

THE D G E



Is The Clinton Disadvantage Theoretically Legitimate?

by David M. Cheshier

Policy debate is dominated like never before by political process arguments, and in particular by Clinton popularity/bipartisanship/agenda focus positions. Given the President's impeachment, recent American actions in the Middle East (which have produced a new slew of nuclear impact cards), and the increasing difficulty in devising other clever and unique disadvantages against Russia policy changes, the influence of strained Clinton scenarios is likely to persist.

This state of affairs drives many coaches and debaters nuts, and for many reasons. The typically hyper-abbreviated Clinton shell usually omits important internal link claims, and too often the argument reduces to: "A. Clinton popular. B. Americans hate Russia. C. Middle East peace process collapse causes nuclear war." Or: "A. Clinton's agenda on the brink. B. Winners win. C. Successful peace process causes nuclear war." Judges end up forced to vote for arguments which they believe utterly lack internal links or real uniqueness, and they're getting increasingly bitter about having to do so. I expect much of the other opposition to the Clinton argument stems from the total saturation and sick-to-death feeling politically literate people have lived with since Monica/Clinton/Starr/Tripp took over the news channels roughly a year ago.

Translating this general disgust with the argument into winnable responses has proved difficult, despite the increas-

ingly common affirmative practice of expressing Clinton answers in the form of theoretical objections. Here's a quick review of some of the arguments now being offered, on both sides, about the "legitimacy" of the political reaction arguments:

First, one might argue that *process arguments are simply poor disguised "should-would" arguments*. The reasoning goes something like this: The focus on policy merits, embodied in the resolitional term "should," is designed precisely to prevent our bogdown in discussions over the means or likelihood of implementation. There remains a continuing opposition to jettisoning fiat, often based on the fear (legitimate or not) that without fiat we'll end up hearing 51 "Senator So-and-So will vote against the plan" meet-needs.

Of course, were the affirmative to argue that the plan's unpopularity will result in its repeal by a Congress still hostile to the President's initiatives, it would get shot down immediately as a "should-would" argument. But is it so different an argument type to argue that the Congress, rather than acting out its backlash sentiments by taking direct aim at the plan, will get its "revenge" by passing national missile defense, yanking its support for Iraqi action, and all the rest?

Some find it quite easy to say "yes" to such a question, and it might indeed seem easy to answer this should-would objection. I suppose the main response would be that the popularity disadvantage does not express a "would" objection to the plan" after all, it does not deny that the plan will be passed and implemented. Clinton scenarios are easily cast as merits objections: "we should not pass this plan since passage would set in motion pernicious consequences." But this answer, as obvious as it is to popularity disadvantage defenders, is not altogether persuasive. After all, the same rationale can be used to transform even obvious "should-would" arguments into "disadvantages." Is the repeal meet-need any less a should-would argument if the negative attaches a "policy reversals undermine America's hegemony" impact?

A second possible objection relates to the first, but strikes most as weaker. We might argue against the popularity position that *political reaction arguments are not name objections to the plan*. Here the

focus is not on reaction arguments as "should-would," but on the broader philosophical question of whether political reaction should count against the tallied benefits of a policy proposal. I've heard this objection expressed several ways. Some argue political reaction is not germane on moral grounds, and to illustrate the point they may analogize rejecting the plan on popularity grounds to the more obviously repugnant practice of rejecting, say, civil rights legislation because of predicted racist backlash. Others argue that political reaction positions do nothing but silence discussion of radical change proposals, since they inevitably throw super-conservative caution brakes on proposals for change. Opponents of progressive (or even reactionary) change have long made it their stock-in-trade to oppose proposals by hyping their predictions of extraordinary backlash, predictions which usually fail to materialize. Arguably backlash positions do nothing more than ratify this perverse thinking by hyping Congressional or public reaction beyond all reasonable bounds. Why not simply dismiss the whole argument category as irrelevant to a tightly controlled discussion of merits?

But these arguments are not usually found persuasive, and for good reason. If backlash risks are small, then why can't the affirmative simply say so with evidence, and defeat the disadvantage straight up? And as repulsive as it sometimes seems, shouldn't policymakers factor likely negative reaction into their decisionmaking calculations? Backlash does happen, and often with disastrous consequences.

Another objection derives from the literature on deontology, and reflects all its strengths and weaknesses. This objection usually tries to stress the many low-risk internal links typical of the Clinton disadvantage, and to argue that *taken together, the strung-together link story forms such a speculative scenario that it should be discounted to zero* when compared to the "certain" case harms. Needless to say, this argument is difficult or impossible to make when the case relies on equally strung-together Russian nationalism advantage claims.

There are substantive objections to Clinton-type positions as well, and these are increasingly cast as in theoretical terms. The most powerful launches an attack on

poll-driven policy debate. One version objects to political reaction arguments because they perpetuate the horse-race nature of public argument. Our medica coverage is undeniably obsessed with process over product. Were the President to call a press conference to announce a proposal designed to instantly achieve world peace, the nightly news would lead off with something like: "In a desperate bid to head off continuing scandal, the President today appealed to moderate Republicans with a smoothly packaged proposal to.." Our public discourse is taken over with winner and loser talk, of who's up and down, at the expense of the actual merits of proposed policies.

This obsession is increasingly criticized by students of political communication and journalistic practice. James Fallows' *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Politics* emphasizes how a horse-race obsession diverts citizens from meaningful participation in public life and fosters electoral cynicism. And others, critical of how polling data increasingly substitutes for deliberation, have urged changes in medica coverage so it will more reflect real pro-con discussions (see Benjamin Ginsberg's *The Captive Public*, or Michael O'Neill's *The Roar of the Crows*). Prof. Gordon Mitchell, the University of Pittsburgh debate director, has recently posted arguments to the debate listservs that extend these objections into a generalized position hostile to a reliance on polling data in formulating public policy.

When debaters let their debates be taken over by process arguments, they only ratify these distortions in public deliberation, and further guarantee that the actual benefits and consequences of proposals for change will be given short shrift, or ignored entirely.

As compelling as these objections are, they are not so difficult to answer. In a world saturated with horse-race policy talk, perhaps we should *encourage* forms of policy argument that equip students to handle political popularity-style arguments. Popularity debates may inoculate students against public opinion claims, rather than making them cynical or apathetic. One might also note that, despite the internal link issues, the Clinton disadvantage is not exclusively a polling argument, but involves (*Cheshier to page 33*)

limited to them.

The most brilliant argument in the world is worthless if the audience (judge) hears only a cacophony of words piled up on top of each other. Even when words are spoken one at a time, if the pace is too hectic and there is no time to absorb the meaning of it all, very cogent arguments may be missed or underestimated by the harried listener. Impress upon debaters that three or four decent ideas, clearly presented, are more persuasive than 20 brilliant ones that nobody can hear, understand or absorb.

Research -- Broaden General Knowledge

One final idea worth passing on to students: while targeted debate research is essential, there is no substitute for an underlying liberal education.

During one ex-temp speech on an economic issue, a brilliant young novice failed to cite the most important economic factor of all. He simply hadn't stumbled across it in his hasty pre-speech research. While it would be unrealistic to expect such a young man to be an economics expert and I did not penalize him for this omission, it was sad to see him come so close to sheer perfection and miss it for lack of a fairly common-place fact.

Of course, no one is every going to hit on all cylinders in ex-temp, but this incident does point up a valuable lesson. Over the long haul, the best debaters will be those who possess an inexhaustible yearning for knowledge of all kinds.

Great debaters do not just fill their debate research hours with a mechanical collection of facts on this year's topics -- they fill their whole lives with learning in the broadest sense.

Consequently, when they go into a debate, they need not gamble all on the hazards of a hasty, quick-and-dirty topical research effort. They operate from a solid foundation of personal knowledge, supplemented by debate research -- much sounder research because it is guided by their broad general knowledge.

Use Metaphors From Unrelated Fields

As a writer, I find that the best arguments on any topic often are metaphors from totally unrelated fields. The best way to win a political point may be an analogy from sculpture, or natural history, or the physi-

cal sciences, or religion.

Research will not turn up such connections. An all-permeating liberal education will.

Broaden Reading Material

Encourage debaters to get that kind of education. Encourage them to read constantly, from non-fiction of all kinds and from great literature. As a minimum, urge them to begin a life-long habit of reading a good news magazine -- ALL of it -- every week.

In conclusion, I urge debate coaches everywhere to return to the days of yore when high-school debate was exemplified by Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, on stage in an auditorium packed with parents and siblings, pondering the merits of standing up to Hitler -- plain talk for plain folks on real public issues so difficult that smart people of good will may disagree.

"Forensics" A Valuable Experience

Clearly, I believe there is room for improvement. Having said that, however, let me emphasize that high-school forensics is an immensely valuable experience. I have gratefully watched my son grow tremendously in analytical skill, wit, articulateness, knowledge, confidence and leadership.

This is a great program. Debaters just need to remember that their ultimate audience is the rest of American society, not just each other.

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students in substantive arguments about national missile defense, trade policy, American hegemony, and Middle Eastern policy.

More than all this, political reaction matters. Particular presidential actions do produce generalized backlashes (witness the Clinton health initiative and his infamous responses to the Congress' "81 questions"): should we ignore the tangible consequences of such reactions? Probably not. I've heard others energetically defend how the Clinton position dominance forces students to stay current in their reading or database searching (although I suspect most would be grateful for relief from night-before-the-tournament update madness).

As sick as most are of the typical Clinton disadvantage, the argument genre may be with us for good, despite the considerable energies being expended to theoretically subvert it. Many of the common objections to political process arguments are unlikely to be given trumping theoretical weight, especially when they are so easily introduced as link or internal link answers. Others are tough to win when the negative combines an advantage-solving counterplan with a process argument. The argument that "given equal solvency for the case claims, why risk the political backlash?" will continue to persuade. In the meantime, it's probably more productive for affirmatives to refine their link and uniqueness responses.

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