

# A Coach's Notes<sup>1</sup>

Everett Rutan

Connecticut Debate Association

[ejrutan3@ctdebate.org](mailto:ejrutan3@ctdebate.org)

## Connecticut Debate Association

Online, March 4, 2023

**This House Would release all frozen assets to Afghanistan's central government.**

### Contents

- Introduction
- The Nettle and the Elephant
- RFD

## Introduction

This edition relates to the March 4, 2023, CDA tournament and topic. 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 Greenwich 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. 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. 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.

## The Nettle and the Elephant

*What's the origin of the phrase 'Grasp the nettle'?*

*This little figure of speech is known wherever *Urtica Dioica*, the Stinging Nettle, is commonplace, which covers most of the English-speaking world. The figurative advice to be bold and 'grasp the nettle' derives from the property of the plant to inject toxins into the skin of any person or animal who brushes against its stiff, hollow hairs. If the plant is grasped firmly, especially if that is done in the*

---

<sup>1</sup> Copyright 2023 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 the Connecticut Debate Association or any other party.

*direction the hairs are growing, the hairs tend to be pushed flat and avoid penetrating the skin.*

*The Phrase Finder, <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/grasp-the-nettle.html>*

Chosen properly, debate motions must be fair to both sides, providing grounds to support a decision both in favor of and against. On the bright side, for most motions, each side has something positive to support. On the other, each side must accept some unpleasant consequences. Debate is finding ways to compare, balance and weigh among these.

Debaters, especially on Gov, try to tip the scales by presenting an interpretation of the motions that minimizes or avoids entirely the downside inherent in the motion. This is a mistake. Surprisingly, it often causes Gov to forfeit strong arguments in their favor.

### ***Why Gov Lost***

In the March final round this strategy loses the debate for Gov. The Taliban government in Afghanistan is, by Western standards<sup>2</sup>, a bad actor. Their policies result in human rights abuses, particularly discrimination against women. Releasing funds to the Afghan government will better enable them to continue these policies.

Gov tries to soften the impact with a plan that releases the funds over five years, each successive tranche conditional on improved behavior. Gov benefits depend on the solvency argument that the lure of additional funds will positively impact behavior. The solvency argument is weak, as Opp points out, because the Taliban has held to its beliefs for over 30 years, 20 of those with a US military presence in Afghanistan.

It's important to note also that the argument is weak because it is unlikely to be believed. Most of what most of us have read about Afghanistan and the Taliban emphasizing strong and strict religious beliefs. Yes, judges are supposed to put aside their own beliefs and weigh only what is presented in the round, but you ignore prior beliefs at your peril. An extraordinary claim requires extraordinary warrants, and most judges are not going to believe the Taliban will sell their beliefs for a few billion dollars unless you can provide very strong reasons.

Opp argues that even a few billion dollars will strengthen the Taliban, and Gov's only reply is the money-behavior link. Gov's offense and defense are tied to the same link argument, and so the Gov case fails when it is broken.

Gov would have been better off "grasping the nettle" by accepting that the Taliban is unlikely to change. Let's see how to do that.

### ***The Elephant in the Room***

Shifting metaphors, when there is an elephant in the room it's best to acknowledge it. Don't ignore the elephant, pretend it's not there, or throw a sheet over it in hope no one

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to realize that "truth" is greatly influenced by cultural standards. By their own religious standards the Taliban believe their actions are fully justified. Gov could argue that we should respect their right to cultural self-determination, but I don't recommend it.

notices. The first thing you should do is point out what everyone already knows: there is an elephant in the room!

*Good morning. My partner and I are proud to support the motion, This House would release all frozen assets to Afghanistan's central government.*

*Before we present our case we would like to make an observation. Afghanistan is currently governed by a religiously motivated nationalist group called the Taliban. They believe in government by a strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law. The consequences are, by Western standards, significant human rights abuses, particularly the treatment of women. The motion requires us to defend releasing funds to this government.*

There, you've said it. You're pointing directly at the elephant that everyone can see. What you need to do now is make sure the elephant isn't the central point in the debate. In other words, don't make the elephant disappear, make the elephant unimportant.

*The Taliban has stood firm in its beliefs since it first took over the country shortly after the Soviet occupation ended, surviving 20 years of US military presence. Given that history, no policy that we or our esteemed opponents offer with respect to a few billion dollars is going to remove them from power or alter their governing principles.*

*In the meantime, Western actions, including freezing funds that are the legitimate property of the Afghan people, are preventing economic recovery and directly harming the well-being of those people. This debate is not about the policies of the Taliban. It is about improving the daily lives of 40 million Afghans.*

*We accept the obvious interpretation of the motion which is to release these funds to Afghan government control and use. We offer two contentions. First, releasing funds will help rebuild Afghanistan's economy and benefit the Afghan people. We note that releasing funds is the first step in normalizing relations with Afghanistan. Our second contention is that normalization is the best long-term strategy for improving human rights in Afghanistan.*

The debate isn't about the elephant any more. I leave it as an exercise to flesh out these contentions properly, especially the second one about human rights.

## **Choosing Your Ground**

If the debate is primarily about the Taliban and human rights, Opp wins. The original Gov case tries to win on Opp grounds: we can use the money to improve Taliban human rights policies. Is Opp going to argue that releasing funds will strengthen the Taliban? Of course they will! But it does not benefit Gov to prime that argument for Opp. Let Opp come to you, force them to make the argument, and be prepared to reply.

If the debate is primarily about economic conditions in Afghanistan, Gov wins. Withholding the funds weakens the Taliban. It also cripples the Afghan economy.

Starvation and deprivation are as real as the closing of schools to women. Which is more important?<sup>3</sup> Always build your offense on your own ground!

### ***Losing Ground***

Leaving the elephant and returning to the nettle, I said above that failing to grasp the nettle often results in Gov forfeiting its strongest argument. Here that argument is to note that so far withholding the funds has had no impact on Taliban human rights policy, nor does anyone expect it to have an impact anytime soon. This is Gov's key rebuttal when Opp argues funding the Taliban will continue human rights abuses.

In the final round, Gov's solvency argument is that releasing funds over time conditional on improved behavior will improve human rights in Afghanistan. Surprisingly, Opp never directly makes the obvious reply: if withholding all of the money conditional on improvement hasn't changed policy, how will threatening to withhold less of it work? In any case, having argued conditional release over time will work, Gov certainly can't reply to the Opp case with the argument that current policies—including withholding money—haven't worked and we should try something else.

### ***Grasping the Nettle***

Always try to argue from strength. Find what is best about your side of the motion and build your case, your offense, around that.

Your opponents can usually be relied upon to highlight your weakness and build their case around it. Any plan you come up with during case prep to preempt their offense is likely best used as rebuttal. Building your case on defense tacitly admits you have that weakness which works against you.

Better yet, if you can, explain why your strength is the central issue in the debate, and why your obvious weakness is not. That isn't possible with every motion, but in cases like this one, grasping the nettle is the best approach.

### ***One More Exercise***

If Gov presents the case I outline in italics above, how does Opp reply?

### **RFD**

*This is my RFD from the final round.*

Gov's case depends on convincing us that the lure of additional money will incentivize the Afghan Taliban government to change its ways. Their only warrant is money. Opp notes Taliban has held fiercely to their beliefs for decades and are more likely to take the money without changing their ways. Opp notes even the first tranche will give the Taliban a lot of funds they can use for bad purposes. Opp argues further that the Taliban lacks the expertise to spend the money in the way the West might require, and Opp uses

---

<sup>3</sup> Every debater should be familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Look it up!

the Gov argument about "nefarious parties" to note the Taliban has other options to obtain funds. While Gov's concept is nice--money for good behavior--Opp does a much better job of explaining why this is unlikely.

This is a difficult topic for Gov at the high school level. A Gov case has to accept that money will be given to bad actors likely to do bad things. Here Gov tries to avoid that by telling a story unlikely to be believed: after 30 years of fierce resistance against long odds the Taliban can be bought. Better to grasp the nettle and argue that releasing the funds is part of normalizing relations, and that over the long-term engagement is more likely to bring reform than either isolating them or trying to strong-arm them in the short-term.

To a high school debater this sounds like a bad argument, but it is the sort of argument and decision that foreign policy experts and governments make all the time. It is worth your while learning how to make such an argument properly, as it applies to many motions.