate. Neither side directly relates the two, but they should have provided a devastating point in Opp's favor: if Ukraine can't win, Russia certainly has no incentive to negotiate and the motion will fail.

Reading through the Gov case, what they meant to say is the alternative to negotiations is a long, bloody stalemate whose outcome is uncertain. Some might interpret that as "Ukraine can't win" but they are not the same thing. This alternative phrasing stresses the costs of continued fighting will be high on both sides. Gov can use this to support an argument why Russia can be brought to the negotiating table.

Simply saying "Ukraine can't win" leads listeners to hear, "Ukraine is going to lose." That immediately puts Gov on its back foot, and, if noted in this case, could have been used as strong support the Opp case.

What you say and how you say it matters!

RFD

This is the Reason for Decision I wrote for the final round at Westhill, with some slight edits. Refer to the accompanying flows for my notes on the round.

The Member of Government gives the most critical speech for the Gov case. Unless they covers everything presented by the Leader of Opposition—Opp case and replies to Gov case—Gov is at a permanent disadvantage: the PM cannot advance new arguments in rebuttal if these are needed to refute any part of the LOC!

In this round the MG begins by repeating the same contentions and supporting material as presented by the PM. The MG only begins to respond to the LO when interrupted by a POI, and soon returns to the Gov case. There is no effective reply in detail to either the Opp contentions or the LO's replies to the Gov contentions. Opp is in a strong position going into the MOC, where the MO need not reply in detail but can go into a series of questions related to issues central to the debate (a bit over emotional for my tastes, but effective none the less).

These tactical moves allow Opp to win the arguments that Russia has no incentive to negotiate other than to gain time to take another bite.

Besides a better response in the MGC, Gov needs a better constructed case that takes control of the framing of the issue. Likely a negotiated peace sacrifices land but might free Ukraine to join NATO. This does not imply an immediate cease fire but may require a continued war of attrition to force negotiations. Starting with "Ukraine can't win" immediately weakens Gov's position. A better start is something like, "Ukraine may win, but it will be long and bloody. Often it's better to live with an imperfect compromise than die on a principle." Gov's arguments at times point in this direction, but the lack of clarity allows Opp to make Gov's position sound more like surrender than compromise.

Overall a good final round, but a clear Opp win.