Professional Resources


At first glance, Robert Weiss's *Public Argument* is not apparently germane to the readers of the *National Forensic Journal,* for Weiss composed his work for audience-style debates. Indeed, the book contains little of interest to those in poetry or prose, impromptu or extemporaneous speaking, or ostensibly even to persuasive speaking or NFA-sponsored Lincoln-Douglas debate.

Yet, desultory perceptions often deceive. Weiss situates argument, or communication, in a public matrix in which the audience is the central rhetorical factor. Indeed, NFA-sponsored public address events and Lincoln-Douglas debate are posited upon the same intellectual and scholarly grounds as Weiss's: the needs of competent speakers and informed audiences in a democracy. That is why, for instance, Weiss holds in the last analysis: "we're going to trust our listeners to know a good argument when they hear one" (p. 8). As long as public address events and Lincoln-Douglas debate are fortunately constrained by their present audience-centered approach, those forensic activities will not implode as other intercollegiate forms have devolved.

Chapter 7, "Premises in Public Debate," is a helpful chapter, particularly to the novice communicator. Weiss treats the pros and cons of different types of evidence and the care the speaker must take in selecting warrants for the speech. Of special note is Weiss's specific and extensive listing of indexes and bibliographic sources that the researcher will want to master.

For those who wish to direct their students to the Toulmin model of reasoning, Weiss situates his discussion therein. Of particular note is Chapter 9 on "The Warranting Process." Weiss lists and defines the usual kinds of fallacies as well as discussing inductive and deductive reasoning.

But the main reason the forensic coach may want to follow Weiss's lead with regard to public argument regards Lincoln-Douglas debating. Given the ubiquitous tournament invitation that bemoans travel expenses, etc., the forensic team might overlook
speaking opportunities on its very own campus. To this end, Chapters 12 and 13 blueprint how to hold a successful audience-style, audience-centered debate. Weiss wisely notes that the audience could decide the debate by the traditional show of hands or voice vote, by a more sophisticated shift-of-opinion ballot, or, if the Lincoln-Douglas debate were to be purely an exhibition, by no vote at all. The synergism that obtains for debaters and the community when students communicate to real audiences on real issues, such as educational reform with the 1996 NFA L-D policy resolution, should not be dismissed.

Weiss also has an annotated bibliography of sources pertaining to audience-centered forensics.

My only caveat, a minor one at that, is the book's informal diction. Perhaps Weiss intended the contractions to enhance his conversational style in the book.

In all Weiss has composed a book that augments the educational mission of the National Forensic Association by reminding coaches and competitors that Public Argument is the raison d'être of forensic competition.

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