A Coach's Notes[1]

Everett Rutan
Connecticut Debate Association
ejrutan3@ctdebate.org

Connecticut Debate Association
Fitch High School, November 9, 2024

TH, as the US, should favor increased tariffs.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This edition relates to the November 9, 2024, CDA tournament and topic. Previous year's editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site. Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Joel Barlow presented in two formats, transcript, and flow chart.

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. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. 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. 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.

Embracing the Burden

If you listened closely to the final round at Fitch you might have heard the PM present a plan under the motion that would increase tariffs on imports from China from 2% to 7%. Neither team made much use of this detail, but it is a useful entry into a discussion of the role of a plan in debate. It also continues the discussion in last month's Notes about framework—motion, definitions, interpretation, plan, central issue, weighing mechanism—which is not argument, but provides the context for the arguments presented in the debate.

What is a plan?

A plan or model provides additional detail on the position a team supports. With a policy motion—a motion that proposes to do something—Gov will want to clear about what actions are needed to put the motion into effect. If Opp chooses to run a counterplan, Opp will want to be clear about what actions are needed to put the counterplan into effect.

While rarely thought of as a "plan", the status quo is a plan composed of the various mechanisms that presently exist. If Opp chooses to defend the status quo, or if Gov initially positions the motion against the status quo, either or both should make clear those aspects of the status quo that are relevant to the motion and Gov plan. Debaters need to know what they are arguing against as much as what they are arguing for.

Parts of a plan

A plan consists of the following components:

- An agent who is responsible for administering the plan, i.e., who's going to do it?
- One or more mandates, i.e., what is going to be done?
- An enforcement mechanism, i.e., how can you be sure it will be done?
- Funding and staffing, i.e., what resources are needed and how will they be provided?
- Any additional items necessary to support the four above.

Most of the time you don't need all of these, and don't necessarily need a lot of detail. You need just enough to support the arguments you intend to make and no more. You have a limited amount of speaking time, and you don't want to waste it. But you also don't want to be caught short by the opposition when they explain why your argument can't be evaluated because you haven't explained how the motion will happen.

Think of the plan in terms of the issues you intend to raise and the arguments you intend to make. Ask yourself "what do I need to know about the world to explain why the argument is correct?"

For this month's motion on tariffs, most of the details you need already exist in the status quo. The US already has tariffs in place, so there is a bureaucracy with staff, funding, and a means of enforcement. A good PMC will briefly note this to cover that base and also to indicate these aren't issues of contention.

What Gov does need to specify is exactly what are "increased tariffs": what goods and services will be covered, from which countries, and how much will they be increased by? If you are making a general argument that tariffs in general are too low and all should be raised you get one answer; if you are looking at specific industries or targeting specific countries you get another.

What can be included in the plan?

Like your framework and arguments, the plan should be based in the motion. The technical term is "fiat" from the Latin, "let it be." This allows the debate to focus on the consequences of the motion rather than on how likely the motion is to come to pass. Would you rather argue about whether raising tariffs are a good idea or not, or would you rather get into the minutiae of how many elected officials would actually support raising precisely which tariffs and by precisely how much?

But what can you fiat? First, Gov's plan must relate to the motion. If the topic is tariffs Gov can't propose a health care plan. More specifically, this motion is about increasing tariffs, which could raise revenue. But Gov is limited to the general benefits of higher government revenue, they cannot direct the money to any specific purpose like health care or job training. (They could say the money would help enforce the tariffs if Opp raised that objection.) The motion isn't about health care or job training, and allowing Gov to bring those in would muddy the debate.

These limits also apply to an Opp counterplan and are one justification for the argument that counterplans be "competitive" in the sense that the counterplan and plan can't both be acted upon. The debate would lose focus if the topic is tariffs and Opp could say, "tariffs are well and good, but spending billions more on health care is way better." Similarly, Opp can't propose sanctions, which could be implemented alongside tariffs. However, Opp could propose banning certain imports rather than applying tariffs: both are about trade policy regarding imports, and you can't apply a tariff to something that can't be imported.

Avoiding the burden of the motion

There are four mistakes a team can make when presenting a plan:

- Presenting plan details that exceed the fiat available to you, as discussed above.
- Proposing an overelaborate plan that takes up a lot of time but provides no argumentative benefit.
- Similar to the first, presenting plan details that are not used. Anything you don't intend to use is wasting time you could use to present something else that advances your side.

- Presenting plan details solely to limit disadvantages that could arise from adopting the motion.

It's this last item that brings us back to where this essay started: the PM in the final round presented a plan to raise tariffs on imports from China from 2% to 7%. It wasn't really used by either team, other than a brief suggestion by the MO that a 7% tariff won't end child labor. At the least, it was 10 seconds of the PMC that could have been used for something else.

I suspect the purpose of this plan provision was to avoid the disadvantages presented in the first Opp contention, that tariffs would raise prices to consumers and producers who buy imported goods and materials. I was surprised the MG did not use it this way in rebuttal. It didn't matter in the debate.

But it is worth noting because I see Gov teams try to avoid the worst of the motion in this fashion all the time. It's a bad tactic because it almost always weakens the Gov case and provides the means for an Opp victory.

Any good motion, if adopted, has disadvantages. There would be no point in debating a motion that didn't. The motion also has advantages. Each team, Gov and Opp, has the burden to accept these and show how and why one outweighs the other. This leads to clash, which ensures a good debate which is a joy to watch, participate in, and high speaker points for all involved.

The Burden of Tariffs

Tariffs raise prices to producers and consumers who rely on imports. They are limits on free trade and globalization. Tariffs also protect domestic industries and jobs, and are instruments of foreign policy which can be used to influence or compel behavior by other countries. Gov needs to show the former is a price worth paying for the latter; Opp that the cost exceeds the benefits. That is what this month's debate should be about.

One interpretation of what Gov is doing here is that they want to raise tariffs just enough to protect domestic industries and jobs, and to influence China, but not enough to cause inflation. This sort of knife-edge solution is unlikely to be possible. Certainly there is no evidence that raising tariffs from 2% to 7% is just right. Note I have seen teams present a plan such as "we are going to raise tariffs just enough to do X but not enough to do Y." Fiat is not a magic wand.

"Just so" plans provide an easy line of attack for the Opposition. In the final, Opp could have focused on the Gov plan. It is fairly easy to argue that increasing tariffs on imports from China from 2% to 7% will have almost no impact. Use what you know:

- The Trump and Biden administrations both touted tariffs significantly higher than 7% on specific countries and items.
- Prices fluctuate by 5% up and down all the time: stocks, groceries, cars, you name it.

- The Fed's target for inflation is 2% per year, not 0%. Total inflation over the past 4 years has been significantly more than 5%.
- Yes, a 5-percentage point increase is an increase, and no one likes to pay more. But it is easily accommodated by a small price rise here, a small shift in what you buy or how you produce things, a tougher negotiation with suppliers.

Opp arguing that Gov will cause inflation is exactly the wrong approach: Gov's plan will have no significant impact, in debate jargon, no solvency. That is instantly fatal.

The Targeted Constructive

When my partner and I debated I was the Second Affirmative/First Negative speaker, the equivalent of Member of Government and Leader of Opposition in our Parli format. My objective in both of those speaking positions was the same: precisely target our opponent's case and leave no argument standing.

This is a step beyond the advice that I give to new debaters, and which appears to be followed by most of the debaters I judge. That advice can be summarized in the mantra "the contentions are my friends." Essentially, if in any constructive you start either on Gov and then move to Opp, or on Opp and then move to Gov, and present or cover each contention in their original order, you will give a well-organized, better than average speech which will be easy for the Judge to follow. The PM presents the Gov contentions. The LO presents the Opp contentions and then replies to each of the Gov contentions (or vice versa). The MG and the MO each reply to all of the Gov then all of the Opp (or vice versa) contentions. The rebuttals should summarize the round by voting issues, but even then a rebuttal organized by the contentions is better than a disorganized or unfocused rebuttal speech.

But I also tell debaters that this is not the best way to organize your speeches. Your objective is to persuade the Judge to vote for your side by explaining why it is superior to that of your opponents. If you simply follow the contentions on each side, you are clashing, but clashing in two separate silos.

Why not clash directly! As LO, if some of your case directly opposes the Gov case, why not position it that way. Only separate out as an Opp contention offense that is truly new to the round. This has several advantages:

- It saves time in that you don't repeat the same argument twice, once as one of your contentions and again in response to a Gov contention.
- It often provides a stronger rebuttal, for example, "not only is my opponent's argument incorrect in arguing something good happens, but in fact something bad happens." This is known as a "turn" in debate jargon.
- It usually impresses the Judge because it demonstrates both a command of the arguments and a clear appreciation of the other team.

I'm going to use the final round at Fitch to show how this can be done.

The PMC and an LOC Re-do

The table summarizes the arguments made in the PMC and LOC in the final round at Fitch. (For more details, see my transcribed notes on this website.). Government contentions are numbered as "G1", Opp's as "O2", etc.

Gov	Opp
G1: Tariffs will improve the US economy • US has a trade deficit • Tariffs produce revenue • Era of high tariffs was one of US manufacturing dominance G2: Tariffs will help US diplomacy • Tariffs are preferred to sanctions in protecting trade and keeping allies • Tariffs send a message on child labor G3: Tariffs will resurrect US manufacturing • WTO led to small decline in prices but big loss of industrial jobs	O1: Tariffs will hurt everyday Americans • Tariffs are a tax which will raise prices to consumers and manufacturers • Tariffs make US produced goods more expensive so will reduce exports O2: Tariffs harm technological progress • Deprive consumers of high-tech foreign goods • Make green energy more expensive O3: Tariffs harm US geopolitically • Free trade lowers prices and binds trading partners • Tariffs unite our enemies *Rebuttal:* G1: Gov never shows how trade deficit has harmed US • US quality of life improved since WWII • US labor expensive, jobs won't come back G2: Tariffs will unite the BRICS • China will be forced to trade with them • Won't impact child labor as goods sold elsewhere G3: compare to O2

The Gov case could be structured a bit better, as the first and third contentions are about economics, the second foreign relations. Always best to put like with like.

But compare to the Opp case. The first Opp contention, plus material in the rebuttal section, directly oppose G1 and G3. The third Opp contention, plus material in rebuttal, opposes G2. While the LO compares G3 with O2 as rebuttal—he was running out of time at this point—O2 is a new issue, technology.

So, why not structure the LOC as follows:

My opponents presented three contentions, but really only two issues: the economic impact of tariffs and the foreign policy impacts. I will treat them in that order, and then introduce a third issue: the impact on technological progress.

The first and third Gov contentions are about economics, essentially that tariffs will reduce the trade deficit, raise revenue, and bring manufacturing jobs back to the US.

Start with the fact that tariffs are a tax on imports. This will raise prices directly for imported goods purchased by consumers, and indirectly as manufacturers who rely on imported raw materials and parts raise prices to compensate. We agree these higher prices will reduce imports and help one side of the trade deficit. But they will also make US goods more expensive, making our exports less attractive. Overall, there will be little improvement in the trade deficit, and it could actually worsen.

I've noted the harm to consumers with higher prices, a disadvantage of tariffs. They won't see any compensation with higher wages from returning manufacturing jobs. Again, note imported materials and parts go up in price, so US manufacturing is less competitive. US labor is already expensive, which is why the jobs left. They are unlikely to return.

Finally, the economy is very different from before WWII, and especially since before WWI. US income and quality of life are much improved. That century-old experience is not relevant to our discussion of today's economy.

Concluding on economics, US consumers and manufacturers will be harmed, not helped, with little or no benefit to the trade deficit or useful government revenue.

Next let's talk about the impacts on foreign relations. Free trade lowers prices and binds countries together. Tariffs are the opposite of free trade. Tariffs raise prices, reduce trade, and push countries apart.

Whether tariffs are better than sanctions—as Gov claims—is not the issue in today's debate. The issue is whether higher tariffs are good policy. The countries that are exposed to increased US tariffs will almost certainly have cause to work together to reduce or overcome the effect of US tariffs. That will bind our enemies together, rather than drawing our partners closer to us.

Gov also says tariffs will send a message on child labor. But we have no explanation from the Government team as to how this will happen. Tariffs raise the price of imports to the US. The goods we don't import can still be sold elsewhere, so they will still be produced however they are now. Gov has no solvency on this point.

Clearly on diplomacy, we have shown you why, rather than improving the position of the US, tariffs are more likely to cause harms to our foreign relations. This turns the second Gov contention against them.

Finally, we'd like to introduce a third issue, technological progress. Other countries produce some goods that are superior to those made in the US, Chinese electric vehicles for instance. Some of those goods are going to be critical to address problems like climate change, such as green energy products like solar panels and wind turbines. By making these more expensive we lose the benefit of critical technology and are less able to face the challenges of the future.

For these reasons—economics, foreign policy, technology—you must reject the motion.

This is certainly less than 8 minutes, and the LO would need to fill out the arguments more than I have done here. But it is a direct response to the PMC—pure clash—organized in a way the Judge can follow, even if a bit different from the order used by the PM. It turns the Gov's advantages into disadvantages, or advantages for Opp. It introduces new offense on technology for Opp.

This sort of speech takes practice. More than practice, it requires a new mindset: don't present the Opp case you wrote during case prep! I'm not saying don't prepare an Opp case. Rather, think about your Opp case as a series of arguments that you may or may not present, and which you will rearrange to best advantage when and while you hear what the PM says. You may even add arguments you didn't think of during case prep.

Give it a try. You will probably mess up the first few times, but once you learn, your Opp will be greatly improved.

And there is no reason the MG and MO can't use this technique. Take a look at your notes from the tournament, or take a look at mine, and see how you might restructure your constructive.

RFD

This is an edited version of the RFD I wrote for the final round at Fitch.

I vote Opp primarily because they give me a mechanism for their impacts, where Gov relies on assertion or correlation.

Specifically on Gov:

- Tariffs will boost the US economy because we had a trade deficit in 2023, and the US economy grew when we had tariffs from 1860's to the 1940's.
- Tariffs will boost US diplomacy by supporting free trade (seriously?) and sending a warning on child labor.
- Tariffs will resurrect manufacturing in the US because it declined since the rise of the World Trade Organization and the highest tariffs were set in 1933 (Great Depression anyone?).

While on Opp:

- Tariffs will hurt Americans as it is a tax which will raise prices.

- Tariffs will hurt workers by raising the cost of imported raw materials, which will force manufacturers to either raise prices or lay off workers to cut costs.
- The increase in the cost of imports means tariffs won't help the trade deficit.
- Tariffs will stymie progress by making high tech goods created elsewhere more or too expensive, e.g., Chinese electric vehicles, e.g., Chinese green energy products like solar panels.
- Tariffs will hurt US foreign policy, as free trade binds allies like Canada and Mexico to us, while tariffs against China will cause closer unity among our enemies like Russia, Iran. and North Korea.

I'm not saying the Gov impacts cannot occur, just that Gov never explains how tariffs led to growth, how they support free trade, how they would affect child labor, or how they would resurrect US manufacturing. A mechanism exists for growth and manufacturing; child labor would require a more specific plan; tariffs are not considered a boost to free trade by anyone.

The MG, in response to the LOC, provides some responses that seem to agree with Opp. For example: rising prices will incentivize increased production in the US, and some of these might be blue collar jobs; higher prices will spur investment in technology; and, China might lower prices to compensate for the tariffs and maintain sales. These are generally answered by the MO by referring back to the LO's arguments. (Note a better answer would have been to note here Gov accepts Opp's inflation disadvantage, and, as they are secondary effects, even if they do occur are unlikely to completely compensate.)

Otherwise, the constructives were well structured, though Opp spent more time than I would recommend on their own case (5:50 and 5:30 respectively), while the MG spent 6 minutes on Gov before turning to Opp. The rebuttals were both Barlow-traditional "three questions", but no one started by reminding me of the weighing mechanism, leaving it implied.

Overall a good round.

There was one odd point. Gov gives a plan—raising tariffs on China from 2 to 7 percent—that goes both unused and unchallenged. I didn't know offhand what annual imports are from China (looking it up $500+ billion in 2023), but even a wild guess of $1 trillion this is only a $50 billion ($25 billion on the real figure) bump, and probably not noticeable compared to how prices jump around in a large market. I thought Gov intended to use it to blunt the inflation argument, but they never did.

On Opp I would have challenged this on two grounds. The simplest is significance, as China and US consumers are both likely to brush off the increase, so Gov cannot achieve any of its impacts. Compare to tariffs already applied by Trump-1.0, some continued by Biden, and the 20% for friends, 60% for enemies, and closing the Mexican border bandied about by Trump-2.0.

The larger reason is Gov is avoiding the motion, "TH, as the US, should favor higher tariffs." The wording suggests this is a general question. There are likely some specific

cases where almost everyone would favor higher tariffs. If we accept Gov's "7% on China", why couldn't I argue a much stronger case of say 50% on products suspected made from child labor or tainted by human rights violations? If Gov only needs to find one example that would justify higher tariffs this wouldn't be much of a debate.

Government teams need to embrace the burden of the motion. That burden is that they will raise prices harming consumers and manufacturers that rely on imports. The grounds for Gov are that this is a price worth paying for national security, technological supremacy, and social cohesion. The Opp replies are that free trade, WTO, globalization, raise economic growth which benefits all and can fund the Gov issues. Gov could note that globalization was fine in world where we were all friends, but not so much as the world drifts apart into competing blocs. Opp then argues…you get the idea.