

# ABOUT CONTROVERSY



by  
James M. Copeland

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Mr. Chad Henson has written in opposition to the new Controversy event. As a former debater and national circuit debate coach I am delighted to debate Mr. Henson about Controversy either as the *affirmative* on the policy proposition *Resolved: Controversy will significantly increase speech participation and education in U.S. high schools* or the *negative* on the L/D topic *Resolved: That Controversy is unnecessary and harmful*.

The initial argument made by Mr. Henson is "Controversy, if it gains a large participatory base, will break up the current cliques and cause chaos in the [forensic] community."

Arthur Kruger in his book *Modern Debate: It's Logic and Strategy*: points out six ways an argument may be refuted -- three indirect and three direct. The indirect: An argument may be insignificant, inconsistent or irrelevant. The direct: An argument may be doubted (not enough evidence), denied (proven false) or retorted (turned; the opposite proven).

Mr. Henson's first argument may be dismissed by every method -- let me count the ways.

- Insignificance: Mr. Henson shows no impact if such cliques are disturbed or broken up
- Inconsistency: The "cliques" were not thrown into chaos by earlier introductions of L/D debate and Duo Interp.
- Irrelevance: The comfort of established cliques must be irrelevant to establishing educational change, else there would be no educational progress.
- Doubt: Mr. Henson asserts the existence of such cliques *a priori*; if his convenient taxonomy is true, little proof is provided.
- Denial: In many programs many students participate in two or three different "cliques". Extemp (the Speech clique) and Debate and L/D (the debate clique) are the largest cross entry at nationals. Number two? Oratory and the Interps.
- Retort: The existence of these cliques (if indeed they exist) is not a positive force and the cliques should be disturbed! To consign a kid to one clique, "You are a debater" is the intellectual equivalent to consigning a kid to one high school social subset: "You are a grease" or "You are a jock"!

Mr. Henson's second argument is that "Controversy should be rejected because "The two existing types of debate, Lincoln-Douglas (LD) and Policy are struggling to keep participants beyond the novice year"

Please note my turn: Mr. Henson admits the reason why the Council thought Controversy was needed: too many kids are rejecting debate now! And such struggling began long before Donus Roberts invented Controversy and is not the fault of Controversy.

What Mr. Henson defines as his "greatest worry"

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is Controversy's greatest strength. In the words of Mr. Henson:

"Perhaps the greatest worry of the debate purists is the appeal Controversy will have to novice debaters. The novi will **not be intimidated** by having to go up and debate alone (a fear of novice LDers) and will not be scared to confront advanced theory and rapid rates of delivery (major fears of novice Policy debaters). Controversy offers an easy format where you have the support of a teammate. This "safety event" will appeal to many novice debaters looking for the easy way out or taking debate as a required class." (Emphasis mine)

Mr. Henson proves the Council's point: Beginning kids **will** be attracted to try Controversy but perhaps be fearful and **not** try other debate events.

"Controversy will teach poor argumentation skills" argues Mr. Henson. Let me three point that: First, no evidence; second the event has barely started, how can he predict; third, a turn: won't kids truly learn argument once they are freed from tubs of briefs they did not write, cases given to them at camp, and "canned" kritiks which have little relationship to the specific proposition being debated? Perhaps with a new topic each month and no camp evidence and briefs available--kids will, using ar-  
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umentation texts, coaching, and their own brains, learn to write their own arguments!

Mr. Henson takes umbrage in particular to rules prohibiting counterplans and kritiks. One could certainly argue that the above mentioned are two of the culprits which caused the rapid decline in policy debate participation.

Mr. Henson, who by his own admission is a college debater, believes the ban on the kritik in Controversy is "...a result of too much liquor consumed by the NFL's Executive Council." This *ad hominem* fallacy is unworthy of any true debater. I'm sure the Council would never claim that most kritiks are composed by college debaters in a haze of pot smoke!

And if students wish to use kritiks and counterplans they are free to do so in policy debate. The fact that controversy bans these items is no more egregious than the ban on Prose material in Poetry. Policy and Controversy are different events (policy is information processing, Controversy is public forum) and have different goals. Students may choose which they wish to pursue.

When one wishes to debate before the public (i.e. the Presidential Debates, the original Lincoln-Douglas debates) one's focus must be on real world issues -- not arcane argumentation theory. In a debate about reform of social security on the floor of Congress, will a legislator present an anarchy counterplan or a language critique? I rather doubt it.

The new Controversy event does not eliminate Policy Debate any more than the adoption of L/D in 1980 eliminated Policy Debate. Policy is available (with spread, spew, kritiks, counterplans, Foucault and TOC legs) for all who wish to participate, and many do. But if people vote with their feet and leave an activity (scores of schools have dropped Policy Debate) that activity needs to look to its internal problems (i.e. year long topics, expense, travel, speed, off topic argument, lack of coaches) and not blame other events for its decline.

Mr. Henson is very concerned that college debaters and debate coaches are not permitted to judge Controversy rounds. Indeed they are not. Controversy is public debate and hopes to teach students to speak to the ordinary citizen. Just as lawyers are barred from jury service so college debaters will not judge Controversy. The NFL believes an event which teaches students to speak to citizens will be of great educational value in a student's later life when they will be addressing juries, sales meetings, campaign audiences, city councils, church congregations and other real life communication situations.

Mr. Henson claims that "Prohibiting college debaters will prevent the participants from getting meaningful feedback from those who debate on a higher level." I contend that prohibition of college debater judges will keep Controversy from turning into Policy Debate.

Mr. Henson next argues "These rules seem to have been designed to ensure that Controversy will never improve." Wrong! The rules have been designed to make sure Controversy is not turned into Policy by the demands of college debater judges. Controversy's improvement must be measured not by the standard of policy debate but by the standard of Public Forum debate: have students learned to effectively argue to citizen voters.

Insulted or not Mr. Henson, you and your college teammates will have to confine your wisdom to Policy and L/D. Too allow you

to judge Controversy is about as sensible as letting you judge Duo. You don't wish to judge the event according to its own goals; you wish to impose your goals upon it.

The reason why most high school debate coaches won't let their principal see a Policy Debate and most college debate coaches won't let their college president see a Policy Debate is that Policy is "inside baseball." Only a few elite judges are allowed to judge the elite teams and no outside thinking is allowed into the *inner sanctum*. Judge strikes and mutual preference judge assignments guarantee this inbreeding.

But I agree with my worthy opponent that Policy Debate may be elitist. Just as the elite in Boston said "the Cabots speak only to the Lowells, and the Lowells speak only to God", in National Circuit Policy Debate the debaters speak only to mutually acceptable "A" rated judges after their coaches have struck judges considered unacceptable. Many would argue that there is nothing wrong with this. In fact, Arthur Kruger makes a strong case that policy debate should be elite:

"If there is any analogy between academic debate and other kinds, it is between academic debate and that carried on in expert administrative and legislative government committees, before those "whose training and specialized experience give them superiority in the technical aspects of the problem."

But not every NFL event should be so specialized. Just because Humorous Interp is funny does not mean that all NFL events must also be funny. Each event has its own mission.

"My Father's house has many mansions" saith the Bible and Mr. Henson will discover that a "single pair of shoes does not fit all feet" (Confucious?). NFL offers to students a smorgasbord of opportunity by sponsoring 16 different events: Policy debate, Lincoln Douglas, Barbara Jordan Debate, Controversy, Legislative Debate, Oratory, Extempore Speaking, Duo Interp, Humorous Interp, Dramatic Interp, Prose, Poetry, Commentary, Expository, Storytelling and Impromptu. Each event designed to teach different skills.

Students may specialize in a single event or experience a variety of contests. In short, each student may exercise free will. Mr. Henson's heroine Ayn Rand would be pleased. Ms. Rand's hero Nathaniel Branden would be *very* pleased! And Foucault himself wrote "...nothing is more arrogant than trying to dictate to others."

NFL needed an event which trained students to debate current issues before lay audiences, school administrators, and on local access TV. Controversy is the right start in that direction. Controversy has no function if it becomes *Policy: Part Deux*.

Mr. Henson took his inspiration from Eminem. I take my inspiration from Lennon and McCartney.

Controversy? "Let It Be!"



(James M. Copeland coached National Circuit Policy Debate for 25 years. His teams closed out TOC, NCFL, Emory's Barkley Forum and reached the finals once and semis four times at NFL nationals. He has been NFL Secretary since 1986. He is the author of Cross Examination in Debate)