

# HIS STORY NEEDS HISTORY: WHAT'S MISSING IN EXTEMP

by Cat Horner Bennett

*"What is all knowledge too, but recorded experience, and a product of history?"*

-ON HISTORY, Thomas Carlyle (1795 - 1881)

There has recently been some complaining at tournaments (well, OK, when isn't there?) about the form that extemporaneous speakers use in answering their questions. A significant number of coaches are complaining that students have become information processors "just throwing out a bunch of sources and statistics," the more recent the better. I am not completely sympathetic to this lamenting because a well-read, well-informed student is a better extemper than one who merely asserts *Newsweek* is the ultimate scholarly reference. In fact, the National Forensic League encourages (as it should) a broad scope of reference in answering the questions. The NFL extemporaneous speaking ballot says:

"The extempore speech should not be regarded as a memory test of the material contained in anyone magazine article, but rather as an original synthesis by the speaker of the current fact and opinion on the designated topic as presented by numerous sources."

And yet, those who have misgivings about a processing of the most recent sources and statistics do have a legitimate point. Very often, there is a lack of pertinent history (beyond last year) which would provide a true synthesis in analyzing current situations. The ballot on

extemporaneous also alludes to this, albeit indirectly: "The information should be well-chosen, pertinent and sufficient to support the central thought of this topic." It is difficult to believe that at least in regard to some topics, ignoring the history of the subject would provide sufficient information to answer the topic. Since history embodies virtually every discipline from economics, philosophy, and government to sociology, science, and the arts, historical emphasis cannot be underestimated.

Unfortunately, very little of the literature on extemporaneous speaking addresses historical reference directly. The March 1990 ROSTRUM presented a fine seminar on extemp by such successful and astute coaches as James Copeland, Jim Paterno, George Grice, L.D. Neagelin, and William Bennett. Yet, it is disappointing that in breaking a speech down into parts, and analyzing them individually, history as a common chord running through the whole speech is neglected. Mr. Copeland at least gives the use of history a place in creating an effective introduction (and that's a good beginning!) However, the other authors shy away from the use of historical chords integrated with current information. Mr. Paterno writes admirably on answering the topic and developing analysis, yet his emphasis of the term relevant may be interpreted by some extempers to mean recent. Mr. Paterno might agree that in his example of protectionism in trade, a reference to the Smoot-Hawley Act and its consequences in reducing world trade would be relevant. But since that Act was initiated nearly

sixty years ago, today's extemper might hesitate to make the reference, fearing it would be judged as irrelevant to any question on trade.

Naegelin and Grice address history only in terms of chronological organization. Yes, there are students who will in the first area talk about the "background" of a topic, but as currently practiced, this is more of a pitfall than a plus. First, when history is treated as a separate area, it appears divorced from the current situation, and not truly a synthesis. Second, the "background" is often more facts and statistics from only the last year or two and really ignores long term causal relationships and broader historical concepts. For example, I recently judged a speaker whose topic was "Can there be peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina?". The speaker's answer amounted to "No. There would never be peace as long as different ethnic groups distrusted each other." The speech provided a fair number of sources as statistics, none more than a year old and a "history" of the problem that went back all the way to 1990. (No doubt this is ancient history in extemp circles!) I left the round felling a bit cheated. Yugoslavia was formed after World War I, supposedly based on a committed effort to allow self-determination for ethnic groups, according to some textbooks. So what went wrong? Only fifteen years ago there WAS peace, if uneasy, between the ethnic groups under the leadership of Marshall Tito. Again, what went wrong? Coaches and judges should demand that students provide a true synthesis of events and causal relationships and the broader, historical analysis run-

ning as a current through the topic. It should not be tacked on, almost as an afterthought and seeming to have little to do with what is "really" going on now.

Finally, in the 1990 ROSTRUM, William Bennett addresses conclusions, and finds little room for history. (Gosh! did someone mention a House Divided?) He emphasizes forecast topics and descriptive topics with "near term outcomes." He does not make mention of topics that specifically require historical evaluation. It was not too long ago that students were drawing the topics "What will be the legacy of the Reagan-Bush years?", "Is El Salvador Spanish for Vietnam?" and "Can the Labor Party in England return to the glory days?".

The tunnel vision students exhibit in extemporaneous speech is nearly boundless at times. I have heard that all nations in the Middle East would prefer Islamic fundamentalism and this course is compromised only because these nations need to sell oil to the West. Of course the recent sources exist to prove this, and Iran, Iraq, and even Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were offered up as examples. Yet, Islam is the religion of Turkey and Egypt, both oil poor, and both with a history of aggressive modernization. Are these the exceptions which prove the rule? Are the actions of Mustafa Kemal and Anwar Sadat completely without effect today? What accounts for the extremely different legacies left by two western-courting, modern-thinking, and secular leaders like The Shah of Iran and Anwar Sadat? Extemp speeches have become overly generalized without an historical frame of reference. They are often noteworthy not so much for what is presented as for what is conspicuously missing.

Coaches, can your students identify the following? All are responsible for significant effects today, and yet they were

all in the news fifteen or more years ago. No cheating. They're easy.

U.S. Extempers - A) Allan Bakke B) Landrum-Griffin Act C) Dollree Mapp D) Norma McCorvey E) Samuel Gompers

Foreign Extempers - A) Balfour Declaration B) The Marshall Plan C) The War Powers Act of 1973 D) Alexander Dubcek

Unfortunately, George Savile, Marquis of Halifax (1633 - 1695) probably hit the target when he said, "Most men make little other use of their speech than to give evidence against their own understanding." So by all means, let's give credit to the well-read student who uses a variety of current sources. But let us also demand an effort at understanding through cause and effect, a sense of history, an ability to see the forest as well as the trees.

*(Speaking of ancient history, Cat Horner Bennett was the 1974 South Dakota State Champion in extemporaneous speaking.)*

## JANET RENO NFL ALUMNA

Popular Attorney General Janet Reno was the President of her NFL chapter at Coral Gables (FL) High School.

As a student competitor Janet earned 249 NFL points (one point shy of the top degree at that time - the degree of distinction.) Janet competed in Extemp in 1955 and 1956 and qualified for the 1955 nationals in Girls Extemp where she finished 13th.

The first woman in American History to be appointed Attorney General, Ms. Reno had a distinguished career as the State Attorney in Miami, Florida - a position to which she was initially appointed but subsequently elected five times!

Prior to her service as Chief State Prosecutor in Miami she served as assistant State Attorney and Staff Director of the Judiciary Committee of the Florida House of Representatives.

Ms. Reno received her A.B. in Chemistry from Cornell University and her LL.B. from Harvard Law School.

Her honors include the Herbert Harley Award from the American Judicature Society and the Medal of Honor from the Florida Bar Association.

In 1983 Janet Reno was named Public Administrator of the Year in Florida by the American Society for Public Administration.

She has served as President of the Florida Prosecuting Attorneys Association and has served on two important committees of the American Bar Association: Criminal Justice and Minorities and the Justice System.

NFL congratulates Ms. Reno for a brilliant professional career.

The Honorable Janet Reno is an example of NFL's motto "Training Youth for Leadership".