Grappling for Original Intent: Failed Mission or Misunderstood Goals In NFA Lincoln-Douglas Debate?

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Talk to the average Lincoln-Douglas debater about what they believe the rest of the forensics community thinks of them and they will likely comment that they feel separate and not necessarily equal. Ask students who are committed solely to individual events competition what they think about the presence of Lincoln-Douglas debate at tournaments and their response is likely to demonstrate less concern. If anything, they are probably more concerned with the impact of the event on sweepstakes awards at invitational tournaments or scheduling at nationals. Billings alleges: "Nothing dichotomizes individual event participants more than Lincoln-Douglas debate." In this essay I contend that this argument is an example of a regularly vocalized hasty generalization, unfortunately dependent on anecdotes and Internet listserv discourse rather than upon empirical data or a coherent rationale formed from the rhetoric of published research. The more important question to be considered is not whether Lincoln-Douglas dichotomizes the community, but whether its image and significance has been tarnished because of a failure to meet stated competitive and pedagogical goals charted when it was originated in 1991. Put more simply, has Lincoln-Douglas debate failed to integrate into the family of individual events? To clarify this argument I will begin by describing, to the best extent possible, the philosophy undergirding Lincoln-Douglas debate in its early days. Next, I will make observations regarding the evolution of Lincoln-Douglas practice and hypothesize how that has affected perceptions of the activity. Finally, I will offer some personal conclusions about the proper role of Lincoln-Douglas debate in the National Forensic Association.

Background and Philosophy of NFA Lincoln-Douglas

Anyone who competed in, or judged, Lincoln-Douglas debate when it first appeared at NFA nationals in 1991 (Marshall University), remembers an "animal" that is far different than Lincoln-Douglas debate is today—especially from a stylistic perspective (Foster 18). This may be, in large part, due to a fairly explicit philosophy statement that made the new activity sound like an initiative as much as an experimental event. As Foster notes, at the first NFA-LD national tournament the rules and philosophy were not as carefully spelled out as they are today.

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The tournament invitation for 1991 was perhaps even more blunt than the current philosophy statement: "If you believe that speed is a strategic part of debate, do not come to this tournament" (Foster 18). A memorandum on speed was issued during the course of the tournament as well, reminding judges to penalize fast debaters. Speed, of course, was not the only consideration for those who crafted NFA-LD in the early 1990s.

As the "rules" became codified after the nationals of 1992, a more specific philosophy statement was formed: "NFA Lincoln-Douglas Debate is a one person, persuasive policy debate on traditional stock issues. It is a communication event, by which we mean the philosophy of the activity is consistent with that which governs other individual events .... Rapid fire delivery, commonly called 'spread delivery,' is considered antithetical to the purpose and intent of this event" (National Forensic Association). Several authors have commented on this statement—although not necessarily supporting it—when shaping their observations about the nature of NFA-LD as an educational, persuasive, rhetorically sound enterprise (Morris and Herbeck 1; Minch and Borchers 19; Bile 37). Speaking from the personal perspective of one who served on the NFA-LD Committee during those years, I think it is a reasonably fair assessment to say that the intent of those involved was to find a home for debate within the community of individual events. When the authors of the rules wrote, "the philosophy of the activity is consistent with that which governs other individual events" they charted a deliberate course that should have taken Lincoln-Douglas debate away from the derided practices of other debate formats.

Evolution Through Practice

If one were to watch a Lincoln-Douglas debate in 1991 or 1992 they would most likely have seen two debaters with a small handful of file folders maybe a small evidence box. They would have heard affirmative and negative constructive speeches with—at most—six to eight pieces of evidence, a fairly simplistic plan of action, and lots of rhetoric. The negative debater—in nearly all debates—would have focused on arguing the case (harm, inherency, and solvency), and rarely would have uttered the word "disadvantage." Counterplans—let alone language critiques or philosophical "kritiks"—would have been considered odd, even "slimy." It was not until 1993 and 1994 that disadvantages became regular fixtures in debates, and counterplans only became truly common a couple of years after that. Analysis dominated rebuttal argumentation. While evidence was occasionally used in rebuttals, the emphasis of those speeches was overwhelmingly upon analysis. The last two rebuttals, in particular, were focused on summarizing and synthesizing arguments rather than extending the period of the debate devoted to refutation and extension. In essence, the early years of Lincoln-Douglas were very much in sync with the stated intention of its founders—to make it accessible to non-debate judges. It was, if only for a brief shining moment, not unlike other individual events. Then things began to change.

A longitudinal study of NFA Lincoln-Douglas debate theory and practice is a study in contrasts. Today affirmative constructive speeches contain significantly
more evidence and far less rhetoric. Negative constructive speeches employ a wide range of weaponry from the traditional negative arsenal: plentiful case attacks, frequent use of the "turning the tables" strategy (on harm and solvency), disadvantages, counterplans, and topicality. Rebuttals, rather than being summary statements, are far more refutation and extension focused. It is important here too, however, to avoid falling into the trap of the hasty generalization. Certainly not every debater has been part of this evolution and there are many who still cling to the older practices. However, a spectator at the national tournament or at competitive invitational tournaments will likely see a more technical style—reminiscent of that seen in CEDA or NDT debate (albeit slower), or varsity-level high school policy debate—being employed by the most competitively successful individuals.

While empirical research does not presently exist to support the hypothesis that an evolution has taken place, there is certainly anecdotal support for that conclusion. Why, despite attempts to codify "rules of engagement" and define a unique character for Lincoln-Douglas debate, has the event changed? I would argue several factors are at play.

First, as students become more experienced in a forum, their language and techniques become more specialized. Just as the emphasis on the technical aspects of blocking in oral interpretation has become greater over the years, and the demand for greater source citation and structure in extemporaneous speaking has become increasingly acute, so too has debate evolved to provide greater challenges for participants. The notable difference, however, is that while individual events have no comparative counterparts in other organizations, Lincoln-Douglas debaters can look to NDT, CEDA, NPDA, and other formats to acquire the technical jargon and philosophical perspectives that the Lincoln-Douglas community might take years to nurture in isolation.

Second, the excessive regulation of Lincoln-Douglas has backfired. While those of us who supported codification of rules and a philosophy statement thought it could provide identity for the fledgling activity, they did not. The opposite effect was true. Students now actively seek ways to argue around theoretical obstacles to reach the argumentative goals they seek to achieve in any particular debate. The fact that the rules mandate topicality is a voting issue, for example, have not stopped competitors from spinning elaborate theoretical rationales for discounting the issue. Similarly, despite there being no framework within the current rules to evaluate a "critique" or "kritik," these arguments are still advanced even if they are cloaked as other arguments, such as disadvantages. These developments in argumentation are not bad, they simply challenge the existing order. One need only consider the philosophy of the eminent rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke to recognize that attitudes inevitably change and that each "order" faces pressure from a "counter order" that might eventually overturn it. There is no reason why we should believe the debate realm should be different.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, debate resolutions have become too broad to allow Lincoln-Douglas competitors to confine their time commitment to the event. When resolutions were as simple as "Resolved: That the terms of federal legislators should be limited to a specified duration" students could count on a
relatively compact set of arguments in each debate and a reasonably manageable body of literature to study. Participation in numerous other individual events was possible without providing a significant impediment to participation in debate. In 2001, however, a resolution such as "Resolved: That the United States federal government should adopt a policy to significantly restrict civil lawsuits" creates an infinite number of potential affirmative cases, with volumes of available literature, and a host of different negative options. To truly be on top of such a broad resolution requires a significant commitment in time—a commitment that is not necessarily compatible with individual events competition. In this sense, the Lincoln-Douglas community, in their votes in the annual topic selection process, has contributed to their own demise as a part of the family of individual events.

**Conclusions: A Sense of Place**

In 1996 Tim Borchers and I authored an article in which we observed that a fusion of traditional policy debate and individual events judging paradigms that we termed "the critical listener perspective" was possible (30-2). This perspective would allow for debaters to argue what they felt was appropriate in a debate and allowed judges to base their decisions on, among other things, their ability to critique arguments based on prior experience, informal logic, and so forth. The idea was that the best of argumentative creativity could be preserved in Lincoln-Douglas debate while allowing the potential intervention of judges to limit the kinds of excesses observed in other debate formats. Such a perspective is achievable, I believe, only when the forensics community commits itself to the deregulation of Lincoln-Douglas debate and the selection of narrow topics with more reasonable research burdens. Only then can Lincoln-Douglas debate fulfill its founders' objective of relatively seamless integration into the family of individual events.

This issue is dedicated to fleshing-out some of the key issues confronting forensics in the 21st century. I agree that the status of Lincoln-Douglas debate is one important issue. However, the hasty impulse to characterize differences between debate and individual events as a source of division or animosity exhibits that same kind of negative culture that Professor Deborah Tannen called, "the culture of critique" (7). Such "agonism" (Tannen 8) does not yet exist within the confines of the NFA. Still, the organization's members have an obligation to recognize that dialog about the technical evolution of the event, as well as reform of some of its founding documents, is necessary to ultimately pull the event back onto its original course and avoid the magnification of minor conflicts where they presently exist.

**References**

