

## DEBATE SHOULD BE A LAUGHING MATTER

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In their delightful book, A Short Walk on Campus, Aitken and Beloff, two British debaters who toured this country in 1964, assert discerningly, "Faced with time trouble and given the choice between throwing a point or a joke overboard, the British debater would always sacrifice the point. The Americans would never have this dilemma since they never have any jokes to throw overboard in the first place. . . . There is no attempt to inject humor. . . .into. . . American debate."<sup>1</sup> What the touring British foresaw was the virtual extinction of humor as an ingredient in debate in this country. Let us organize a consideration of this matter around three questions: 1) Should humor have a place in American debate? 2) Why is humor used so seldom? and 3) Should the use of humor be encouraged by CEDA?

Should humor have a place in American debate? Probably the answer to this depends on one's acceptance of the approach that one of the goals of debate should be persuasive, communicative speaking. Writers of basic texts in the field of speech communication stress to us the value of humor as a key factor of attention in our speeches. Ehninger, Gronbeck and Monroe state this forthrightly in Principles of Speech Communication: "Laughter indicates enjoyment, and people pay attention to that which they enjoy. Few things, in fact, will hold an audience as well as the speaker's judicious use of humor."<sup>2</sup>

And in the most recent edition of a well-known text, Eugene White tells us: "Fresh, sparkling, appropriate humor can be of great value in getting and keeping the attention of an audience."<sup>3</sup> What the British debaters said in the 1960's still serves today as a distinguishing feature between the British and American styles of debate. Yet, surely any of us who have attended a debate between a touring British team and an American team are aware of how well the British humor is received by an American audience. This is true even though British debaters' humor often tends toward sarcasm and ad hominem attacks on their opponents that is forgiven our overseas visitors, but which would likely come off as heavy-handed or even distressingly rude if tried by one American team against another.

Perhaps one of the cardinal sins of American educational debate has been its tendency to take itself too seriously. We have, over the years, stressed to our students that their judges have an obligation to listen to them and, moreover, to capture on paper every point they utter. We have been so engrossed with the "rights" of the debaters to a fair hearing from their judges that we have ignored the "obligations" of the debaters to offer their arguments in as palatable a fashion as possible and to make an effort to hold the attention of the judge. The appeal of debate has waned in consequence. While many factors are responsible for the loss of audiences at our intercollegiate debates,

certainly the dry, uninteresting nature of the speeches must take some of the blame. Too many debaters ignore the fact that while a judge may be the only non-participant hearing the debate, he is still an audience, admittedly only an audience of one but still a very important one. Humor can help to arrest his flagging attention, especially toward the end of a long day of judging, and certainly should have a place in contemporary debate.

Why, then, is humor so seldom used? Even assuming that debaters are aware of the significant role humor could play in their effectiveness, one can think of several reasons why it is encountered infrequently.

First, would be the emphasis placed by the NDT style of debating on evidence. For a number of years many debaters in both high school and college have had impressed upon them the attitude that anything which takes time away from reading another piece of evidence is unproductive. Two of the most obvious casualties of this way of thinking have been the introductions and conclusions of debate speeches. How often have you judges debates in the last few years where if you did not have your pen poised when the First Affirmative opened his mouth, you missed (probably forever) the exact wording of the first contention or the first plank of the plan? Nor was any overall summary given in conclusion to assist you in catching these vital items. Humor, unfortunately, joined the first and third parts of a complete speech as a sacrifice to the rush to read more cards and chalk up more "points" in the debate.

Second, would be diffidence felt by the debater about his ability to be humorous. Admittedly, this

is more a valid reason for not using humor than the first one, but like so many other things in life, if one never tries, he has no way of knowing whether he can do something or not, nor is he giving himself an opportunity to develop his skill. DEbaters who are reluctant to try humor should recall how reluctant they also were to try debate at all before they had ever done it.

Third, would be a misconception by debaters (or their coaches) as to what constitutes humor in a debate. Debate is not the place for a stand-up comedian with his comic monologue. Nor is it really the place for the set story or joke, which would probably be too time-consuming even by my standards. What is desired is the clever expression, the humorous turn of a phrase, the quick one-liner, even the pun (people may pretend to shudder at puns, but they really enjoy them and even admire the flash of brilliance that produced them). Wit in a debate should be the thrust of a rapier, not the blow of a sledgehammer. It should be something a debater's opponents, his judge, and his audience can all enjoy, which means, of course, that it should not be embarrassing or personally derogatory to anyone in the room (and from my point of view that would also include the debater's own colleague).

Fourth, would be a fear on the part of the debater that the judge may not appreciate humor at all. Let it be conceded that there are some judges that are so sober-sided as to disparage any humorous sally, but human beings stand alone in the animal kingdom in their ability to laugh, and most judges are human. Occasionally, debaters will encounter the old bear huddled over his flow sheet and scratching on the ballot, but the odds are very much in favor of his judge being responsive to humor.

While there are numerous reasons, therefore, for not using humor, none of them are compelling. They explain why humor is not used without justifying its lack of use.

Finally we reach the question: Should the use of humor be encouraged by CEDA? To this, my answer would be an unqualified yes.

I have never tried to calculate how many debates I have judged in the course of an overly-long career in intercollegiate forensics, but surely the number must be in the thousands. Yet of that welter of contests, few hold a place in my memory and the ones that do tend to be those made memorable by a flash of humor. Nearly thirty years ago, I recall attending a debate by a traveling British team at the University of Nebraska one feature of which was to be questions from the audience. The topic was some long-forgotten one dealing with the Middle East, and when the questioning began, an anglophobe in the audience got the floor armed with a sheaf of questions with which he intended to embarrass the British. His first question, given with the thickest and phoniest British accent he could muster, was: "At Oxford, do you pronounce the name of the country 'Persh-ah' or 'Purr-sha'?" Obviously, which ever choice the British debater made, or any alternative pronunciation he gave, would sound strange, and funny, to the midwestern audience already skeptical of what they had heard of the Britishers' accent thus far in the debate. But, instantaneously came back the answer, "At Oxford, we call it Iran." And the audience roared, and not at the British, but at the questioner who had been so behind-the-times in his knowledge of Middle Eastern geography, a

questioner who had tried to set a trap and had fallen in it himself. Discomforted, he sat down and was not heard from again during the evening. (I have used this story many times over the years in teaching cross-examination techniques as an example of how a difficult question may be averted by quick use of humor and the questioner derailed in the process, for, in retrospect, while the British surely scored the "point," they never actually answered the question.) To cite one more example of a debate remembered for more than twenty-five years, I recall an encounter in which an affirmative had presented a complex plan and had attempted to emphasize aspects of it by drawing lines on a blackboard. When his negative opponent took the floor (I have forgotten the school of the affirmative, but recall the negative as being from Texas A. & M.) he, too, took chalk in hand and commenced his speech by saying, "As I sat looking at this diagram, I thought that if I drew a line here and one there, it would look just like an elephant!" And it did! The affirmative plan was reduced to absurdity (it didn't have far to go!) and the memory of that elephant has remained with me for all these years.

Those who engage in CEDA (both debaters and their directors) should remember that CEDA is dedicated to communicative, persuasive speaking and use of an audience-debate approach, even though the audience consists of only one person. Humor should play an important role in realizing these objectives. Frank Capra, the movie director, once referred to the use of humor in his medium in a statement that debaters should take to heart, as it also applies to theirs: "If I can get them (the audience) laughing, they have let their

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