

# STUDENT CONGRESS: THROW THE BUM (PRACTICES) OUT

by James Talley

For almost 60 years, NFL has recognized student congress as a legitimate event. NFL chapters across the country participate in student congress, and over 300 students qualified for the 1995 John C. Stennis National Congress in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. This long track record and this breadth of participation make congress an activity that has paid its dues. Yet around the country, misperceptions and myths plague congress and restrict its ability to come into its own as a forensic activity.

## The Consolation Event

The number one myth currently damaging student congress is the notion that congress is merely a consolation event. Too many people see congress as the event students enter when they fail to qualify for a national tournament in policy debate, extemp, Lincoln-Douglas or oration. I am familiar with only one national summer institute which provides a special course offering to student congress people. In recent years, we have seen *Rostrum* issues devoted to various events, in the magazine's "focus on" series. We've seen Focus on Debate, Focus on Lincoln-Douglas, even Focus on Coaches. We have not seen, however, a Focus on Student Congress issue, and in fact, the number of articles printed in *Rostrum* addressing student congress over the last five years can be counted on one had.

In addition, even districts which excel in congress tend to hold the event in low esteem. This year, in a district which ranks consistently high in the national chapter rankings and typically sends a formidable compliment of congress people to NFL nation-

als, one school submitted a bill proposing that we channel the money going to the National Academy of Arts and Sciences to a new research group whose sole task would be to develop a functioning technology of time travel. This technology, once developed, would be turned over to the military, who would use it benevolently to "correct" historical injustices (kill Hitler as a baby, perhaps). The submission of a bill as ludicrous and nondebatable as this one in a district with a strong congress tradition shows how poorly esteemed congress has become, even in its historical strongholds.

## Crossover Complications

Because people see congress as an activity which requires no special training or orientation, many congress people merely "crossover" from other forensic events, applying the same techniques and styles to congress that they do in their other events. Policy debaters, LD-ers, extempers and orators often believe that, because they have been successful in their "first-love" events, they can transfer their skills to congress and achieve equal or higher success. After all, how hard can a series of three-minute speeches be to create and deliver?

This question shows, perhaps better than any other illustration, how grossly in error the notion of "transferable skills" actually is. Policy debate and Lincoln Douglas both require students to speak for approximately three minutes at certain stages of the debate. Cross examination in these activities is a perfect time match. Yet I have never heard a theorist or experienced coach assert that a policy rebuttal (1AR

especially), an LD affirmative rebuttal, or a cross examination period to be "easy." On the contrary, whole chapters of texts have been devoted to both rebuttals as well as question periods. Students whose first love is policy or LD view these short presentations in their *own* events as challenges, not to be taken lightly--yet they do not transfer this same appreciation to student congress, where every speech lasts three minutes.

## Policy Crossovers

Crossover congresspeople tend to show their true colors in congress competition. Policy debaters often fall back on both the policy debate jargon they are accustomed to as well as rebuttal-style attempts to glibly cover every argument presented thus far in the debate on a given piece of legislation. This results in both a departure from the lay communication style appropriate to congress, as well as a superficial treatment of the issues raised in the course of congressional debate. A policy rebuttalist's natural tendency is to cover everything on the flow, and, because congressional debate rests on the shoulders of not a two-member team but rather on a dozen or so individuals proposing or opposing a bill or resolution, this tendency is inappropriate to the event. Both congressional and policy debate are team activities, but in congress the teams shift as the items on the agenda are disposed of, and congressional "teams" are large in number. This presents a disorienting situation for most crossover policy debaters, who believe they must take on the entire pro or con faction single-handedly. We thus witness the

birth of a 1AR into a family where it does not belong.

## LD Crossovers

Lincoln-Douglas debaters and orators who crossover into congress tend to imagine that emotional exhortation carries as much weight in congress as it sometimes can in their respective activities. Too many of these crossovers believe that congress is merely "pretty speaking," and so ignore the fact that congress is debate, and thus requires clash and support for the positions advocated. Policy debaters attempting to flow congressional debates become frustrated at the comparative lack of structure and proof offered by L/D and OO crossovers. Experienced congress scorers feel the same.

## Extemp Crossovers

Crossover extempers probably come the closest to what student congress asks in a speaker and a speech. The primary drawbacks of an extemp style "cut and pasted" onto congressional debate are the unfamiliarity with the requirement to clash and the overly rigid organizational structures common in extemp. Congressional style prizes organization of one's arguments, but this organization should not come at the expense of a listener-friendly and fundamentally persuasive appeal. Novice congresspeople most commonly learn basic extemp's tropes and customs and often present rigidly structured, cookie-cutter speeches which even open with extemp-lifted stock introductions. In addition, extempers are generally unaccustomed to the requirement, common to all debate activities (including congressional debate), that the advocates' arguments must clash. Extemp speeches focus on topics drawn by the students; extempers are not required to follow or take part in the give-and-take of debate activities. The only extemp parallel to the burden

of clash is a weak one: the existence of a limited cross-examination of other extempers seen in District and National final rounds. Aside from this, extempers are trained not to clash, but to answer a question, and such training does not transfer well to student congress.

## Short Shrift for Student Congress

Student congress' lowly reputation can be seen in other areas as well. Many of the students I have met and taught complain that their coaches do not seem to give a fig about congress, and therefore expend little time in coaching the event or even delivering orientation lectures on proper student congress conduct. If lecture or coaching does take place, it too frequently consists of a presentation of the most commonly used motions in student congress. Beyond this, students are expected to go out and win. The lack of coaching and lecture specifically on student congress indicates how coaches' dismissal of congress can leave students to their own devices (usually falling back on the skills and techniques they have acquired from other activities) or else leave them infected with the same dismissive attitude toward congress.

Some districts go so far in their snubbing of congress as to hold only one or two congresses during the season, one of which typically, serves as the district national qualifying tournament. How students are to judge the merits of their peers based on only one or two congresses is never explained. The thinking runs something like this: "NFL has an event called student congress. We want to send as many students as possible to nationals, so why not hold a district tournament in student congress?" Why not indeed. Such token seasons denigrate congress as a unique activity which requires of students both a commitment and

a particular mindset.

The absence of legislative packets presents another cause for concern. In the district where I participated (as well as at NFL national congresses), the bills and resolutions were submitted to the district committee, screened for inappropriate material, typed up in standard formats, and then mailed to each school in the district. The result of this process was the legislative packet congresspeople would debate for the season. Over time, the district developed a two-packet process with two submission dates, to allow the debate to remain fresh and the student to remain interested in the legislation.

Naively, I assumed this practical method was in use elsewhere. After teaching at a summer institute last year, I learned that some districts and circuits handle things in a much different way. Instead of receiving a copy of each bill and resolution to be debated for the season or half the season, these districts have a new "packet" each tournament. The titles of the legislation ("A Bill To Decrease Poverty," for example) are faxed out to all participation schools. From such vague and uninformative labels, congress-people are expected to come prepared to debate the merits of the legislation. The students, saddled with such a handicap, are unable to research the specifics of each bill or resolution, and arrive at congresses with little substantive material to offer as proof of their opinions on the legislation. Indeed, they do not even get the chance to read the legislation they must debate until the day of the congress. If our intention was to design a practice guaranteed to reduce congressional debate to a contest of non-clashing assertions, we would be hard pressed to come up with a better scheme than this.

Finally, we must examine the judging pools of typical

student congresses. Student congress scorers are typically of two types: community judges and coaches. Coaches acting as scorers are presumably well-qualified to judge student congress. However, if those coaches dismiss the activity as some kind of forensic fluff, they will reward speakers for non-congressional appeals, styles and practices, since they will be ignorant of the unique requirements of congressional debate. In addition, as unfortunate as it may be, coaches are at least tempted to rank their own students higher than the students of competitor schools. Whether this happens or not can never be ascertained with certainty, but the temptation does exist.

Community scorers, while they may not have any school allegiances to worry about, are usually wholly ignorant about the specific styles, practices and nuances of congressional debate, which differ considerably from other forms of forensics. If they have prior judging experience, it is most likely in policy or LD debate, or the public address events, and their training and experience from judging these contests only partially applies to student congress. Students sincerely trying to practice student congress as a unique event will find their scores lower on the ballots of these judges, since they will fail to meet the policy, LD or public address expectations of these untrained scorers.

### Modest Proposals

Much can be done to alleviate the damage done to student congress by these trends and practices. The first order of business in reforming congress should be a commitment on the part of forensic coaches to teach congress as a unique activity, one with its own theory, ethics, and style. It may be true that congress, like policy and LD, is a debate activity; that congress speeches are largely

"extemped"; and that the purpose of a congress speech is to persuade an audience, much like an oration. But the differences between congress rightly practiced and these other events are more striking.

Policy debate addresses propositions of policy. Congress addresses such topics as well, in the form of bills. But congress also addresses resolutions, which take no outright policy step and thus are usually value or a least non-policy proposals. Because no one has yet resolved the in famous breadth vs. depth controversy, we cannot assert that policy debaters work

congress compared to policy.) The communication style prevalent in policy debates simply won't fly in most student congresses. One must eschew the jargon and the speed and content oneself with addressing three to five of the opposing faction's arguments in a speech. Flowing practices for policy debates are similar, but logistically problematic for congressional debates.

Lincoln-Douglas addresses propositions of value, while congress, in debating bills, focuses on explicit policies as well. Congressional value debate, when it occurs, may not be as rigorous as LD-ers would like it to be, but it does approximate the debates on value-laden issues in the United States Congress and in the media. Once again, we see that congress requires research into a wide variety of topics in a given season, and thus has a more broad-based focus than LD, which concerns itself with one resolution.

Extemporaneous speaking is usually highly structured, whereas congress speeches mask that structure with a more oratorical presentation. Whereas extemp tends to be more spontaneous in the topics discussed (an extemper never knows the question until 30 minutes prior to speaking on it), congresspeople seldom have the luxury of the extemper's half-hour to prepare their remarks. Because congress is *debate*, speakers cannot afford to assemble the material for a speech and rehearse 30 minutes before speaking; either their issues will be raised by another speaker or else the legislation will be acted upon and a new bill or resolution will be on the floor. Congress requires its participants to consider and keep track of the flow of the argumentation, something extempers can remain oblivious to, since extemp is not about *debate* at all.

These differences between congress and the other forensic events must be highlighted

SUPER CONGRESS WINNERS			
The Super Congress was established in 1985.			
House			
1985 Kiki	Bhatia,	Maryland	
1986 Michael	Lazar,	Illinois	
1987 Gilbert		Bradberry,	
California			
1988 Jonathan	Koppell,	New York	
1989 Paul	Peralez,	Texas	
1990 Nick	Montfort,	Texas	
1991 Carson	D. Elrod,	Kansas	
1992 Roy	Hanks,	Oklahoma	
1993 Albert	Giang,	California	
1994 Winthrop	Hayes,	Texas	
1995 Boris	Bershteyn,	California	
1996 Adam	Zirkin,	New York	
Senate			
1985 Brad	Young,	Kansas	
1986 Ted	Smith,	Missouri	
1987 Jonathan	Polak,	Texas	
1988 James	Talley,	Kansas	
1989 Carey	Eskridge,	Texas	
1990 Jeff	Prescott,	Kansas	

harder with their brains or with their eyes in the library when researching one broadly-worded topic as compared to congresspeople who must research and consider several more specifically-worded proposals for change, most of which have little to do with one another. (Although with congress as currently practiced--with a low premium placed on new issues, clash, and substantive argument--one would be right in saying that intensive research has a lower payoff value in

by coaches. But equally important, especially in countering the "consolation event" myth, coaches must play up congress' similarities to the other events. Policy and LD debaters will not scorn congress so quickly if they understand that all three events are forms of debate. Extempers will dismiss congress much more reluctantly when they are shown that, although research can be done weeks before a congress for topics that are known ahead of time, the actual preparation time student congresspeople enjoy hovers between three to five minutes, instead of thirty. And all forensic competitors should appreciate congress' balance in the types of propositions it tackle--both policy and non-policy--with equal vigor. Overall, coaches cannot turn students loose on congress and seriously expect to hear rigorous debates inkeeping with a congressional style. Congress does *not* "teach itself." The misperception that it does, contributes a great deal to the self-fulfilling prophecies of those who dismiss congress outright.

When we begin to teach congress as a unique and uniquely challenging event, crossover disdain and arrogance will diminish. I do not wish to seal congress off from any student who also participates in policy, LD or extemp. On the contrary, I believe that wide experience in the other events can only help to inform a student's congressional style and success. What crossover competitors must understand, however, is that while congress is in many ways analogous to other forensic events, the comparison is not one-to-one. Subtle differences as well as great chasms separate congress from the other events, and mature communicators should be taught to recognize that as forums change, so should practices.

In addition, the *Rostrum* should solicit articles addressing current issues in congressional debate as they

do for value and policy debate. A "Focus on Student Congress" issue would go a long way toward re-legitimizing the activity in the minds of many coaches and students. There are more than a few veteran congress competitors and serious congress coaches who have sat quietly by as their activity fell into disrespect. Many would be thrilled to hear that the national forensic community was ready to listen to their theories on the practice of this event.

Student congress seasons should be of sufficient length to allow several congresses to be held, and students aspiring to represent their districts in this event at nationals should be encouraged to make a commitment to attend as many of these congresses as possible. How discouraging it is for a serious, seasoned congressperson to attend the national qualifier only to see some dark horse win the slot to nationals after having competed at only one (or in some cases, none) of the congress tournaments prior to districts. What could alienate a student more quickly than this type of cavalier disdain for the event?

Legislation submitted to both the National congress as well as district circuit competitions should be scrutinized, honed and pro-forma. Frivolous claptrap like the time-travel bill mentioned earlier should be excluded from packets on grounds that such nonsense actually harms the activity. Debatability--the susceptibility of each side of the legislation to well-supported arguments--must be the primary concern, lest congress become a contest of dueling three-minute mini-oratories and group exhortations.

As already implied, the compilation and distribution of legislative packets must be encouraged. The practice of faxing legislation titles to participating schools can never allow the students to adequately research, brain-

storm, and seriously consider bills and resolutions. Students need to see copies of the actual legislation as it will be proposed in session, and they need to have them well before they are expected to speak knowledgeably about the bills and resolutions. The inevitable outcome of "faxed title" practices is the debasing of the activity, a positive disincentive to research, and a virtual destruction of any notion that congress should be a debate activity.

## Judging Congress

Lastly, we must give some serious thought to the judges we recruit for congress competitions. If we are uncomfortable with the notion of coaches scoring students, then community judges would be the sensible alternative. Yet because congress is both subtly and dramatically different from the other forensic events, we cannot assume that any old judge will do. Many schools hold judge clinics prior to their policy debate tournaments, to acquaint community critics with the general outlines of that activity. Why should it be any different for student congress? A typical congress requires the services of only a fraction of the judges required by a policy debate tournament. Judge clinics for congress scorers should resemble focus groups more than classroom lectures and could thus orient judges with greater speed, clarity and depth. Judges should be briefed on what to look for in student congress speeches. They should be taught the rudiments of parliamentary procedure in order to appreciate students who make perceptive motions from the floor. And a small pool of such trained judges can be used again and again, gradually increasing the quality of criticism from year to year. Coaches could still be used as parliamentarians, since they are presumably conversant in proce-

dure, and this would allow a community judge to handle the scoring of speeches. A variety of nomination procedures could be utilized so that students are recognized not just for their speechifying but also for their procedural savvy. And such a reform would free scorers from having to keep track of procedural trivia while trying to compose meaningful comments on those tiny congress ballots in time to hear the next speaker.

## **Conclusion**

Student congress as an NFL-recognized activity has nearly reached its sixtieth birthday. Compared to venerable events such as policy debate, this span may make congress seem like a spring chicken. But compare Congress to Lincoln-Douglas (recognized in 1979 and thus not even of legal majority) and you will begin to perceive some of the significance of this dismissal of congress in the forensic community. We must begin a discussion on student congress--its strengths, its weaknesses, how it can and should be improved.

One possible model is that of NFL's national congresses, which are run in an imminently sensible manner, guided by the twin goals of fairness to all competitors and the encouragement of good debate. Policy debate may be more populous and glamorous; the opportunity to help forge rule revisions for Lincoln-Douglas may be more exciting; but neither event provides students with the precise body of skills and styles that congressional debate can. We must not allow student congress to fade away into obscurity, facetiousness, or decadence.

*(James Talley, a former NFL student congress national champion (Senate, 1988), is coauthor (with Gary Harmon) of In Search of the Common Good: A Holistic Approach to Student Congress.)*