

## Editorial:

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## A Call to Statesmanship

“The point of being good is that you have the chance to be great,” Aristotle.

The format of the International Public Debate Association teaches its competitors to be good. It teaches them clarity, critical thinking and persuasion. I could go as far as to say that it teaches them manners, presentation, and hygiene.

But the argument that I find myself unable to make, the argument that I most desire to make, is that IPDA teaches statesmanship, that it teaches true rhetoric. That it enables our students to learn and to practice public address at its highest level. The level reached so rarely in “real” life, but the level reached for by all who would demand an audience. The level reached by Lincoln, by Roosevelt, and by Reagan. The level missed so famously by both Bushes, by Clinton, by Nixon. The level of the Gettysburg Address, the Challenger Address, the Day of Infamy Address.

And, of course, this problem is far from unique to IPDA. Public speaking teachers, corporate consultants, professional speech-writers, and every debate organization ever formed have all, at least at some level, grappled with this very issue. How is IPDA to be any different? Are we to teach the wind-up oratory of collegiate individual events? Are we to succumb to the logic-only oratory of Parliamentary and Cross-Examination debate? Or are we to continue to be appeased at the stumble-bum, ho-hum rhetoric of most of our own competitors?

I say we can do more! I say we can raise the level of statesmanship expected and practiced in our classrooms and at our tournaments. I say we can and should aim higher! In certain circles, Public Debate is derided as value debate dedicated to the inane, concerned more with the frosting than the cake. I say IPDA is in the perfect position- historically, culturally, and institutionally- to practice and to teach more than “college forensics.” I say IPDA can and should be a vehicle to produce true rhetors, statesmen able to move mountains with the sound of their voice, to inspire action in the masses, to change to very course of history with the force of their logic.

Which all sounds wonderful in the abstract, but how do we do it? How do we succeed where others have failed so dramatically? How do we achieve what our textbooks never even dare to dream? How do we systematize that which many would argue is fleeting? How do we dare to expect that which is an exception to the rule?

We do so like true scholars. By identifying it, by analyzing it, and by synthesizing it. In my experience, true rhetoric, true statesmanship, address that inspires and moves, speeches that transcend time and place, have five common characteristics: content that matters, logic that works, passion that moves, values that transcend, and a rhetor who cares.

### *Content*

First, true statesmanship must have content that matters. In this vein, much of the criticism leveled at IPDA is justified. We spend a great deal of our time and energy discussing Britney and Madonna instead of Hillary and Condeleeza, talking about the NFL and MLS as opposed to the EU and NAFTA. But significance, like all communication, is a subjective criteria. What may move me may leave you cold. And surely we can’t expect all of our debate topics for every round to concern timely, historically important, culturally significant issues. So, what is a debater to do when faced with yet another topic on the career of K-Fed, sports, or even too small a slice of a larger, more significant issue (like school uniforms).

Might I suggest that it is the obligation of the debaters, the rhetors, to fill their address with content that matters, not the framers of the resolutions. While remaining topical and not resorting to specific knowledge, our debaters can and should raise the level of discourse. Enconced in every value resolution are ideals that underpin and underlie. Every fact case is rife with causes, effects, and implications. Policy rounds cry out for depth and breadth of logic. Our debaters should be trained in the specific skills of critical thinking. Even while being true to the letter and spirit of a resolution, the larger picture and the microcosm are both valid areas of analysis and argument. Does our rhetoric reach the “depth and breadth and height our souls can reach?” Or are we satisfied with just trying to win a round?

But what does that look like in an actual debate? First, we should do a much better job of encouraging our students to support their contentions. Narratives, statistics, facts, expert opinions- these are good things! I know they only have thirty minutes of preparation time, but be honest, most of them do not use it wisely. As a result we get contentions that are stated, explained and summarized but not supported. We have to do a better job of teaching our young scholars how to do valid research on the internet, of what print resources they may need and making them available, of how to study before going to a tournament. Public debate cannot be content-free debate. If it is, it will die.

Next, we should challenge them to go beyond the denotative definitions of the words in the resolution. I am previewing a bit of logic and values here, but our content should transcend the small-scope, microcosm of the announced topic. Implications, harms, effects, advantages, causes should all be explored and analyzed. Our thirty minute rounds should seem crowded and insufficient. I am not speaking here of case analysis, rather of case construction and support. Our judge may be lay, and our discourse may be lofty, but perhaps we should have so much to talk about that we feel a bit rushed at times. Not in number of points and sub-points, mind you, only in amount of support for our points. A well-supported argument is a thing of beauty!

#### *Logic*

Second, true rhetoric has logic that works. Peggy Noonan, the author of Reagan’s “Challenger” and “Boys of Normandy” addresses, claims that the logic of a speech is always its most moving element. Fortunately, this is the area which we do best. Our CEDA and Parli. brethren claim the higher ground in this criteria, even equating their brand of debate as verbal chess. However, their logic is limited to one resolution per year in the case of CEDA and limited to specific topic areas in Parli. Even more to the point, Parli. teams are now announcing at the start of the year what they are “running” that year. I can’t even begin to fathom how they think they are debating the actually announced topic!

As for us, we have a box on our ballot for logic, we teach case construction and refutation, and we hammer home how important they whole issue is. So, where can we improve? First, in moving away from CEDA and Parli., we have also moved away from policy resolutions. I feel that running a policy case requires a level of logic and a depth of thinking that are missing in the average round. As I have watched the Trey Gibsons, Bob Alexanders, and Keith Milsteads of the world, I have noticed that their best rounds are often those concerning policies. I don’t think that is a coincidence. I think policy requires that next level of thinking, and thus, their rhetoric is inspired as well. So, we should keep, or go back to, teaching how to run a policy case. Our students should learn the stock issues. They should be challenged to think through harms and advantages. They should understand plans and how to present them. This improves our ability to think logically.

Second, our desire to speak to the common man has also caused us to speak to the lowest common denominator. We disrespect our judges when we fail to trust them with basic vocabulary and concepts. We water down our language to the point where it is no longer discernable. We should call logical fallacies by name. Sure, we may have to explain them, but so what? It will only take a moment. Our judging pool is untrained, but that doesn’t make them unintelligent! It is okay for us to construct a syllogism, to use an enthymeme, and to call out a logical fallacy. “The most moving thing about a speech is its logic.”

#### *Passion*

Third, true statesmen move their audiences with emotion as well as logic. When was the last time you were moved to tears in a debate round? And yet, Aristotle taught us that a full third of the available means of persuasion falls within the realm of emotion! Why are we not teaching it? Why are we not using it? We know for certain that it is being used in the world into which our trainees are graduating? In everything from campaign addresses to laxative commercials, we are being asked to laugh, cry, or lust! Yet, emotion is MIA in our debate rounds. Why? Excellent texts on pathos line the bookshelves. Examples of great pathos exist in

virtually all of our classic speeches. Our culture is replete with emotional arguments. Yet, I sit and I judge and I try to stave off boredom and just stay awake!

This association is virtually crying out for passion! Our lay judges show up without knowing what they are in for. Move them! Our coaches trek to yet another tournament. Move them! Our teams prep for yet another case. Move them! We must do more than advise our debaters to open with a story or use a short narrative in the summation. We must insist that a speech without passion is a child without a smile! A speech that bores is a knife without a blade! A speech that fails to move is a car that won't crank!

And we have to institutionalize it. It won't happen by hoping it will. We have to make it clear to our judges- if this rhetor doesn't command your attention, don't give it to her. If his speech doesn't move you, don't vote for him. If they don't move you to fear, to empathy, to laughter, to tears- they aren't worthy of your ballot! It has to be a criteria on the ballot and a point of emphasis in the judges' meetings. If we are to train the next crop of great speakers, then we must train them to grab the audience by the throat and not let go. And then, we must reward them for doing so!

#### *Values*

Fourth, great speeches contain values that transcend the here and now and speak to the eternal and timeless. Are we better people for doing what we do? Are we? Has our experience with college forensics made us better people than we would have been without it? I'm not talking smarter, or better speakers, or even more responsible. I'm asking, "Are you a better *person*?" Are you living an examined life? I would dare say that I am not. I love my job. I feel that I have an important job, but I don't necessarily feel like a better person for doing it! I don't feel like I am edified when I come to judge a tournament, when I hold a practice. Our debates, for the most part, do not edify. They don't appeal to our better natures. They educate, they illuminate, they even enlighten. But they do not, on the whole, edify. They don't appeal to our more noble selves, challenge us to live up to a higher standard, or illuminate the human condition.

Public speaking is, after all, an art form. And art should be more than simply practical, serviceable. It should move us at a level beyond the daily and mundane. It should inspire us to greatness, not just to the routine. It should challenge the very core of our being, not just our choice of breakfast cereal. It should show us what is possible, not just the lesser of two evils. Our debate rounds should do all this and more!

But how? How can a simple debate exercise be turned into the Sistine Chapel? How can we go from teaching prose to teaching poetry, paint-by-the-numbers to oil, chopsticks to Mozart? Not to over-simplify here, but perhaps it is as simple as expecting more. Our students have an endless capacity to surprise and amaze. Perhaps they are simply giving us what we have come to believe is acceptable. We've all seen the entrance exams for colleges 100 years ago. We know that standards across the board are dropping faster than temperatures in November. Perhaps, Public Debate should be a sentinel, a lone guard standing firm against lowered expectations, against the tyranny of grade inflation and against the celebration of the lowest common denominator. Just because it is Public Debate does not mean that everybody can do it or that everybody will succeed at it. Our craft is difficult, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise. We should be gentle, but we should not coddle. We deserve to expect more! And our expectations should be reflected in our classrooms and on our ballots.

#### *Rhetor*

And finally, true statesmanship is reflected by the character of the statesman. And I'm not talking about our practice of welcoming and thanking the judge which so often comes across as stilted and forced. And I'm not talking about making your first question in cross-examination, "And how are you today?" I am talking about a speaker who is passionate about her topic. A speaker who is genuinely concerned that her audience understand the topic. A speaker who holds her audience in true esteem. We must teach our speakers to respect their audiences. To communicate that respect. To find points of commonality and community with them. We must remind them of the old adage, "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care."

IPDA is founded on the principle that teaching our students to persuade one person is teaching them to persuade the masses. And that is true of every rhetorical situation. So, what is that one person asking of us? Do I like you? Do you like me? Can I trust you? Are you acting in my best interests? And, once again, our judges are smart. They know when we are faking it. When we act less than ethically, less than honestly. They don't want to shake our hands while they are trying to remember enough of the debate to fill out a ballot. They don't want to make "small talk" before the round when they are trying to maintain a sense of neutrality. They simply want

address that treats them and the topic with respect, regard even. So, we must become ethics professors as well as communication professors. But how? How do we teach empathy? How do we teach people to care, genuinely, passionately, about both their topic and their audience?

First, we must allow for it. We acknowledge the “ego barrier” (Calvin Miller, *The Empowered Communicator*) that exists between speaker and audience and teach our students ways of overcoming it. We acknowledge that persuasion is about more than content. It is about personality and trust. Perhaps we even give each speaker an extra minute in the constructive addresses during which, if they choose to use it at all, they cannot mention the resolution. Perhaps we simply teach them how important trust and “like-ability” are. But either way, we must take deliberate, active steps toward teaching our students that character counts.

Second, we judge it. We give our judges permission to do that which they are already doing. We provide them with a vehicle to judge/acknowledge their feelings about a particular speaker. “But that’s too subjective. That would lead to too many abuses. That would lead to a ‘tyranny of the beautiful people.’” A) “No it’s not, no it wouldn’t, and no it wouldn’t.” But B) “Yeah. So?” That’s life. We make those types of judgments everyday in every setting. From courtrooms to boardrooms, from dates to interviews, how we subjectively feel about a person influences, determines even, the extent to which we are willing to listen to them, to accept their ideas, to allow them to move us. That’s why books like *Dress for Success* exist! We have to give our judges the ability to express how they feel about our debaters because that is a direct reflection of how our debaters feel about them.

So, where does that leave us? It leaves us with a litany of challenges to face, issues to address, and mountains to climb. We need

- Content that matters
- Logic that works
- Passion that moves
- Values that transcend
- Rhetors who care

Anything short of that dishonors the memories of great orators from Demosthenes to Barbara Jordan and Edmund Burke to William Jennings Bryan. It also fails to realize the dreams of Alan Cirlin and Jack Rogers. And perhaps most importantly, it sells shorts the potential of those yet-unnamed students who are to pass through our teams, our rounds, and our lives in the years to come.

There is no weapon more dangerous, no tool more useful, no force more powerful than the spoken word. We must teach it with care and yield it with precision. The challenge is ours for the taking. The world awaits.