

A Coach's Notes¹

Everett Rutan

Xavier High School

everett.rutan@moodys.com or ejrutan3@acm.org

Connecticut Debate Association

Darien High School

March 3, 2007

Resolved: The U.S. should actively pursue development and expansion of its nuclear power facilities.

Contents

- **Introduction**
- **“Actively?” “Aggressively?” What’s the Difference?**
- **What Are We Doing? Some Comments on Technique**

Introduction

This is the March edition of the 2006-07 CDA season. If you did not receive the earlier Notes please email me and I will send them to you. Accompanying this document is a transcript of my notes from the final round in two formats: transcript and flow chart. I email these along with a copy of the packet to CDA-registered and CDA-interested coaches usually within two weeks after a tournament. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools.

I would 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 reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. If there is sufficient interest, this could evolve into a CDA newsletter.

“Actively?” “Aggressively?” What’s the Difference?

There was a last minute change in the wording of the resolution this month. Originally it read “The US should aggressively pursue development and expansion of its nuclear facilities.” The word “aggressively” was changed to “actively.”

The reason for the change has to do with keeping the debate focused on the issue of nuclear power, and maintaining a reasonable burden of proof. The original wording might be interpreted as requiring an all out, Manhattan Project-like approach to implementing nuclear power. The Negative could win the debate by agreeing on the need for nuclear power, only implemented at a slower pace. The focus would change

¹ Copyright 2007 Everett Rutan, all rights reserved. This document may be freely copied for non-profit, educational purposes. The opinions expressed herein are those of Everett Rutan alone and do not represent the views of nor have they been endorsed by Xavier High School, the Connecticut Debate Association, Moody's Investors Service or any other party.

from the advantages of nuclear power to how quickly we should build power plants, likely a less interesting debate.

What Are We Doing? Some Comments on Technique

Every debate is unique, and there are many ways to win. But there are a number of practices that are likely to help. In particular, there are goals debaters should have for certain of the speeches in each debate.

The First Affirmative Constructive, of course, opens the debate and lays out the Affirmative case. The Second Affirmative Constructive, Second Negative Constructive and First Affirmative Rebuttal must largely react to what has come before. But there are things we can say about the First Negative Constructive, First and Second Negative Rebuttals, and Second Affirmative Rebuttal.

First Negative Constructive

The First Negative should try to do three things. First, they must respond to the Affirmative definition of terms. Second, they must present the Negative contentions. So far so good: every team does these, occasionally forgetting the definitions.

The third thing every First Negative should do in their constructive speech is respond to the Affirmative contentions. In the nineteen varsity debates I saw this year, only seven First Negatives did, about one in three.

Why is this important? After all, the First Affirmative had six minutes to lay out their case. Shouldn't the First Negative take as much time to explain their position to the Judge?

There are two reasons why the First Negative should split his time evenly between laying out the Negative case and responding to the Affirmative. The Affirmative has the burden of proof, and arguably needs more time to make a prima facie case. The Negative burden is less.

More importantly, consider what might happen if the First Negative fails to respond to the Affirmative contentions. The Second Affirmative can begin his constructive by noting that all of the Affirmative contentions stand by default, and spend the rest of the speech rebutting the Negative contentions. Assuming the Second Affirmative does a good job, at the end of those six minutes the Negative team is back to square one. The Affirmative case stands, the Negative case has been rebutted. It's as if the First Negative Constructive had never happened!

To be fair to the Negative, I've never seen a Second Affirmative punish the Negative in the way I've just described. In eight of the 19 debates I observed, the Second Affirmative only addressed the Affirmative contentions, ignoring the Negative. Six of those were debates where the First Negative ignored the Affirmative contentions. In other words, in six of 19 debates, almost one in three (and one of those a final round!) at the end of the Second Affirmative Constructive speech the two teams had yet to clash!

First and Second Negative Rebuttals

The Negative rebuttals follow each other with no intervening speech by the Affirmative. Conceptually they are one eight minute speech given by two people. Just as you shouldn't repeat the same argument twice in one speech, the Negative team should coordinate their rebuttals so as not to repeat each other. In general, the First Negative should reply to any outstanding Affirmative arguments and the Second Negative should summarize the debate for the Negative side.

In my 19 debates, the two Negative speakers substantially repeated themselves in 12 of them, including one final round..

Second Negative and Second Affirmative Rebuttals

These are the last speeches for each side. A significant portion of each speech needs to be devoted to summarizing the debate in one's favor. It's time to step back from the contentions and figure out what the important arguments are, and explain why your team's position on the resolution should prevail.

Yet it amazes me how few teams do this! Debaters seem to get caught up in the need to respond to every point. They are so focused on the details of the arguments, and forget that the purpose of the debate is to convince the Judge to accept or reject the resolution. A key to doing this is to summarize and explain your position to the Judge.

This means more than just going over your contentions for the fourth time. Over the course of six or seven speeches importance of the arguments may shift. Some will fall away as unimportant. Others will become the focus of debate. You must learn to go over your notes, select the critical points, and present them to support your position on the resolution. This way you give the Judge a rationale for deciding in your favor.

In the 19 debates, only one Second Negative and two Second Affirmatives actually summarized the debate. The other 18 Second Negatives and 17 Second Affirmatives either summarized their contentions or spent their rebuttals responding to specific points.

Does It Matter?

Based on the debates that I have seen, many debaters either don't know or fail to follow certain practices that I prefer. And I can't say that this has hurt any team—I try to judge primarily on the arguments. But I believe that more attention to technique wouldn't hurt.