

# **A Coach's Notes<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Connecticut Debate Association**

### **Westhill High School**

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**Resolved: Iran should comply with the UN-sponsored uranium exchange agreement.**

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## **Introduction**

This is the second edition of the 2000-10 CDA season. Past editions may be found on the CDA website, <http://ctdebate.org> .

I did not attend the tournaments this month, so there is no accompanying flowchart. However, I would like to thank the Greenwich team for providing me with a copy of their notes from the final round. They served as the basis for some of my examples below.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

## **Point of View**

This month's resolution was intended to be different. Most of our debates have been from the perspective of the United States. The most direct interpretation of this month's resolution is from the point of view of Iran. Arguments based on the perspective of other nations are considerably weaker. We will consider why in detail below.

Why debate this sort of resolution?

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## Whose Point of View?

Debate always involves a point of view. We have two sides, Affirmative and Negative, and we require all teams to be able to support either side in different rounds. For a well chosen resolution there are usually disagreements over the absolute impact, and disagreements over differential impacts on different groups. In other words, some will be affected differently from others, and a major point of debate is often: “Who matters more?”<sup>2</sup>

Consider last month’s resolution on US health care. I am certain that every team argued the resolution from the perspective of one or more US-based groups: individuals (health care in general), the elderly (impact on Medicare), the poor (impact on Medicaid), the rich (higher taxes), insurance companies (competitive economic effects), doctors (pay, efficiency, control over profession) or health care companies (profits, efficiency, control over business).

But why couldn’t you make the following argument:

My first contention is that the public option will irreparably harm the Chinese people. The public option will result in deficit spending and a decline in the value of US Government debt. China holds over \$2.2 trillion of US Government debt, the bulk of their foreign currency reserves, essentially their total savings.

Or this:

The public option will significantly damage health care in third world countries. By increasing the availability of health care, the public option will increase the need for doctors and nurses. Rising demand will pull health care professionals—doctors and nurses—from foreign countries to the US. The current “brain drain” to the US from poor countries will become a flood, and it is the poor who will suffer.

Both of these are perfectly valid arguments. But no one seems to have made them. Why not? One reason is that probably no one thought of them. There wasn’t much in the packet about Chinese foreign currency reserves or third world medical care. But if we worry about the impact of global warming on polar bears, why don’t we worry about the impact of US public policy decisions on other countries? While China’s monetary reserves may not be as important as extending medical care to America’s poor, how can one argue that extending first world medical care to America’s poor is more important than providing basic care to the many more and much poorer citizens of the third world?

## Whose Point of View Matters?

When analyzing a resolution it is always useful to ask who benefits and who is harmed. You are likely to come up with a lot of different answers, maybe more than you can cover in a single round of debate. Every affected party represents a different point of view. You must choose among them.

There are a number of interested parties to this month’s resolution. Certainly the future of the Iranian uranium enrichment program is important to the Iranians. Within the country there are a number of actors with different concerns and goals: the current

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<sup>2</sup> For those of you who like big words, I offer the following from one of my former economics teachers: “Interpersonal comparisons of utility are fraught with difficulty,” which is essentially the same point.

government, a variety of other government institutions, the clergy, the opposition, the students. And those are just the ones mentioned in the packet.

Outside of country there are a number of interested parties. The US and Europe have been the strongest voices condemning Iranian uranium enrichment. Russia and China are more ambiguous in their attitude. Many believe that Israel will take military action rather than permit Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. The Arab countries have mixed feelings: the Arabs are traditional adversaries of Iran, but all are adversaries of Israel; the Arabs are Sunni while Iran is Shiite, but all are Muslim.

### **Why Is One Point of View Better than Another?**

We argue many resolutions from a US perspective without thinking. It's only natural. Most people automatically argue from their own point of view, even when they claim to be arguing from another perspective.

Certainly the majority of CDA resolutions have been primarily about US concerns. For US citizens, it is natural to look at most problems from US perspective, and to assume everyone else does too. That, unfortunately, is also a common foreign criticism of US policy, even though there is no reason to think foreigners behave any differently. The purpose of setting a resolution like this one is to force you to look at the world from a different perspective, to put you in Iranian shoes.

The parties listed above all have a valid interest in the Iranian uranium enrichment program. There are a number of questions that you can ask to try to prioritize those interests:

*Who must act to implement the resolution?* While there are US and UN sanctions in effect against Iran, and there has been some talk of various parties taking military action against Iranian nuclear facilities, only Iran can implement the resolution as stated. The subject of the resolution is "Iran" and the verb is "should comply" not "should be compelled to comply." I believe this argument dominates all others.

As an aside, there is another important difference between the November resolution and the October resolution. No agent was specified in the October resolution: "A 'public option' *should be included*..." The Affirmative needs to justify a particular component of a national health care program. The Affirmative does not need to decide who would be best to implement it.

*Who is most affected by the resolution?* One has to be omniscient to truly answer this question. But much of debate consists of comparing the harms or benefits for one group to those of another. In the short run it seems the greatest impact will likely be on the people of Iran. Whether Iran complies or not will affect their politics, economy and international status immediately. The impact on other countries will likely take longer, though it could be greater in the long run. .

*Who pays the costs of the resolution?* Here "pay" must be seen in a broad sense. Some experts in the packet state that adopting the resolution is a better economic choice for Iran. But there are costs in terms of pride, national strength and security, international position and influence, political position, etc., that must be considered. Again, in this case the

greatest immediate impacts are on Iran, and different groups in Iran value them differently.

*What individual, municipal, state, corporate, sovereign or other rights are involved?* Clearly this resolution involves the rights of sovereign states. Iran claims that this is a purely internal matter. Other nations beg to differ. Most would consider healthcare policy to be a national matter, though as noted above, it may have international ramifications.

*What laws or treaty obligations are involved?* As the packet states, one of the issues in the debate over the Iranian nuclear program is the competing rights of a sovereign state and its obligations as a signatory of the UN Charter, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But in each case Iran is the focus of those rights and obligations.

*What financial agreements or contracts are involved?* Not really relevant here, but this would be a consideration in other debates.

*What is custom or common law?* Again, this is not really relevant, though Iran claims it is invoking customary rights of a sovereign state. While custom may seem a weak argument, much of what we do is dictated by custom. Common law is an important factor in judicial systems derived from Great Britain.

## **Sufficient Grounds**

Another question to consider when choosing a point of view for debating a resolution is whether that point of view will lead to an interesting debate. This may sound like an odd idea. After all, isn't the point of debate to come up with arguments that will squash your opponents like bugs and provide them with no possibility of serious rebuttal?

Actually, no, unless your idea of a good basketball game is UConn against a high school team. If a contest is going to be interesting to participate in and enjoyable to watch, the contestants need to be evenly matched.

In debate that means that the interpretation of the resolution must permit both sides sufficient grounds to make a convincing argument. One can argue that an Affirmative interpretation of the resolution is not topical if it is so restrictive that it doesn't permit the Negative a reasonable chance to debate.

Point of view could be subject to the same test. Arguing that Iranian compliance should be based on US interest doesn't leave the Negative much to work with. There is almost no one in the US who believes that that Iran should not comply with the UN resolutions or continue to enrich uranium. The Negative might argue that Iranian non-compliance would justify a stronger US response, even military action, permitting the US to take control of events in the Middle East. But it is a stretch to argue one should take by force what could be obtained peacefully.

## **How to Answer Arguments from the “Wrong” Point of View**

Just because the resolution best corresponds to a particular point of view, doesn't mean that other points of view aren't relevant. But arguments from those points of view are likely to be much weaker. And arguments from the wrong point of view may simply fail. One of the most useful questions a debater can ask of a contention is whether it serves its

purpose: on the Affirmative, does it provide a reason to adopt the resolution; on the Negative, does it provide a reason to reject the resolution. A useful variation of this question, when analyzing your opponents' contentions, is, "Can I agree with this contention and still win the debate?"

Consider several contentions used at the tournament:

*A1: The uranium exchange program benefits the Iranian economy.*

*A2: Iran can't be trusted with enriched uranium*

*A2a: Iran cannot be trusted on an unregulated nuclear path.*

*A3: The only reason for Iran to refuse the agreement is because it seeks nuclear weapons.*

*N1: The exchange program will not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons*

*N2: The exchange program unfairly singles out Iran compared to other sovereign nations.*

*N3: The exchange program is unenforceable and impractical.*

Only the first Affirmative contention and the second Negative contentions have any direct bearing from Iran's perspective. Many have noted that enrichment is a lot more expensive than purchasing reactor fuel from existing nuclear powers. If Iran's goal is simply civilian nuclear power it makes more sense to pursue it economically. On the negative, Iran has pointed to the existing nuclear nations as evidence that, as a sovereign nation, it is being treated unfairly. Both of these a clear reason for Iran to choose to comply or reject the uranium exchange program.

Consider the two versions of the second Affirmative contention and the third Affirmative contention. If Iran can't be trusted, that may be a good reason to force them to comply, but how is it a reason for them to agree to comply? As the Negative, I not only can agree with the statement that Iran can't be trusted, I can turn the contention against the Affirmative. If Iran can't be trusted, won't their compliance just be a ploy? For the third Affirmative contention, so what if Iran's only reason to refuse is because it is seeking nuclear weapons? Again, that's a good Negative argument: Iran should refuse to comply because it is their sovereign right to develop nuclear weapons!

We can look at the first and third Negative contentions the same way. If the exchange program won't prevent Iran from developing nukes, why shouldn't they comply? They still get nukes, and they get any other benefits claimed by the Affirmative. If the plan is unenforceable, it should have the same appeal to Iran. Only if the plan is impractical—depending on what that means—would it be a reason for Iran to refuse to comply. These are both good reasons why the United Nations should consider a different approach to dealing with Iran's nuclear program, but not good reasons for Iran to refuse to comply with the proposed exchange programs.

There are ways that some of the ideas behind A2, A3, N1 and N3 could be transformed into useful contentions.

*A2: Compliance will advance Iran's nuclear goals.*

- *Compliance will demonstrate that Iran can be trusted and will gain international support for its civilian nuclear energy program.*

*A3: Compliance will have no effect on Iran's military nuclear program, if such exists.*

- *A military program is necessarily top secret and nations have kept them separate from their civilian nuclear programs.*
- *Since the agreement only affects low enriched uranium for civilian use, it cannot impact any military program Iran may have.*

*NI/N3: Compliance will not obtain any of the benefits claimed for Iran claimed by the Affirmative*

- *The plan is unenforceable, impractical, and will not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons if that is its intention*
- *Once the United Nations realizes this, it will continue to suspect, harass and sanction Iran, even if Iran is fully in compliance.*
- *Iran could likely lose the uranium exported for processing.*

The revised Affirmative contentions translate the impact on foreign countries into terms that matter to Iran. The revised Negative contention retains the theme that the exchange is a bad plan, but makes an argument that its flaws will hurt Iran's interests.

## **Stick to Your Guns**

Just because your opponent uses an argument in a debate that doesn't make it a good argument, even if your opponent repeats the argument several times and says it's a good argument. It doesn't even insure that the argument supports your opponent's case. Your job is to take the argument apart and demonstrate—using questioning, logic, reason and evidence—that it isn't a good argument, and even turn it against your opponents if you can.

But even if you do demonstrate your opponents' argument is bad, or turn it against them, don't expect the other team to agree with you and stop making that argument. It's also unlikely that the judge to stand up in the middle of the round and say "You're right. Let's drop that argument and continue." But if you are persistent and persuasive, in the long run, the ballots will fall your way.