FIRST AFFIRMATIVE REBUTTAL -- A REASSESSMENT

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There is little doubt that the first affirmative rebuttal is usually the single most difficult and challenging speech in debate rounds. Debate experts seem in strong agreement on this point. James McBath (1963) described this speech as "the most critical point in the debate for the affirmative" (p. 120). Russell Church and Charles Wilbanks (1986) stress that "The first affirmative rebuttal is often a turning point in an intercollegiate debate" (p. 172). While Theodore Sheckels, Jr. (1984) refers to the first affirmative rebuttal as the "tough rebuttal" (p. 213), Karlyn and Donald Rybacki note (1986) that "The first affirmative rebuttal speech is, strategically speaking, the most important and difficult speech in the entire debate" (p. 206).

The difficulty and importance of the first affirmative rebuttal is axiomatic for several reasons. First, the first affirmative rebuttal has only four or five minutes to respond to twelve or thirteen minutes of negative block argumentation (i.e., an eight minute second negative constructive and a four to five minute first negative rebuttal). Second, judges and opponents make heavy demands on the first affirmative rebuttalist to cover both the off-case arguments (usually developed in the second negative constructive) and on-case extension arguments (usually argued in the first negative rebuttal). Third, even in a close round, by the end of the negative block, the negative should be at a decided advantage and it is up the first affirmative rebuttalist to tip the argumentative scales towards the affirmative. These demands make it extremely difficult for first affirmative rebuttal speaker to fulfill the seemingly paradoxical function of a rebuttal speech, that is, to crystalize and focus on key issues, to narrow rather than broaden the scope of the debate. In short, no other speaker is expected to do so much in so short a time.

Given the brief time alloted to the first affirmative rebuttal, the current expectations that adhere to this speech are difficult to achieve. In seeking alternatives to the first affirmative rebuttal, at least two areas of inquiry are possible. First, altering the format of academic debate in order to ease the burden of the first affirmative rebuttal can and has been considered (Buckley & Remick, 1984). Second, examining strategic alternatives is an option that has not been fully explored either in the literature or in the tournament setting. The purpose of this paper is to examine some strategic options for the first affirmative rebuttal in academic/competitive debate. Alternatives in format will not be discussed since format alternatives have already been considered in the literature and in practice (see Thompson, 1982 and Ulrich, 1982 for examples of format change proposals). Further, format in collegiate debate is more entrenched and resilient to change than strategy. Historically, change in academic/competitive debate has been primarily strategic not structural. Hence, if there is to be justified change in the responsibilities of the first affirmative rebuttal, then they will be more easily accomplished via strategic changes rather than format changes.

While resistence to changes in

format may be great, resistence to changes in strategy also exists. Coaches, judges and debaters can needlessly constrict the process of debate if alternatives, especially in strategy, are not considered and, if appropriate, employed in the classroom and tournament setting. Alternative approaches for every speech in debate except the first affirmative rebuttal already exist (i.e., Gotcher & Biggers, 1984). As such, alternative speaker strategies seem to be a natural process in academic/competitive debate. More alternatives have been suggested than are in practice, but the point is, there is a strategic dynamism to most debate speeches that has yet to spread to the first affirmative rebuttal.

Before discussing alternative strategies for the first affirmative rebuttal, the assumptions that undergird this paper need to be identified. First, debate is largely a strategic process. Second, arguments introduced in a debate are of relative persuasive weight. Third, substantive debating for the affirmative team does not end with the first affirmative rebuttal. Fourth, resident strategies that foster poor communicative skills (i.e., excessive delivery rates, shallow analysis and poor use of evidence) should be reevaluated. By examining the four assumptions on which this paper is based, some alternatives for first affirmative rebuttal speakers can be developed.

The first assumption states that debate is a strategic process. The assumption suggests that a static conception of debate is needlessly limiting. Without strategic dynamism, debate can lose much of its educational value. This is not an uncommon assumption concerning debate, as such, changes in strategy should not be resisted but considered openly. Currently, the debate community has a relatively static approach to the speaker duties of the first affirmative rebuttal while strategic options commonly exist for the other speeches in debate. The key problems facing a strategic reassessment of the first affirmative rebuttal include theoretical justification, judge and debater resistance.

The second assumption states that arguments introduced in a debate are of relative persuasive weight. While this assumption may seem obvious to most coaches and debaters, it has a particularly important application to the first affirmative rebuttal. Clearly the constriction of time exacerbated by the preceding negative block, should compel the first affirmative rebuttalist to consider this assumption carefully.

Specifically, instead of responding to all the negative block arguments relatively equally, the first affirmative rebuttalist should make strategic decisions about which arguments are important enough to demand a substantive response and which arguments are unimportant enough to be dismissed with little argumentative effort. Clearly, some negative block arguments are so tangential to the affirmative arguments and the resolution in general that the first affirmative rebuttalist should be able to dispense with them with a sentence or two of justification. However, "Few teams will be confident enough to trust the judge to agree with their choice as to which arguments they need not cover" (Ulrich, 1985, p. 39).

Thus, a distinction needs to be made between substantive responses and procedural responses, and that distinction can be useful for first affirmative rebuttal strategizing. Substantive responses, in the case of the first affirmative rebuttal, are developed arguments to positions that have been made by the negative block that warrant a full response; that is, a full

rebuttal or refutational argument (i.e., statement of opponent's position, statement of your position, reasoning and evidence to back up your position, etc.). A substantive response, then, is a response to arguments that could warrant the rejection of the affirmative position and/or resolution if not effectively countered.

Procedural responses, on the other hand, are arguments in response to negative block positions that are irrelevant, incomplete, trivial or in some other way pose no real threat to the affirmative position or to the resolution in general. As such, procedural responses can be brief. Falling just short of a summary dismissal, the use of procedural responses by the first affirmative rebuttalist can economize precious time, allow for more reasoned arguments on issues of substance, and shift the burden to the negative to demonstrate that those arguments responded to on a procedural basis warrant a substantive response. Hence, if the argument is irrelevant, the second negative rebuttalist will probably not spend his or her valuable time trying to salvage that argument. On the other hand, the second negative rebuttalist might successfully argue that a given argument is important and cannot be dismissed on procedural grounds. At that point, the burden shifts to the second affirmative rebuttal for a final response.

While differentiating between substantive and procedural responses may open useful options for the first affirmative rebuttal, there are attendant risks. As with all strategic decisions, debaters risk making the wrong decision. For example, how is a debater to know whether a judge will agree that an argument can be dismissed on procedural grounds or not? Since judges are not in a position to issue rulings on procedural vs substantive arguments, basic human communicative skills become critical to the debater. Audience or judge analysis is not a science and uncertainty exists. But forgoing the strategic narrowing of issues in a debate because the judge's response cannot be assessed, represents the antithesis of audience analysis and contributes significantly to the problems now facing the first affirmative rebuttal speaker. Debaters might also be tempted to categorize virtually all arguments as procedural (a sign of poor analysis) or all arguments not mentioned when time runs out (a sign of poor time management) and place an untenable burden on the second affirmative rebuttal. Poor execution is possible with any strategy and does not diminish the value of the strategy.

For example, some negatives can and do argue that any affirmative case will lead to nuclear war. First affirmative rebuttalists should develop the strategic option of arguing that such an argument applied to the resolution concerning the values of higher education, for example, is irrelevant and should be rejected on that ground, making no substantive response. A substantive response, complete with analysis and citations, would not only take valuable rebuttal time but also tacitly validate the nuclear war argument. Further, a substantive response to an argument that can be dealt with on procedural grounds may distract the affirmative away from key substantive arguments (which may be exactly why the negative block issued the nuclear war argument). Clearly, the first affirmative rebuttalist can respond more efficiently to the negative block if the difference between substantive and procedural responses is understood and utilized.

The third assumption states that substantive debating for the affirmative does not end with the first affirmative rebuttal. There

are, of course, unique characteristics to each affirmative rebuttal. The first affirmative rebuttal is the last affirmative speech to which there can be a negative response and the second affirmative rebuttal is the only speech in the debate to which there is no responding speech. However, these characteristics present no compelling rationale for requiring the first affirmative rebuttal speaker to respond to all the negative block arguments.

Theoretically, debaters have two types of speeches in a debate, constructive speeches (in which arguments can be introduced, refuted, extended and even rebutted) and rebuttal speeches (in which arguments can be refuted, extended and rebutted but no new lines of argumentation introduced). Currently, because of the expectations placed on the first affirmative rebuttal, the second affirmative rebuttal speaker is relegated to less of a rebuttal speech and more of a summary speech. A division of speaker responsibilities is a natural and expected element of academic/competitive debate and should not be denied to the affirmative during rebuttals simply on the grounds that no negative response will follow the second affirmative rebuttal.

Thus, a specific strategic reassessment of the first affirmative rebuttal is prompted by this point. An obvious division of speaker responsibilities develops during the dynamics of a debate. The affirmative introduces their case in the first affirmative constructive and the negative refutes the case in the first negative constructive (unless a negative switch strategy is employed). Thus, the second affirmative usually has the opportunity to extend existing case arguments and rebut the refutations of the negative. The second negative constructive usually introduces the off-case argumentation (traditionally placed this late in the constructives, at least in part, to limit the time the affirmative has to respond). The negative block continues by reasserting and extending upon the initial attack on case side. So, the first affirmative has at least three strategic choices: argue on-case issues, argue off-case issues, or both. Current expectations clearly mandate that the first affirmative rebuttal argue both on and off-case issues or risk losing the debate on those grounds alone. Arguing on-case issues alone would be strategically weak if not fatal because it would leave a crucial area of argumentation with no affirmative response. However, since on-case issues have been introduced and extended by the affirmative already, and since off-case issues have been introduced and not yet responded to, arguing off-case issues alone is a sound strategic choice for the first affirmative rebuttal speaker. Clash between teams and among debaters is a concept central to debate, and a greater balance between the on-case clash and the off-case clash can be achieved by this strategy.

Clearly, coaches, judges, and debaters already sense the prime importance of getting the affirmative response to the off-case on the record as soon as possible. Virtually all first affirmative rebuttals begin with off-case responses then go to on-case responses. Currently, however, if the first affirmative rebuttal speaker does not respond to on-case arguments the negative team usually argues that any further responses by the affirmative would be unfair since they will not be able to respond. Having the first and last speech is an affirmative advantage (just as the negative block is a negative advantage), those offsetting advantages in no way restrict the second affirmative

rebuttal from substantive debate and in no theoretical way compel the first affirmative rebuttal to respond to both on and off-case arguments.

Strategy and fairness are two, often competing, objectives and in reassessing the duties and opportunities of the first affirmative rebuttal that must be balanced. It would, for example, be unfair for the affirmative to wait until the second rebuttal to make initial refutations of any argument, since the opposition would be denied the opportunity to offer rebuttal arguments. The parameters of fairness would not be violated by freeing the first affirmative rebuttal from case side rebuttal arguments and allocating them to the second rebuttalist. Thus the first affirmative would be freer to focus on the initial refutation of the negative off-case arguments.

The implementation of an off-case focus for the first affirmative rebuttal would be simple and employ no fundamental changes in format or exotic theoretical readjustment. Affirmatives would preview for the judge and the negative team that final case-side extensions or rebuttal responses will be brought up in the second affirmative rebuttal. Though few strategies in debate need to be announced, when employing a strategy that may run against the popular grain, the strategy and a terse justification should be pesented. One of the problems with the strategic narrowing and division of responsibilities is that it opens the affirmative to charges that arguments have been dropped. This charge is easily preempted by stating that final case arguments will be presented by the second affirmative rebuttal. Thus, the first affirmative rebuttal speaker can avoid creating the impression that she or he has conceded an argument by omission. Because some judges will resist the use of selective coverage (and thus many teams will avoid trying this strategy), tournament directors could specify that judges were not to give losses for dropped arguments in the first affirmative rebuttal. However, shifts in strategy become acceptable less by mandate than by usage by successful teams.

The final assumption states that resident strategies that foster poor communicative skills should be reevaluated. Three areas of communication that suffer from the current demands on the first affirmative rebuttal are delivery, analysis, and evidence. Analysis and evidence are not outside the umbra of communicative skills; in academic/competitive debate, analysis and evidence are manifest orally and are inherently part of communicative skills.

More specifically, the pressure to achieve coverage of both on and off-case issues in the first affirmative rebuttal often results in uncommunicatively fast delivery. Many first affirmative rebuttal speakers sacrifice delivery quality due to the pressures of "coverage." Typically, the first affirmative rebuttal speaker responds to all the points raised in the negative block even if the arguments are trivial or irrelevant. Not uncommonly, the negative introduces an argument that they know is trivial or irrelevant yet that argument becomes "crucial" if the first affirmative fails to respond to it. Some judges exacerbate this coverage pressure by noting on their ballots "Never drop an argument, no matter how unimportant." The strategies of substantive vs. procedural responses and division of rebuttal responses with the second affirmative can help first affirmative rebuttal speakers avoid the perceived need for uncommunicatively fast delivery.

Analysis also suffers from the perceived need for both on and off-case coverage by the first affirma-

tive rebuttal. By rebuttals, debaters should be making strategic choices about what are the key issues in the debate. By continuing current expectations concerning coverage, very little of an already short period of time is spent on each issue. For example, if five off-case arguments with three subpoints are raised by the negative, and if the first negative rebuttalist extends on three case arguments with two subpoints each, then the first affirmative rebuttalist is expected to respond to twenty-one arguments in four or five minutes. Even if the substructure is grouped, the eight major arguments would receive on average about thirty seconds of response. However, by adopting the strategic reassessment discussed above, the first affirmative rebuttalist will be able to spend more time on issues of substance without sacrificing the argumentative integrity of the affirmative team.

Evidence suffers also. A reasonably complete citation, evidence that is relevant and from a qualified source, evidence that is read understandably and applied to the argument at hand, are minimum standards for materials used to support argumentative claims. The current pressures on the first affirmative rebuttal, however, often result in incomplete citations, blurby quotes that are not specific to the argument, and speed reading of evidence, rendering it incomprehensible. By readjusting the strategic options available to the first affirmative rebuttal, the problems associated with evidence in this speech can be reduced. An appreciation of the nearly impossible task of the first affirmative rebuttal prompts many judges to allow the standards of evidence to slacken. With a strategic reassessment, those basic and reasonable standards need not be relaxed. Thus, without altering the format of debate but through a strategic reassessment of the speaker options available for the first affirmative rebuttal, the quality of academic/competitive debate can be enhanced and the obligations now placed on the first affirmative rebuttal speaker can become more reasonable. One of the paradoxes haunting human behavior is that we both desire and resist change. While many coaches and debaters desire change in the first affirmative rebuttal, the resistance factor keeps the "fire drill" in place (Rybacki & Rybacki, p. 206).

This article has reassessed the first affirmative rebuttal and suggested several specific strategic options. The first affirmative rebuttalists will still have the single most difficult and important speech in the debate. However, with strategic alternatives, a more manageable task can be accomplished in a manner more consistent with the stated philosophy of the Cross Examination Debate Association (i.e., balancing delivery, analysis and evidence) (CEDA Constitution, Article 2, Section 1). The current expectations adhering to the first affirmative rebuttal contribute to strategies that strain the credibility of that philosophy, the implementation of this reassessment can lessen that strain.

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