THE STRAW ARGUMENT IN AFFIRMATIVE CASE APPROACHES IN CEDA DEBATE

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Sproule (1980) defines "straw man" as a "fallacy that occurs when an advocate sets up an artificial issue or opponent" (p. 177). He describes the manner in which the fallacy manifests itself: "Instead of confronting the real issue or opponent, the advocate attacks the straw man. Like the scarecrow in a corn field, the argumentative straw man appears real and relevant--but it isn't" (p. 177).

Freeley (1981) refers to the "straw argument" (p. 146) for what is traditionally known as the straw man fallacy. He calls this type of fallacy a "pseudo-argument" created "by accident or design, by distortion, confusion, manipulation, or avoidance of the matters not germane to the issue" (p. 143). Ehninger and Brockriede (1963) categorize the straw man argument as a "diversionary proof" and indicate that when "repeated several times during the course of a controversy is called a red herring" (p. 174).

The motives for resorting to straw argument in any argumentative context are obvious. It is much easier to attack a weak argument than to attack a stronger position actually espoused by the advocate. Additionally, by using a straw argument attention may be effectively diverted away from the real position of an advocate to the straw man. If the straw man is dressed carefully enough, and presented subtly and skillfully enough, the advocate as well as the audience may be fooled. The benefits of presenting straw arguments are greatly increased when time constraints are part of the context of a dispute and precious time and thought can be diverted from legitimate issues.

In academic debate the benefits of presenting straw arguments are quite evident. If a debater can convince the audience (judge) and/or the opponent that an argument being presented and defeated represents the position of the opponent then she or he can reap whatever benefits are available for winning that argument. In the debate context the rewards will range anywhere from wasting an opponent's time, resulting in inadequate coverage of other important issues, to winning a debate on an issue that was irrelevant in the first place.

Although the opportunities for and advantages of straw argument present themselves at many points in a debate, this paper will focus on the use of straw argument by first affirmatives in Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) debate. The first affirmative constructive is focused on because straw argument effectively presented in that speech will lure judges and negative teams away from relevant positions at the outset and often throughout the debate. Two resolution types will be specifically identified as especially susceptible to first affirmative straw argument approaches. That discussion will be followed by advice for debaters and judges faced with straw arguments.

Proposition Types That Invite Straw Argument

Two forms of CEDA resolutions lend themselves to affirmative case approaches that encourage straw argumentation: the negatively-worded proposition of policy

evaluation and the proposition of policy comparison. Without entering into the controversy of whether CEDA topics are value or policy or both or neither, it is fair to say that the object of evaluation in most CEDA topics is some policy. Values play an important role in any of the CEDA topics that have been offered, but a close examination of most of the topics that have been offered will reveal that the context for the topics has been some policy or program--past, present, or future.

Negatively Worded Propositions of Policy Evaluation

One example of the negatively worded proposition of policy evaluation was offered for debate in Spring 1987. The resolution read: "Resolved: that regulations in the United States requiring employees to be tested for controlled substances are an unwarranted invasion of privacy." On its face the resolution seems straightforward. The affirmative should provide a framework for evaluating "warranted" invasions of privacy (by way of a criterion), and then show how drug testing fails to fall within that framework (case). What happened, however, was that many affirmative teams simply defined "unwarranted" as "unjustified" from any number of dictionaries that included that definition and then proceeded to identify bad reasons for testing in an attempt to show that the tests were unwarranted. Without an explicitly presented legal, philosophical, or other framework, these reasons were nothing more than straw arguments to the extent that the negative team did not articulate them as good reasons for testing.

For example, it was common for the first affirmative to include among their contentions that drug testing is unwarranted because it

is inaccurate. If no negative warrant for drug testing relied on accuracy, and in the absence of a sound and well defended criterion making accuracy a condition of warranted testing, then the affirmative has committed the straw argument fallacy by what Sproule calls "the device of misrepresenting the position of one's opponent and then attacking the misrepresentation rather than the opponent's actual position" (p. 177).

Many a negative team was lured into defending against this often irrelevant position and many a judge was found making a final decision on the basis of it. Even when the accuracy issue was made moot in one way or another it had the positive effect for the affirmative of drawing the negative away from relevant issues and wasting valuable time.

Absent a more specific criterion for "unwarranted" than "justified" almost any argument presented by the first affirmative under the drug testing resolution for the purpose of proving the tests unwarranted amounted to straw argument. However, the straw arguments ceased to be false issues and were made relevant whenever the negative approach was either taking a defensive posture concerning the straw arguments or introducing arguments that required defending against them.

On the other hand, had the resolution been worded positively: "Resolved: that regulations in the United States requiring employees to be tested for controlled substances are a warranted invasion of privacy," the temptation to offer straw arguments in the first affirmative would be greatly diminished. It would do little good for the affirmative to offer weak examples of unwarranted tests. The negative team as well as the judge would recognize the irrelevancy immediately. For instance, the argument that tests are accurate would serve

as little more than a pre-emption since accuracy alone would not logically provide a justification for invading privacy and would not be an important enough issue to spend time on unless it was highly likely that the negative would introduce the accuracy issue. All of this is not to say that topics should not be worded negatively, but simply that in so doing we increase the likelihood that straw arguments will be presented and that debaters and judges should be cognizant of that possibility.

Propositions of Policy Comparison

A proposition of policy comparison was debated during the Fall 1986. The topic read: "Resolved: That improved relations with the Soviet Union are a more important objective than increased military preparedness." Clearly, this topic required debaters to compare two possible policies. These two policies, improved relations with the Soviet Union and increased military preparedness, contain many value-laden assumptions about the nature and purpose of U. S. foreign policies, but again, the focus of evaluation was on those policies. In fact, even if two teams debating this topic agreed on a single value, such as peace, and argued that their respective positions best met that value--the focus of the debate would still be to evaluate, by comparison, the policies.

This type of topic, the proposition of policy comparison, presents an obvious opportunity and almost irresistible temptation to present straw arguments. A wily affirmative was often found presenting, in support of the improved relations/increased military preparedness resolution, examples of both improved relations and increased military preparedness. As soon as the first affirmative presented examples of bad military preparedness and then demonstrated the weaknesses of those examples, the affirmative committed the classical straw argument fallacy.

Some affirmative teams even went so far as to virtually ignore the presentation of reasons why improved relations were important and chose instead to focus their entire case on reasons why specific types of increased military preparedness were bad. For example, several affirmatives argued that U.S. actions that increased the number of countries with nuclear capabilities were likely to increase the likelihood that nuclear exchanges would occur. The affirmative claim was that this terrible outcome was proof by itself that improved relations was more important than increasing military preparedness. The approach was designed to force negative teams to support the worst possible example of military preparedness and amounted to nothing less than straw argument strategy.

There is one common practice in CEDA that seems to invite this affirmative abuse. There is an assumption among many in CEDA that the affirmative must, in the constructive, and by many judges in the first affirmative constructive, justify the entire resolution. It is further assumed that justifying the entire resolution means that all terms in the resolution must be accounted for in those speeches. Many affirmatives, for fear of losing the debate on the issue of prima faciality, presented varying degrees of weak examples of military preparedness for the purpose of meeting all the terms contained in that topic. A clever affirmative team chose examples that appeared to be mainstream and/or strong instances of military preparedness, and even some that clashed philosophically or practically with their example of improved relations, but unless the negative intended to present the same example(s) the affirmative approach stacked the deck by pre-

senting a false issue and defeating that rather than the actual position espoused by the negative.

In the proposition of policy comparison, it seems that even a solid criterion will not cure the straw argument defect. Unless both sides of the policy in the sentence equation (A>B) are specified by the resolution, the affirmative should not have the right to choose the options to be defended by the negative.

Recommendations for Debaters and Judges

In debating either of the two types of resolution discussed above, a wise negative team will be on the lookout for straw arguments presented by the first affirmative. In either resolution type, or in any other discovered instance of fallacious reasoning, the team recognizing the fallacy could present a defense against the argument by defining the fallacy, identifying its existence, and then giving the judge reasons for rejecting it on the basis and extent of its fallaciousness. As Freeley comments:

> In exposing fallacies in our opponent's case, we will do little good by declaiming "Ah ha, in his last statement my opponent has committed the fallacies of circulus in probando and per negationem consequentiae!" Although we may wish to identify and classify a fallacy for our own convenience, our task in the debate is not to name the fallacy but to be able to demonstrate to those who render the decision how or why the matter in question is fallacious (p. 139).

The negative team should also provide substitute non-straw arguments to justify their own position. This latter condition would seem to be necessary since it makes little sense to argue that an opponent has raised a false issue without providing an alternative that one prefers to defend as the "real" position. The negative could meet this condition by offering their own examples of warranted invasions of privacy or of beneficial increased military preparedness, for instance.

If a negative team does not care to take a chance that the judge will agree that an argument is straw and should be ignored, however, the time wasting advantage will have been gained by the affirmative. This is especially true if the negative team spends time both arguing that an affirmative contention is straw man position and defending against the straw man itself. Absent argument that the straw fallacy has been committed, as soon as the negative argues against the straw man or presents arguments that rely on a defense of it, it ceases to be a straw man. In other words, if the negative team begins to attack the example presented by the affirmative as though the argument were more than mere straw, then they have, by default, conceded that the argument is relevant and not merely a diversion. Likewise, if the position(s) that the negative presents rely on the affirmative argument, then the argument was real and not made of straw.

Debaters on the affirmative can be more careful about selecting case issues and focus on non-fallacious ones. Specifically, when a negatively worded proposition of policy evaluation is offered for debating, the affirmative will want to provide carefully thought out and justified criteria that will lend relevance to their case arguments. When a proposition of policy comparison is offered, the affirmative can avoid fallacious argumentation by allowing the negative to choose their own ground.

Whately (1848) defined fallacy as "any unsound mode of arguing, which appears to demand our conviction, and to be decisive of the question in hand, when in fairness it is not." Because it is unfair, when a straw argument in the first affirmative constructive has been properly identified by the negative, the judge should ignore the

argument in her or his decision as long as the conditions above are satisfied and the issue is resolved in favor of the negative.

By being alert to the special potential for straw argument to appear in particular circumstances, such as in the negatively worded proposition of policy evaluation and the proposition of policy comparison, debaters on the negative side should be able to ferret out the false issues manifested by straw arguments. Debaters on the affirmative can be more careful about selecting case issues and focus on non-fallacious ones. As Ehninger and Brockriede taught, "One can debate effectively only if he understands various proof deficiencies. If he understands them, he can avoid them in his own proofs and search them out in the proofs of his opponents" (p. 168).

References

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