Like other veteran debate coaches, I have read with keen interest the excellent articles in this magazine that speak to the situation regarding policy debate in the United States. I must confess to being alarmed by the statistic that Mr. Copeland cited regarding the reduction in the number of high schools offering policy debate. As coaches, it is critical that we confront the decline in policy debate. If not, we will be in danger of losing an activity that can have, and indeed does have, valuable benefits for our students. I even had a debate program. Alas, my students countered that it’s not their fault if the public doesn’t get it. High-level policy debate, they opined, is a specialized activity whose wonders are such that only the initiated need appreciate. Flabbergasted, I could only conclude that their attitude spoke volumes about our decline. Such denial is tantamount to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. My former debaters couldn’t be more wrong, and I am emboldened by the knowledge articulated by previous articles in the *Rostrum*, that there are other coaches, who like me, want to fix the hole in the boat and salvage to magnificent vessel on top.

Other contributors to the *Rostrum* have correctly observed that speed and counter-intuitive off case arguments are hurting us. Additionally, it has been noted that debate so often descends into a game, where whining about fairness, ground, and abuse, have replaced any meaningful discussion of the resolution. In fact, the resolution in contemporary debate hardly matters at all. Camps, increasingly led by student instructors, challenge their labs to put out massive generic positions that are only slightly modified from the year before. There rarely is any examination of the resolution, independent of how it is to be debated. Debaters leave expensive camps largely ignorant of the resolutional problem area. Thus, they are all but incapable of constructing a meaningful case argument, which is precisely the kind of argument that an educated, or even an uneducated citizen would appreciate.

We are not a ‘cult’. We should not think of ourselves as a closed society, but rather as a vehicle to conduct policy discussion in a manner that enhances societal understanding of critical national and international issues. Specialization is our natural enemy. It drives off potential coaches, alienates parents and administrators, and reduces our connection to the public that pays for our operation. It is sobering how intelligent new coaches with college educations don’t feel they are ‘qualified’ to judge policy debate. What does their trepidation really say about what we do, or better how we do it? Additionally, veteran coaches often will not judge, but instead hire students who ‘get’ the activity to judge in their place, serving to further thicken the walls. As a coach who judges, I literally dread most rounds. No mat-
ter how I phrase my pre-round observations, I usually hear the
generic round, full of games but devoid of a meaningful discus-
sion of the resolution. I often leave the round after my hour and a
half feeling no more intelligent for the experience, and possibly
less so. That doesn’t mean there are no wonderful debate rounds.
But they are becoming fewer and fewer, and we are paying the
price. What does it say when so many coaches do not want to
d Judge a varsity policy debate round? Even factoring in fatigue
and the burden of other responsibilities, the main reason seems to me
to be that judging is not an enjoyable experience. The nature of
our activity makes judging another burden, rather than an oppor-
tunity for enjoyment, enlightenment, and growth, which it should
be.

Many coaches, though by no means all, share my diagno-
sis. Hopefully, some might find agreement with my prescription. I
would propose that we adopt what I refer to as the citizen test. All
arguments and methods should be examined through the lens of
these simple propositions. Would a reasonably intelligent indi-
vidual observing our activity be enlightened by the discussion? Would
they want to talk about the issues that were raised? Would
they feel that we have added, not just heat, but light to the policy
controversies surrounding the resolution? Or to reduce it more;
would a reasonably intelligent citizen enjoy what we do? If the
answers to these questions continues to be no, then we might
well be doomed. Numerous other speaking events, not just the
new Ted Turner Debates, will occupy the void our current prac-
Oaces create. But, if the answers increasingly become yes, then our
activity will rebound and thrive. I want to advance five measures
that might move the activity to meet my citizen test.

First, we simply have to deal with the speed issue. There is
just no getting around the fact that it is the number one deterrent
to citizen enjoyment. What can’t be understood can’t be enjoyed?
It goes beyond judge adaptation. The proof of this is how much
evidence is read after the round by the very judges who say they
can ‘handle’ speed. No one really can, and no one really should.
Reasonable speaking rates should be the norm simply because it
is the norm among educated citizens in all walks of life.

Secondly, we should embrace the resolution and the chal-
genles it imposes. If an unaware but educated citizen believes
they are about to listen to a debate over ocean policy, they should
not be disappointed. The politics DA, the PIC, the generic topical-
ity, strange Kritiks, should be dispensed with unless they are
presented with an absolute explanation of their relationship to the
resolutional problem area, which almost never happens and might
not in fact be possible. Camps should set out to educate young
debaters to appreciate, if not celebrate, the resolution as an im-
portant policy area, not just to demonstrate how you can link a
generic round, full of games but devoid of a meaningful discus-

Thirdly, and in connection to the above, we should elevate our
willingness to accept inherency, solvency, and harms as a criteria to
absolutely decide debate rounds. Today, they tend to be dismissed
as “non-offensive” negative arguments, thus not an issue really worth
voting on. This way of thinking is counter-intuitive and not con-
ected to any serious consideration of policy. A proposal can be bad
without blowing up the world. I suspect that every debate coach has
listened to a new colleague, or a citizen observer, demean the low
probability/high impact argument as being ludicrous. But an intelli-
genent citizen would readily listen to a measured inherency position
that demonstrated that the harms are being solved absent the affirm-
ative proposal, or that the plan as constructed has no hope of solving
the harms, or that the harms are so minimal as not to justify the
affirmative proposal. Those are real arguments that people can con-
nect with, both personally and intellectually.

Fourth, we need to limit the use of vernacular, both regard-
ing theory and substance. In no way am I suggesting that argu-
ments that rely on theory are less than legitimate. They are legiti-
mate. But application of theory to issues of substance can be
made in terms that can be understood by all. A citizen would be
able to understand a well-articulated topicality argument, one that
presented the challenge to the jurisdiction of the judge over the
proposal and the reasoning that supported that argument, and the
real implications to the discourse. But what citizen can under-
stand what “T” means, what a blippy presentation of pre-written
standards are, and the lexicon used to spit out the voting issues?
Richness of explanation is crucial. We should celebrate our ability
to articulate in a manner that unites the citizenry in language,
rather than one that further divides them by specialization and
lingo.

And lastly, we should discourage any discourse during a
debate round oriented to anything but a discussion of the sub-
stance of the issues. Policy debate would be better if all of our
artificial constructs such as decision-rules, absolute voting is-
ues, ground, fairness, abuse, time trade-offs, etc. were simply
eliminated. What relevance do they have to any other aspect of
our existence? They only serve to create a level of discourse well
below what the proper level should be. Such positions distract us
from a discussion of policy, and replace what should be our focus,
to one dealing solely with the ‘game’. If the affirmative wins the
debate, it should be solely because they have articulated and
defended a good public policy. If the negative wins, then they
should have demonstrated that the affirmative has failed to do so,
or that a real alternative (not a PIC) is superior, or perhaps that the
affirmative fails meet well-articulated concerns over jurisdiction.
This doesn’t make any issue illegitimate, though it probably mini-
mizes some pure theory discussions. Returning to the citizen test,
I suspect that no citizen understands or cares about an ‘absolute
voting issue’ or a ‘decision-rule’. They seem to care about the
substance of the resolution, the quality of the proposal for change,
the persuasiveness and analytical skills of those involved, and
the quality of the substantive objections made. Winning means
something when it is a victory on substance. If the student dis-
course transcends the game, and elevates the dialog, I have to
believe that winning will take care of itself.

I continue to firmly believe that policy debate should be
enjoyable to the educated public. I want to have my Principal
watch my student’s debate. I want to listen to parent observers
actually discuss the issues raised in the round they witnessed. I
want my students to take away from this activity not just research
skills, but skills of presentation applicable to other aspects of life.
I am tired of having to explain the unexplainable. I have struggled
for 19 years defending an activity that violates the sensitivities of
even brilliant observers. Debate should serve to unite us through
(Grodd continued to page )
a common language. Articles in recent issues in the *Rostrum* force a healthy degree of introspection. We are specialized enough as a society. Let's make our activity such that every observer can understand it, enjoy it, and feel inclined to promote it. The citizen test may offer some criteria for change.

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