

A Coach's Notes¹

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Connecticut Debate Association

State Finals

Wilton High School

March 22, 2014

Resolved: We (Russia) should actively seek to reincorporate those former Soviet territories with a substantial Russian population.

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Introduction

This is the State Finals edition of the 2013-14 CDA season. 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 Wilton High School 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 teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

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 in subsequent issues. So 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.

Point of View

This month's resolution required debaters to argue from a particular perspective, that of Russia, regarding current and possible future events in Eastern Europe. Most debaters seemed to like this change from the usual sort of debate we would have on this topic,

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something like: *Resolved: the US and Europe should take substantial measures to oppose Russian aggression.*

The resolution for this tournament is an example of a broader class of resolutions (or motions, since these are more common in Parliamentary debate) called “time and place resolutions.” The debaters must assume they are living at a particular time in a particular place and argue based on the knowledge such participants would have had available and with the likely preferences they would have had at the time. This permits debate to enter into a wide range of counter-factual arguments that are common among historians, political scientists and others. For example, one could debate whether the 13 colonies should have pursued Parliamentary representation rather than independence, or whether Lincoln should have pursued peaceful resolution rather than the Civil War, or whether Bush should have treated 9-11 as a criminal rather than military matter.

Possibly because of my comments prior to case preparation, I heard many debaters say things like, “we don’t need to consider Western opinion,” or use the low-hanging statistic in the packet that 72% of Russians approve of Putin’s actions. I will deal with foreign opinion in the next section. Let’s consider the Russian point of view first.

What does it mean to argue from a perspective? Personal preference is one possible consideration, but it is hard to reliably know what someone else thinks. Benefits and harms that directly affect those you are concerned with are easier to justify as most audiences will agree on certain universal needs common to all people at all times.²

Saying you³ like “it” or that “it” is popular is a weak argument. Ask yourself, how far did “But I like ice cream!” get you with your parents? Most kids move on quickly to a more sophisticated approach: “I got all my homework done and I mowed the lawn and I cleaned my room. Could we go to Baskin-Robbins tonight?”

At the very least you should move on quickly from saying something is popular either to arguments based on why it is popular, or to arguments as to why that popularity will lead to a desired result. For example:

- *Occupation of the Crimea is popular in Russia.*
 - *It is popular because the Crimea was a part of Russia for 200 years before a Soviet dictator re-drew the borders for no reasons. Crimea is ours!*
 - *It is popular because the Russian people see this as a step towards restoring Russia’s place in the world after 25 years of Western pressure.*
 - *This popularity will help Russia stand firm against any sanctions or reprisals taken by Western governments.*

Popularity is also very fickle. Most wars have been extremely popular at the beginning. Pick one, any one, and go back and check the newspapers and the history books for the first year. But the bloom leaves the rose, opposition grows and many deny they once cheered the troops on even when presented with pictures of them doing so.

In a democracy (and even in a dictatorship or tyranny) popularity is necessary for things to be accomplished. Many policy debaters will run disadvantages that claim the loss in

² Every debater should be aware of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

³ In this section “you” will mean the person or people whose perspective you are adopting.

popularity of the President due to implementing the resolution will lead to a backlash election of a reactionary government with disastrous consequences. For example, against *Resolved: The US should implement a carbon tax* they might argue:

- *A carbon tax to protect the environment will lead to worse harm:*
 - *Any politician supporting it will lose office because it is unpopular*
 - *This will lead voters electing a more conservative government that will loosen all environmental regulations.*
 - *This will lead to even worse pollution and environmental damage.*

Given the resolution says “should” it’s not clear if this sort of argument is valid, but I’ve heard similar things many times. At least it gets closer to linking popular opinion to real consequences.

Establishing a Voting Issue

Standard Lincoln Douglas debate practice is that each debater should present a value that they wish to uphold and a criterion by which to measure how well they do so. Debate can proceed on three levels: is the Affirmative or the Negative value superior; is the criteria proposed a good measure of how well the value is supported; and which side of the resolution does a better job of supporting the better value as measured by the appropriate criteria. In simple words, LDers are taught to explain to the judge how he should evaluate each side of the debate. In even simpler terms, LDers start by outlining what a policy debater would call a voting issue!

A voting issue is simply a reason why the judge should award his ballot to one side or another. But that isn’t a very useful definition. It is better to describe a voting issue as a consequence of adopting the resolution that is compelling, either for or against adoption. One way of looking at your goal as a debater is to identify, explain and justify voting issues to the judge.

Voting issues often arise in the course of a debate as the clash between the two teams clarifies what they really think is important. (Many debaters think any argument they think they are winning is a voting issue!) But starting out by building your case around a voting issue like an LD debater does helps clarify your arguments and their relationship to the resolution. Surprisingly many debaters present cases that they don’t explicitly link to the topic or to hard consequences.

While what is best for the Russian people is a reasonable value, popularity, as discussed above, is a poor way to measure it. The argument is tempting: the Aff believes Russia should do what is best for Russians (value) and the best way to measure this is how popular the actions are with the Russian people (criterion), and since the polls support Putin, QED! But the counterarguments are legion—people have a short horizon, are often poorly informed, act on emotion not calculation, often change their mind—and what is popular today may not be so in a few months or years. Your opponent can accept your value but propose a superior criterion like economic well-being. All of the popularity arguments collapse at that point.

In the debates I saw, most teams argued a combination of arguments including popularity, economic well-being, international power, respect and prestige and so forth. But most

were just using a shotgun approach, often shifting from one to the other as it seemed to be convenient. Compare the following case to the one used in the final round or to the one you used:

- *The Affirmative believes that Russia should take those actions which most benefit the Russian people, as measured by their well-being.*
- *Reintegrating areas with large Russian ethnic populations does this directly.*
 - *Evidence from the Crimea, Ukraine and elsewhere indicates Russians are under economic and social discrimination, and may be at risk of physical harm.*
- *These areas will contribute to Russian economic growth.*
 - *They already trade primarily and heavily with Russia: the breakup of the Soviet Union made this trade more difficult and expensive.*
 - *Attempts by the US and EU to turn these areas away from Russia have a direct economic cost that reintegration can counter.*
- *Finally, Russia international interests have been ignored or thwarted by Western governments who believe Russia does not have the strength or the will to act in its own interests.*
 - *Yes they invite us into the G8, but then look to threaten our economic interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia and the Middle East.*
 - *Reclaiming Russian territory shows strength and resolve*
- *So you can see for these reasons adoption of the Resolution provides direct benefits to the Russian people, and you should evaluate the debate on that basis.*

One word of caution: debate terminology is not fixed and many use terms differently. Let us suppose in the course of the debate you win the safety and economic arguments, but lose the international influence argument. Some might call all three of these voting issues. In their summary they might say something like the safety and economic arguments outweigh the international argument because they have a more immediate impact on the welfare of the Russian people. But I hope you get the idea.

Why Care What the US Thinks?

Introducing other points of view works the same way: link them to something you care about. Why do we care what anyone thinks? Because they can help us, hurt us, because it feeds our self-esteem. Just like saying Putin's actions are popular in Russia is a weak argument, saying the US or the EU disapproves of them is a weak argument because it doesn't link to anything significant. We all want to be liked, but if someone 5,000 miles away doesn't like us, so what? On the other hand, if that dislike causes them to launch a missile at us, maybe it's worth a little more consideration.

The argument in this case requires an extra step, because as of the date of this tournament, the US reaction to Russia's actions has been modest. If the resolution is adopted, there will be more Crimeas in the future. You need to use this. Consider the following:

- *The US and EU disapprove of Russian actions and if Russia continues, the US and EU will be forced to take actions to harm Russia.*
 - *Georgia and Crimea show they will enact harsher sanctions over time*
 - *After Georgia they canceled some economic projects.*

- *After Crimea they banned some prominent Russian citizens and dropped Russia from membership in the G8.*
- *So additional actions will lead to stronger sanctions*
- *Self-interest will compel the US and EU to act.*
 - *US and EU believe Russia is violating accepted international norms*
 - *Continue military aggression will be seen as threatening NATO and international peace.*
 - *Each action risks military conflict: Georgia and Crimea required military force, and this likely to be resisted in the future.*
- *So while current sanctions seem minor, if we persist in this course of action, the US and EU will express their displeasure in increasingly harsh economic, diplomatic and military actions that will eventually harm Russia.*

You could make similar arguments with an economic or diplomatic emphasis. But in each case, you are linking US and EU preferences to actions that will directly harm Russia.

Avoiding the Worst

It's not unreasonable for the Affirmative to present an interpretation of the resolution that tries to minimize the negative consequences of its case. But sometimes this can be fatal.

In the three rounds I saw at the tournament, I heard the following definitions of "actively seek":

- *use legal means;*
- *hold a referendum;*
- *by a vote arranged through diplomacy.*

On the positive side, with this definition the Aff can argue they won't start a war, maybe. And most of these Affirmatives later admitted in cross-ex or elsewhere that there might be some force involved.

But the case is wide open for the Negative to attack solvency: without force the Aff is unlikely to ever incorporate any region into Russia. If they don't incorporate more regions, then they won't realize any benefits. The only examples of Russian action so far are the small wars to take parts of Georgia and the massive infiltration by special forces into the Crimea. There aren't a lot of governments willing to permit referendums allowing parts their own country to secede.

Most tournaments I will see Affirmative teams try to soften their interpretation of the resolution. It may not be as obvious as it was this month. Sometimes they can do this successfully and still have a strong case. More often they get by because the Negative lets them.

The Affirmative doesn't have to propose outright invasion, but leaving open the methods Russia might use is better than losing the solvency argument. And it is defensible! There was no overt invasion in the case of the Crimea. All of the territories the resolution might apply to are contiguous to Russia, so infiltration, subversion, covert action are all possible and plausibly disguised. As long as the tanks don't roll in guns blazing every time, there

is a good argument that the West won't respond in kind. In the words of Al Capone, you can get a lot further with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone.

Affirmative teams must accept the fact that most resolutions will require them to support bad things, or at least propose actions that will have negative consequences. Maybe you can minimize these with a clever interpretation, and maybe the Negative team will let you get away with it. But a good Negative will press the issues home and you will have to defend against them. Rather than make your case seem weak and wishy-washy, embrace the weaknesses and make a virtue out of them. At least be prepared to accept and defend the flaws.

Negative teams need to watch for an Affirmative interpretation that fails to fully embrace the resolution. Usually this will mean either the Aff fails to actually argue for the resolution, or they fail to achieve the results they claim. Don't let them get away with it!

Good Cross-Ex

I like aggressive cross-ex: pointed questions, sharp replies, some verbal fireworks. Done well it's fun to watch, excites the crowd and makes the debate interesting. But there is a difference between scoring points and scoring points, that is, between a verbal put-down and an exchange that can help you win the round.

Cross-ex is a very powerful weapon whether you are asking the questions or answering them. The examiner can direct attention to things the responder doesn't want to discuss. The responder can provide replies that defend against potential attacks and in some cases even turn the answer into an attack on the examiner.

But squabbling accomplishes nothing. It just wastes valuable time to no purpose. Pyrotechnics are fun, but you can't use them in your next speech to make an argument.

Let's start with the examiner. You should have certain objectives—specific questions to ask, certain issues to explore—which you and your partner agree are important to the debate. Since answers usually generate more follow-up questions, you probably have more than enough to fill the time available. You want to control the flow and move steadily down your list, covering as much ground as possible.

You will not accomplish this by trying to bludgeon your opponent into giving you the answers you want. This isn't a police interrogation out of a 1930's gangster film. Your opponent is as smart and capable as you are and will resist your efforts, even more so if you try to use force.

Your opponent is a classic example of what the law calls a "hostile witness" (look it up!). In court an attorney is permitted to ask leading questions if the judge agrees the witness is hostile, and the judge can compel the witness to answer. Debaters can always ask leading question, but no judge will force your opponent to answer. So hostile or not, you are dependent on the good will of your opponents to get the answers you need!

A good way to destroy that good will is to insist that your opponent "answer yes or no," to tell your opponent "answer my question" or to inform your opponent that "you haven't answered my question." This just wastes time, even if the judge agrees with you, which he may not.

Cross-ex is not a time to argue with your opponent. You present your arguments in the constructives and the rebuttals. Cross-ex is the only time you can guide what your opponent says towards issues that you choose, emphasis on the word “guide.” If you are arguing you aren’t asking questions, you are likely losing control of the dialog, and your opponent can drag the conversation in a direction he prefers. Stop, take a breath, and start over with a short, simple question.

You have a hostile witness who you have to entice into answering your questions. What’s the best way to do that?

In terms of approach, be nice, be patient but be persistent, and be focused on the answers. Your opponent is more likely to answer if you treat them with respect and ask a question politely. They may not answer the question the first time for any number of reasons: your question may not be clear; they may honestly not understand it; they may understand it precisely and be unwilling to go where it leads. Don’t get annoyed. Rephrase the question and ask it again. Finally, don’t persist in trying to get the answer you want but listen closely to the answer you get.

The two biggest mistakes debaters make in cross-ex are asking the wrong questions (see below) and not listening to the answers. If you are focused on where you want the discussion to go—and cross-ex is properly looked at as a guided discussion—the evasive half-answer you get may be all you need, or the opening you want for the next question. An opponent likely won’t answer a question that puts them in a corner or damages their case. But they may answer a series of question that lead to the same place.

In my experience, your opponent is most likely to answer questions about their own case taking advantage of their own words. And that is exactly what you want them to do, to say something about their own case that you can use against them. So the best question to ask is something like: “In your speech you said X? (You can pause here to get agreement if you like.) Doesn’t that mean Y?” If they reply, “No, I didn’t say that” don’t argue, rephrase and see if you can get them to admit to something similar. Or ask them what they did say, and use those words to lead in to your next question. Look for agreement, not disagreement. Lead them to reasonable conclusions about their own arguments.

The worst questions to ask (after those that end with commands like “answer yes or no”) are those that are open ended (e.g., “What do you think of X?” or “How will you accomplish Y?”), introduce evidence (e.g., “Are you aware of Z?”), hypotheticals (e.g., “Suppose Q, how would you react?”) or anything that doesn’t refer to things your opponent has actually said. Each of those questions is an invitation for your opponent to make a speech and use up your time!

An Example

Here’s an example, word for word from the final round. The Neg has presented loss of trade with the West as a disadvantage to the Resolution. The Aff is trying to undermine this argument.

1. *Aff: Does the United States only trade with those whom they agree with?*
2. *Neg: No. I think they trade with a lot of people.*

3. *Aff: So then why would they cut off all trade with Russia because they don't agree with us like you said?*
4. *Neg: Well, I never said they would be cutting off all trade with Russia. I don't think I ever used that phrase in my entire speech.*
5. *Aff: You said it was not realistic to believe that we could continue to trade with the West.*
6. *Neg: I said it's not realistic to believe that we could continue to display erratic behavior by trying to annex countries that are simply is what our legal system is trying to do. It's not allowed*
7. *Aff: So we can agree that the consequence for that action does not affect our trade with the West?*
8. *Neg: I think it 100% affects our trade with the West.*
9. *Aff: So then...(cut off)*
10. *Neg: You said that the sanctions were negligible but you've only been having them for a week. You've only had them for a week.*
11. *Aff: So how do they affect our trade with the West then?*

Do you see the mistakes the Aff makes?

It's easy to see the little ones. The last question (11) is open-ended. The Aff is lucky the Neg doesn't make a little speech here, but follows up a short answer with an almost identical open-ended question and the Neg then goes off on a tangent. (The remainder of the cross-ex is not shown for brevity.) Before that, in 7, the Aff obviously misinterprets what the Neg said and gets an answer that drifts onto Neg ground in 8 and 10. And in 5 the Aff proceeds to tell, not ask, the Neg their position which gets a sharp, tangential reply.

A bigger mistake happens in 4. Look at it closely. Do you see it? The Aff is so determined to get the Neg to say directly that the West will continue to trade with Russia that they completely miss the Neg saying exactly that indirectly: *"I never said they would be cutting off all trade with Russia. I don't think I ever used that phrase in my entire speech."* Done and done! If the Neg says they never said all trade will be cut off, then the Neg must believe that that some trade will continue! Who cares what they may have said in their speech: this is the answer you wanted. Run with it!

The correct follow up is to use questions like:

- *So there will still be some trade?*
- *Will the West still buy Russian oil and gas?*
- *Will the West still sell industrial equipment? Medical supplies? Consumer goods?*

But you only need the first of these to confirm the response. Then move on. Your rebuttal is set: *My opponents agreed trade will continue, so the question is whether the loss of trade will be significant. Trade occurs where there is mutual economic benefit. The West needs Russian energy and Russia will only sell that energy for the things it needs. While some trade may be lost, the important trade will continue.*

But stepping way back, things are going wrong from the first question in (1). The Aff is trying to get the Neg to admit to an argument the Aff wants to make but hasn't made yet: you don't have to like someone to trade with them. This violates my rule about

introducing arguments. And it violates my rule about asking questions about what the speaker said. The Neg does say there will be trade sanctions. Why not this exchange:

Aff: You said the West will cut off trade with Russia, is that correct?

Neg: Yes.

Aff: All trade or just some trade?

Neg: I never said all trade.

Aff: So there will continue to be some trade between Russia and the West?

The Negative doesn't have a lot of wiggle room here. The questions are short, require obvious short answers, and any attempt at evasion will be seen as exactly that. And there is nothing to argue about! (Suppose the Neg does answer, "Yes, all trade." What do you do?)