

The Questions Dividing Us

By Paul Moffitt

The Value of Value Clash

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: I appear before you to-day for the purpose of discussing the leading political topics which now agitate the public mind. By an arrangement between Mr. Lincoln and myself, we are present here to-day for the purpose of having a joint discussion, as the representatives of the two great political parties of the State and Union, upon the principles in issue between those parties; and this vast concourse of people shows the deep feeling which pervades the public mind in regard to the questions dividing us.”

—Stephen Douglas, Opening Remarks, First Debate; August 21, 1858; Ottawa, Illinois.

With the political fallout over the Dred-Scot decision and the Missouri Compromise, and with the emergence of a new Republican Party, 1858 was a fitting time for two thoughtful, well-spoken public servants, known then as the Little Giant and the Rail Splitter, to explore what the “public mind” considered the “principles in issue.” Perhaps the most important words in the statements above, however, are “the questions dividing us.” Both Douglas and Lincoln recognized that people were deeply divided about the major issues of the day and that the electorate deserved to hear each Senate candidate publicly articulate his party’s position so the public could cast an informed vote. While the primary issues—popular sovereignty and slavery—may seem archaic to a modern audience, the principles that both men appeal to when discussing them—sanctity vs. quality of life, minority rights vs. majority rule, federalism—are still relevant in the

world of modern politics . . . and in debate rooms. After all, since their names are forever tied to the activity, it should come as no surprise that Lincoln and Douglas participated in a good old-fashioned clash over, well, *values*.

Values still matter: Just look at the 2004 Presidential campaign. President Bush and Senator Kerry both espoused core leadership values and both candidates used the word “fundamental” seven times during their three Presidential Debates in order to delineate what they perceived to be the central differences between them. Kerry accused Bush of confusing conviction with correctness, of valuing pride over principle. The President actually used the “v” word in his response, asserting that Kerry was a politician who changed his “core values” to suit his political surroundings. By the third debate, the public watched as both men spoke of fundamental differences over health care and the minimum wage. This declaration of fundamental distinctions did not end at the top of the ticket. Cheney and Edwards, who participated in only one debate, waved the fundamental-difference flag five times, three times for Cheney, twice for Edwards.

I am not suggesting that the way our current politicians use the term “value” is equivalent to the presentation of values in Lincoln-Douglas debate. Rather, I am suggesting that communicating core values and beliefs that are fundamentally opposed to other core values and beliefs is not only at the heart of LD debate, but is also at the heart of our country’s political and

social discourse. If we are to continue to promote the NFL’s mission of “Training Youth for Leadership,” then this is a message that the Lincoln-Douglas debate community has to promote. We have to embrace the clash of values. While this may seem like the most obvious LD principle ever defended, allow me to elaborate by first explaining two growing trends I have observed during my time spent in debate rounds, coaching sessions, and tab rooms: the increase in line-by-line flow debate and the increased use of philosophical jargon in LD. Both of these trends have detracted on LD’s historic focus on core value conflicts.

Impediments to Value Clash

Quid pro flow

As a former policy coach and judge, I used to practically take dictation in most LD rounds, or at least I could have. I know I am not the only one to notice how the pace of LD rounds, especially those at the higher levels of state and national tournaments, seems to have gotten faster. Let’s face it: 38 minutes just isn’t what it used to be. The effects of increasing rates of delivery on the world of debate has been a contentious topic in many a *Rostrum* article over the years. I do not wish to add to that debate; instead, I want to comment on what the challenge of speedy flow management has done to the value clash. In most cases, it has buried the value at the bottom of the round. If, as I argue, the value clash is paramount to a debate round, then this may not appear to be a problem. After all, it is a matter of saving the strongest point for last. However, I have seen too many

LDers over the years lose rounds because they spent so much time addressing the line-by-line and matching point for point (or tossing in three responses á la policy debate) that they forgot the big picture.

The importance of flow coverage has caused Lincoln-Douglas debate to become rather formulaic during the rebuttal speeches. With the affirmative rebuttal split, the aff debater feels compelled to cover every single point in the order of the flow during 1AR, beginning with the neg case, and then quickly address attacks made against his or her own case. Quick-speaking neg debaters with big cases will often get aff debaters trapped on their side of the flow. Problems then occur for the aff in two ways. First, when the 2AR contains almost no points of crystallization or emphasis on the competing values in the round because the aff debater is trying to recover the line-by-line, the value clash becomes just a part of the flow without any special emphasis. The second problem, one which I see more frequently with rounds in Ohio, is that the aff debater will abandon the line-by-line and go for crystallizing the main points in the 2AR. On one hand, the aff becomes doomed for not crystallizing the round; on the other, the aff is doomed for dropping a significant part of the flow.

Now I know that the aff has an advantage with the last word, and I am aware that not every judge, region, or debater focuses on the line-by-line. This does not just apply to aff debaters who become trapped at the end of the round. Plenty a negative debater has tackled the speed-of-light three-contention marathon of an aff case only to fall short in NR in delivering the voting issues or crystallizing the round. And since so many debaters insist on burying the value clash at the bottom of the flow, the values become casualties of this formulaic style of debating. If I had a dollar for every round that I have seen debaters lose because they simply could not cover every point on the flow, I would be able

to buy that big-screen plasma TV I want.

As with the issue of rapid-fire speed in policy debate, the solution for all this may lie with the judges. I know the NFL judge preference sheets give us the freedom to prefer crystallization over line-by-line or vice versa. It also allows us to explain the value burdens we assign to each side of the resolution. As I stated before, I am not looking for a panacea that requires us all to evaluate rounds the exact same way. However, it might be wise for us to consider the impact we make when we sign ballots that force students to favor flow management over communicating the main ideas inherent to their side of the resolution.

Speaking in code

A state champion once joked with my debaters, “I don’t know philosophy, I use it.” The implication, of course, was that one does not necessarily need to understand the philosophy that one is using in order to make an argument sound convincing. I often have to warn my students during practice against what I refer to as philosophical name-dropping. I will listen to or read cases where the student states that “Kant says” or “According to the social contract,” and I have to stop my debaters for a few reminders. First, I remind them to cite the primary source with the author/philosopher. For example, from which work is the Kant quotation taken, and whose social contract? Next, I urge them to make sure the quotation can stand on its own and is not included merely to make them sound smart. Finally, I urge them to explain, as with any piece of empirical evidence, how the philosophical theory bears on the values issue of the resolution.

Compounding the philosophical name-dropping problem is the need to dress up the value premises in such a way that observers need thesauri or lengthy explanations to understand them. Over the years, I have listened to very competent debaters expound

rather cryptic values such as governmental beneficence and judicial efficacy, and then spend half the round explaining what they mean to their opponent and the judge. Before anyone accuses of me at this point in the article of advocating that we dumb down Lincoln-Douglas debate, let me emphasize that I understand the need to clarify and define complex terms in order to set the ground for debate. Many of the competing claims inherent in these topics are philosophically based and require additional explanation. My point here is that we should not complicate an already challenging task by dressing up the main values and principles for debate with empty rhetorical flourishes. Morality, justice, social welfare, and autonomy are complex enough without masking them in unnecessary prose.

Obviously, our students employ these tactics of speed and obfuscation because we reward the behavior by signing ballots in their favor. Now I am not calling for a judging or coaching revolution where we ask students to conform to one standard or style of debate. However, if we allow the competitive tricks of the debate trade to overshadow the main educational value of this activity, then I fear that Lincoln-Douglas debate, in the words of Donus Roberts, when he introduced Controversy to the National Forensics League, has “become specialized, filled with code-words that ordinary people do not understand on topics people don’t wish to hear.” While I agree with Mr. Roberts that the style of debate is off-putting to a public audience, I believe this is because of choices students make and coaches and judges reward. I contend that most LD resolutions raise important values questions that could and should be of interest to the educated public.

Values in Conflict

One look at the past twenty years’ worth of topics on the NFL website reveals that we have generally based LD topics on issues that have been part of the current, or at the very least near-

past, public debate. I regularly tell my debaters that most resolutions are typically rooted in a current news event or court case. To that end, I would like to borrow the Little Giant's vernacular and discuss how some of the resolutions on the 2007 Lincoln-Douglas Topic Ballot address issues that resonate rather prominently in the "public mind" because of the "underlying principles" they address.

Keep in mind that this superficial analysis is by no means a comprehensive exploration of issues and values – save that for debate practice. Rather, I hope this discussion will illustrate how any Lincoln-Douglas topic, if we are true to the principles set forth by the participants nearly 150 years ago, offers us an opportunity to discuss, debate, and perhaps even answer the "questions that divide us."

The precautionary principle ought to guide environmental regulations.

There are some serious semantic issues with this resolution, particularly with what constitutes an environmental regulation. Vocabulary aside, however, this resolution reveals a fundamental conflict over the nature of what constitutes proof and what should determine the actions we take to protect our environment and ourselves. As far as the public mind is concerned, the scientific community is filled with research and discussion over this iconoclastic approach to risk assessment and human behavior. From nanotechnology and genetic engineering, to natural resource management and pollution control, scholars have been debating over the past ten years whether it is better to rely on the traditional practice of using empirical support to guide regulatory behavior, or whether we should perceive the risks before we have the science to support them.

The affirmative will most likely cite examples of current harms to the environment produced from the old empirical mindset and explain how changes in regulatory behavior have

outpaced the scientific evidence necessary to validate them. Several sources, for example, suggest that the overabundance of chlorinated chemicals in our atmosphere are having deleterious effects on our ecosystem, yet a generation ago, no scientific evidence existed to support their restriction.

The negative may respond with a defense of the scientific method and empirical evidence and cite examples where fear and exaggerated risk perception led to incorrect claims about environmental harm. Further, the scientific community, while it may take longer to analyze regulatory behavior than mere precaution does, usually arrives at a correct and provable conclusion that can either validate or allay communal fears. For example, precautionists scared the public for years into believing that microwave ovens, power lines, and cell phones all directly contributed to increased cancer risks. The scientific community, however, dispelled such claims.

As stated earlier, there are some fundamental values in contention here. First, the resolution speaks directly to the nature of scientific inquiry and its value in regulating environmental decisions. Further, it addresses key sanctity and quality of life issues by examining how proactive and reactive judgments are made to preserve both. Finally, this debate forces us to evaluate how technological advancements continue to change our environment faster than our means to measure their effects.

The actions of corporations ought to be held to the same moral standards as the actions of individuals.

As I write this article, Jeffrey Skilling, former CEO of Enron, awaits sentencing on fraud charges. Clearly, play by a different set of rules. This debate also goes to the heart of concerns over the use of questionable ethics in the name of capitalism and the decreasing public tolerance for such behavior. The affirmative debater may

choose to define the corporation as a collection of individuals, thus blurring the line between what is a corporate act and what is an individual one. After all, Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling, while operating under shareholder trust in the name of a corporation, were ultimately unethical individuals that made unethical decisions. Therefore, the rules that apply to individuals have to apply to corporations.

I can see a bi-directional approach for the negative debater. One could argue that since corporate action has the potential to affect many more lives than individual action, the corporate agent ought to be held to a higher standard. After all, the corrupt corporate action of Enron executives cost thousands of people tens of millions of dollars. The neg could instead argue that moral standards can apply only to individuals as rational agents. Corporations, by definition, are faceless business entities that have no inherent rational or moral attachments.

Whatever the approach, this resolution offers two main levels of value clash. The first is the nature of justice and the need to establish a consistent standard of ethical conduct to determine whether rational agents receive the punishment they are due. It also goes to the nature of individual versus collective responsibility to examine whether or not our actions have greater or less ethical accountability if they are committed as individuals or as part of a group.

In United States public university admissions, socioeconomic disadvantage ought to be a higher priority than race.

My alma mater, the University of Michigan, faced two lawsuits in 2003 and corresponding Supreme Court decisions that addressed some of the issues raised in this resolution. Additionally, with the rising costs of higher education and the growing concerns over admissions fairness, this qualifies as a topical issue, especially for most of the students who compete in LD and most likely plan to go to college.

The affirmative will probably address the increasing gap in this country between SES groups that can and cannot afford college tuition, illustrating the need to prioritize economic diversity over racial diversity as a byproduct of the changing times. Whereas the need to combat institutional racism may have been greater 30-40 years ago, today's socio-economic climate dictates that the greater need exists to combat institutional classism.

The negative may recognize the need for economic and racial diversity in college admissions. However, as the court suggested in the U of M rulings, unfairly prioritizing one factor over another is not an effective way to achieve diversity. Of course, negative debaters can support the need for affirmative action today more than ever and claim that combating institutionalized racism will also net benefits for socio-economic disparities.

Overall, there are clear clashes of value over the nature of the welfare state and the merits and drawbacks of

governmental subsidies for education. This issue also invites a spirited discussion over the effects of societal discrimination versus government-sanctioned discrimination and, ultimately, the responsibility that educational institutions have for insuring an educated populace.

Even though matters of urgent policy have practical impacts on people's lives, Lincoln and Douglas remind us that the greater impacts relate to those ideas about how we live as free people and the principles we value. Yes, they wanted to settle public policy issue of popular sovereignty and what should be done as additional states were admitted into the Union. More practically, they wanted to influence how Illinois voted on the issue. On a much deeper level, however, they wanted to spend 17 ½ hours discussing the matter seven times in most of the districts in the state. Ultimately, they were concerned about whether or not popular sovereignty as it is exercised through the democratic process ought to be

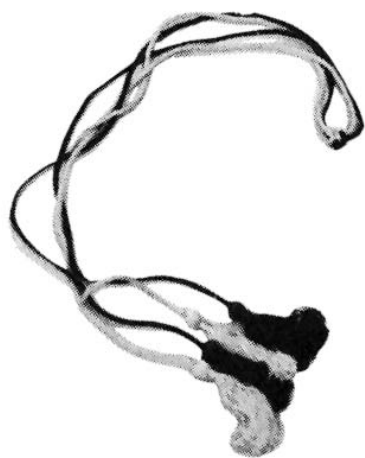
valued above the inherent rights of human beings to live freely. And they were concerned with how this fundamental difference between them reflected on the fundamental differences between their parties.

Ultimately, what the two namesakes of our activity remind us is that issues of value are not divorced from issues of policy because human beings, whether they are policy makers or members of the general public, make decisions about policy in light of their prior value commitments. In this sense, LD resolutions need not be viewed as somehow uniquely normative or philosophical; rather, LD as an event is an invitation for students to consider the value commitments at play in important public issues.

(Paul Moffitt is a single-diamond coach at Sylvania Southview High School in Ohio, where he has been coaching debate and teaching English for the past sixteen years. He is currently a member of the Ohio High School Speech League State Executive Committee.)



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