

## A CASE FOR DEBATING PROPOSITIONS OF POLICY

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The growth of the Cross Examination Debate Association has been marked by a spirit of innovation. Initially, the cross-examination format itself was a departure from the 10-5 pattern that was normal in intercollegiate debate. In its early years, CEDA broke with the tradition of a single year-long topic by using two topics each year, a practice to which we seem firmly committed today.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most significant innovation, however, was the decision to employ a non-policy proposition in Spring 1975. In many ways that decision has served to characterize CEDA itself for many people now regard CEDA as exemplifying "Value debate" as opposed to the traditional "Policy debate" which is used in NDT.<sup>2</sup>

I believe the time has come to reexamine the commitment of CEDA to the use of value propositions. In the spirit of innovation which has characterized CEDA, I propose we expand our horizons by debating both issues of value and of policy. The two topic per year framework afford us the opportunity to change not only the substance of the proposition, but the type of the proposition as well. Specifically, I suggest that CEDA debate a non-policy proposition one semester, and a policy proposition during the other. In this paper, I will briefly consider the benefits that will follow from this proposal.

First, the use of different types of propositions would expand the educational opportunities available to our students. If there are distinctions between types of propositions, as most of our textbooks acknowledge, then our students should profit from learning to deal with all types of propositions. To understand that controversies have different dimensions and that appropriate arguments vary with the type of proposition would provide a useful analogue to the variety of "real world" argumentative settings our students are likely to confront.

Some might argue that students can gain experience arguing policy propositions by participating in NDT debate. However, relatively few debate programs afford that choice to a student. Limitations of staff or finances have forced many programs to choose to focus on either CEDA or NDT debate. Several coaches have chosen to emphasize CEDA because they are dismayed by the argumentative and communicative styles that dominate NDT debate. For whatever reason, few intercollegiate debaters have the opportunity to sample both value and policy debate.

Those who encouraged the use of value propositions were right when they argued it was inappropriate to regard policy questions as the only issues worth

debating. An alternative was needed at that time. But now that CEDA has grown into the mainstream of intercollegiate debate, new steps are required to provide our students with the broadest possible forensic education.

A second reason for advocating the use of policy propositions by CEDA is that we can have better debate topics. I do not mean that policy propositions are inherently more debatable than value propositions. However, the most controversial aspects of several current issues focus on policy choices. We ought not deliberately avoid lively and current controversies simply because they are policy issues, for the use of such topics often serves to attract students to forensics programs. But creating non-policy propositions from these controversies has produced some unsatisfactory debate topics.

In Fall 1982 CEDA used the following proposition: "Resolved: That a unilateral freeze by the United States on nuclear weapons production and development would be desirable." Although stated as a value proposition, this proposition is the functional equivalent of a proposition of policy. It is difficult to imagine that the meaning of the proposition would have been any different if it had been stated as a traditional proposition of policy — "Resolved: That the United States should adopt a unilateral freeze on the production and development of nuclear weapons." In fact the latter proposition might have been preferable as it would have forced the affirmative team to commit itself to a particular program. Negative teams often had a difficult time arguing against an abstraction rather than a concrete plan, and affirmative teams frequently took refuge in studied ambiguities about what it was that they endorsed.

Some would argue there is merit in requiring debaters to consider the "value" of the "concept" of a freeze rather than a particular freeze proposal. Barbara Warnick has made a similar point concerning the 1979 CEDA topic on national service programs when she observes, "The formulators of this proposition intended that debaters argue the comparative merits of the concept of a system of compulsory national service."<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is only through particular proposals that the concept of national service or a nuclear freeze has meaning. A reasonable person should want to know what is involved in a nuclear freeze before deciding whether or not to endorse it. We might appropriately support some freeze proposals and reject others. In this case a proposition of policy would be superior to the quasi-policy proposition we actually used.

A second problem we have experienced by avoiding policy propositions is that we have focused debates on limited (and sometimes the least interesting) areas of a controversy. This problem is exemplified by the Fall 1981 topic, "Resolved: That unauthorized immigration into the United States is seriously detrimental to the United States." This topic produced debates which had relatively little value clash, but centered on studies of the costs and benefits of illegal aliens in this country. Verch and Logue have argued that debaters did not understand how to deal with the clash of values inherent in this issue,<sup>4</sup> but I would contend that debaters chose to emphasize the descriptive issue rather than definitive issues because that is what they found to be controversial when they studied the question. It is ironic, however, that some of the most interesting value dimensions of the controversy over illegal immigration are to be found in the policy implications of responding to the problem. The values of justice and fairness for both citizens and aliens are important issues that are highlighted by proposals for dealing with the problem. By choosing a value proposition, we had debates which did not center on values. We would likely have had a greater emphasis on values if we had dealt with the policy dimensions of illegal immigration.

Policy propositions, then, would afford us the opportunity to consider some current controversies in ways our students would find both interesting and enlightening. To incorporate policy propositions into CEDA debate need not make us an imitation of NDT debate. We need not choose broad, open-ended or multiple choice policy propositions. By selecting wisely, we can limit the proposition to a range of issues compatible with reasonable research expectations. Indeed, we might even select policy propositions which have a strong value flavor to them. Neither will we be required to adopt the current conventions of NDT debate. One can certainly debate policy questions without the silliness of "affirmatively appointed, munificently salaried, self-perpetuating boards" and "affirmative speeches serving as legislative intent." We might do the forensic community a favor by reminding them that these are mere conventions useful only if listeners are willing to accept them and not an inherent requirement of the format. CEDA judges could be expected to enforce reasonable standards of analysis and argument much as we now ask them to enforce reasonable communicative practices.

Finally, we need not abandon our commitment to value debate. CEDA can enjoy the benefits of both value and policy debate and our students can profit

from this diversity of experience. Last December nearly half of those voting favored the occasional use of limited policy propositions. I urge that we give such a system a try.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>James E. Tomlinson, "The Philosophy and Development of CEDA" in Don Brownlee, ed., CEDA Yearbook, Cross Examination Debate Association, 1983, 1 - 5.

<sup>2</sup>Contemporary usage employs the initials "NDT" to identify college debate on the national proposition selected under the direction of the Committee on Intercollegiate Discussion and Debate. Although I have never been comfortable with that designation, I have used it here for the sake of clarity.

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Warnick, "Arguing Value Propositions," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 18 (1981), 111.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen L. Verch and Brenda J. Logue, "Increasing Value Clash: A Propositional and Structural Approach" in Don Brownlee, ed., CEDA Yearbook, Cross Examination Debate Association, 1982, 25 - 28.