

LET'S SHARPEN THOSE ISSUES

by Harry F. Noyes III

Defending the Affirmative or Negative Issues

Nothing is more frustrating to debaters and judges than to be trapped by a debate topic that inadvertently favors one side over the other. Unfortunately, several of the topics I have seen in my three years of judging fall into this category.

While I cannot remember the topics clearly, I do remember feeling on most of them that the negative didn't stand a chance unless the affirmative really performed badly.

Some topics were stated in such a way that the negative could only come up with forceful arguments by adopting postures that seem inherently immoral to most Americans -- a burden no high-school debater should have to overcome.

Others were stated so vaguely that a clever affirmative could focus the topicality in any way it wanted to. This in turn would have the effect of forcing the negative into the same position of climbing uphill against judges' inherent moral convictions.

For example, one topic dealt with "strengthening" immigration laws. Most people would take this to mean reducing immigration.

However, I judged a debate in which the affirmative cleverly the vagueness of "strengthen" by demanding refinements that would speed up the admission of orphans for adoption.

Negative was placed in the impossible position of arguing against orphans, adoption and family love. They tried heroically, but logically as well as emotionally they

simply had no legs to stand on. All the usual anti-immigration arguments -- Who will pay for them? They'll change our society. Their own countries need their skills -- collapse completely in the context of orphan babies being adopted by American families.

It's easy to tell judges to be neutral, but they must decide the merits of arguments and there is no way they can totally shake a lifetime of values in doing that. And, as in the example above, in some cases even the coldest logic leaves one side holding the dirty end of the stick before the debate ever starts.

For fair debating, the topic itself must be neutral. That is, it must be selected and worded in such a way that the affirmative and negative cases both lie somewhere within the mainstream of American values or at least within the normal parameters of American policy conflicts. Topics must be one that intelligent adult Americans of good will sincerely disagree on -- and which a self-disciplined judge can therefore truly see both sides of. If not, there is no way for judges to be neutral and there is no way for affirmative and negative to have equal chances to win.

In other words, it's fair to ask debaters to defend either the affirmative or negative of genuinely hard issues. Let them flail away on balancing the federal budget, on foreign aid, on whether to send troops to Bosnia. Don't ask them to argue the merits of motherhood, compassion or honesty, where society has already made up its mind what it believes -- and don't give them vague topics that might "melt down" or be twisted by affirmative into a form that negative has

no hope of winning.

Clearly no one writes a bade topic on purpose. That some slip through suggests a need for better screening. Not knowing the current process, I risk proposing the obvious. But I would suggest pre-testing the topics with a series of debates, using average high-school debaters (not the national champions) and real lay judges. They should be able pretty quickly to report whether the topic presents unfair difficulties for either case or for the judges.

Identifying appropriate issues is hard. Crafting the wording is even harder. The topic must be sharply focused, yet not too restrictive. It must be succinct and yet not vague.

No doubt about it: this is hard work, but it can be done. This year's Lincoln-Douglas topic -- whether private groups should be allowed to discriminate -- worked quite well. I saw both sides consistently scoring good points.

However difficult, the crafting of good topics is the sine qua non of an effective debating season. This is a challenge that must be met if debate outcomes are to depend on more than just the luck of drawing the affirmative slot.

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