A DEFENSE OF SWITCH SIDE DEBATE

By

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Thesis under the direction of Allan Louden, Ph.D, Associate Professor of Communication.

The debate about switch side debating – a practice that requires students participating in academic debate contests to argue on behalf of both the affirmative and negative sides of the resolution during a multiple-round tournament – has intensified with the introduction of critical and activist arguments in competitions. While the controversy over the ethics of publicly debating both sides of an issue has largely been closed, the social and pedagogical merits of the practice remain the subject of contentious argument. Against charges that switch side debating, this thesis defends the continuing relevance and benefits of such an approach. In particular, it argues that true conviction is a result of debate, rather than a pre-condition for it, that a limited form of argumentative pluralism is preferable to dogmatic assertions about what should be considered subject for advocacy, and that switching sides is a remedy for uncritical absolutism and intolerance.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION AND A HISTORY OF DEBATE

**Introduction**

Academic competitive debating is an extremely valuable experience. Every year, tens of thousands of students engage in simulated policy debates, research complex and controversial issues, learn important argumentative skills, and are exposed to critical forms of decision-making. Although the value of the activity itself has been relatively uncontested, an important lingering question remains about how the format and content of debates should be structured in order to maximize the pragmatic, pedagogical, and social benefits of the practice. Competitive debate, a structured activity that represents a microcosm of broader societal processes of deliberation, has always been as concerned with *how* students argue (the process of debate) as it has been with *what* is being argued about (the content).  Traditionally, high school and collegiate debating has followed a switch-side blueprint that requires students to argue both for and against a given topic during the course of a season. As part of this process, it has been generally accepted that student debaters are allowed, if not encouraged, to "step outside of the box" and gain additional insight into controversial issues during contest rounds by arguing on the behalf of positions that they do not personally hold. However, with the emergence of increasingly widespread views that there are no isolated, neutral, and apolitical training grounds for argumentation, the merits of such "switch side" debating practices have been called into question. Some have argued that debaters should argue only from personal conviction because certain anterior concerns should be privileged over debate itself or

because debating both sides of controversial issues risks persuading students to support dangerous ideas. Against these recent charges, the defenders of switch side debate have been largely silent. Yet, the practice of stepping outside of one's own rigid beliefs and exposing their views to contrary arguments is one that still has considerable value and ought to be firmly defended. Switching sides is a method that is integral to the success of debate as a deliberative and reflexive activity. No other component process than switch side debate contributes more greatly to the cultivation of a healthy ethic of tolerance and pluralism, generates the reasoned reflection necessary for critical thinking, or instills responsible and critical skepticism toward dominant systems of belief. The purpose of this paper is to mount of defense of the validity of switch-side debating in light of modern criticisms, drawing upon the existing body of literature related to the theory to build a case for its continued practice.

**Background on Debate**

Debate is, in its most general sense, "a mode of critical thinking in which the parties to a disagreement appeal their views to an outside adjudicating agency and agree to abide by the decision it hands down" (Ehninger and Brockriede, 1978, p. 7). Unlike a discussion, where people attempt internally to persuade each other to settle differences, debate is similar to an arbitration or courtroom hearing where a third-party renders the final decision.  Human history, reaching back thousands of years, is filled with examples of the prevalence of debate. Evidence of the existence of some form of the activity reaches back at least 4000 years, to Egyptian debates over agricultural policy in the pharaoh's court (Freely and Steinberg, 2005, p. 18). From the deliberations in the

Athenian assembly to nineteenth century debating societies, to medieval disputation, to modern televised Presidential Debates, structured oral contestation has been a popular recurring method of examining controversial issues. A discussion of the relative forms and merits of debate as a general practice in society is potentially endless; however, the scope of this thesis will be narrower, focusing one of its specific incarnations: competitive policy debate.

The origins of formal competitive debate at a scholastic level in the United States are somewhat contested. According to one popular account, the first American intercollegiate debate occurred between Harvard and Yale in 1892 (Ericson, Murphy, and Zeuschner, 2003, p. 2). However, in his study of high school debate, <u>Gifted Tongues</u>, Northwestern sociologist, Gary Alan Fine, claims that "David Zarefsky informs me that in 1872 Northwestern University debated the old Chicago University" (2001, p. 12). In any case, it is clear that shortly after the turn of the 20$^{th}$ century, competitive debate had become a common activity at the collegiate level and by the 1920s and 1930s there was a "veritable explosion" in the numbers of students and colleges participating (Greene and Hicks, 2005, p. 102). To more efficiently accommodate the increasing demand for debate, the format of the activity began to evolve from a one-on-one contest, pitting a single school against another, to a large tournament style, where many schools would arrive at a single location to debate against all of the other participants (Keith 2007, p. 61). Accompanying the move to tournament-debating was a similar shift to holding multiple debate rounds over the course of a day or weekend, instead of a single contest. A current national-caliber tournament typically has eight preliminary debates over the course of two days to seed a bracket for a third "elimination day" single-elimination bracket that

determines the eventual winner. Marking the beginning of one of the most prevalent

forms of contemporary policy debate, the West Point tournament, a season-ending

championship and precursor to the most prestigious National Debate Tournament, was

established in 1947.

Contemporary competitive policy debate, at both the high school and collegiate

levels, is a unique activity. In teams of two, students furiously research and debate a year-

long topic called the "resolution." A normative statement prescribing some course of

action, past resolutions have included, "Resolved: The United States federal government

should establish an energy policy requiring a substantial reduction in the total non-

governmental consumption of fossil fuels in the United States" and "Resolved: The

United States federal government should substantially increase diplomatic and economic

pressure on the People's Republic of China in one or more of the following areas: trade,

human rights, weapons nonproliferation, Taiwan." Policy topics such as these, divide the

teams debating into two sides: one arguing for the resolutional "should" (called the

"Affirmative") and the other rejecting it and defending the *status quo* (called the

"Negative"). At the end of a two-hour period of time that is comprised of alternating

speeches from the four participants in each debate, an impartial third-party judge must

reach a decision about the winner of the contest and announce one team as victorious.

**Significance of Debating Both Sides**

A crucial element of competitive policy debate is a practice called "switch-side

debating" (SSD). SSD is an argumentative model that requires students to debate both the

Affirmative and Negative sides of the resolution over the course of a multiple-round

tournament. In practice, SSD requires that debaters' arguments are frequently divorced from personal conviction; in many cases students are forced to take a position and argue vigorously on behalf of views that they disagree with. Debaters with ideological beliefs are thrust into the position of the Devil's Advocate, assuming the side of the opposition and being forced to understand the arguments of the opposing view well enough to argue on their behalf. Instead of approaching the debate topic from the perspective of personal belief, students most often choose arguments from a strategic and competitive perspective. Because of SSD, the purpose of debate is not to convince others to accept a certain argument as preferable or "true", but rather to choose the strongest and most intellectually rigorous position that will have the greatest chance of prevailing under scrutiny (and thus earning a competitive victory). Policy debate, an activity with few formal rules and requirements, developed this norm of arguing both sides of a topic for pragmatic, pedagogical, and social reasons.

Practically, the contemporary format of tournament contests would be much more difficult to maintain if the tournament directors were not able to require than an equal number of competitors debate on the affirmative and negative in any given round. Were students free to choose their own sides, it seems likely that debaters who held strong views for or against the statement of the resolution would choose to exclusively debate on that side. Given the generally liberal leanings of the debate community and inevitable biases in topic construction, an unequal division between the sides would be unavoidable (Cripe, 1957). This would make pairing debate rounds much more difficult, if not impossible.

While such pragmatic justifications for SSD are persuasive, they are admittedly secondary to the greater consideration of pedagogy. Although it is certainly true that debate is a game and that its competitive elements are indispensable sources of motivation for students who are otherwise apathetic about academic endeavors, the overwhelming benefits of contest debating are the knowledge and skills taught through participation. The wins and losses (and marginally-cheesy trophies), by and large, are quickly forgotten with the passage of time. However, the educational values of debate are so fundamental that they eventually become ingrained in the decision-making and thought processes of debaters, giving them a uniquely valuable durability. To this end, SSD is essential. The benefits of debating both sides have been noted by many authors over the past fifty years. To name but a few, SSD has been lauded for fostering tolerance and undermining bigotry and dogmatism (Muir, 1993), creating stronger and more knowledgeable advocates (Dybvig and Iversion, 2000), and fortifying the social forces of democracy by guaranteeing the expression of minority viewpoints (Day, 1966). Switching sides is a crucial element of debate's pedagogical benefit; it forms the gears that drive debate's intellectual motor.

Additionally, there are social benefits to the practice of requiring students to debate both sides of controversial issues. Dating back to the Greek rhetorical tradition, great value has been placed on the benefit of testing each argument relative to all others in the marketplace of ideas. Like those who argue on behalf of the efficiency-maximizing benefits of free market competition, it is believed that arguments are most rigorously tested (and conceivably refined and improved) when compared to all available alternatives. Even for beliefs that have seemingly been ingrained in consensus opinion or

in cases where the public at-large is unlikely to accept a particular position, it has been

argued that they should remain open for public discussion and deliberation (Mill, 1975).

Along these lines, the greatest benefit of switching sides, which goes to the heart

of contemporary debate, is its inducement of critical thinking. Defined as "reasonable

reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis, 1987, p. 10),

critical thinking learned through debate teaches students not just how advocate and argue,

but how *to decide* as well. Each and every student, whether in debate or (more likely) at

some later point in life, will be placed in the position of the decision-maker. Faced with

competing options whose costs and benefits are initially unclear, critical thinking is

necessary to assess all the possible outcomes of each choice, compare their relative merits,

and arrive at some final decision about which is preferable. In some instances, such as

choosing whether to eat Chinese or Indian food for dinner, the importance of making the

correct decision is minor. For many other decisions, however, the implications of

choosing an imprudent course of action are potentially grave. As Robert Crawford notes,

there are "issues of unsurpassed importance in the daily lives of millions upon millions of

people…being decided to a considerable extent by the power of public speaking" (2003).

Although the days of the Cold War are over, and the risk that "the next Pearl Harbor

could be 'compounded by hydrogen'" (Ehninger and Brockriede, 1978, p. 3) is greatly

reduced, the manipulation of public support before the invasion of Iraq in 2003 points to

the continuing necessity of training a well-informed and critically-aware public (Zarefsky,

2007). In the absence of debate-trained critical thinking, ignorant but ambitious

politicians and persuasive but nefarious leaders would be much more likely to draw the

country, and possibly the world, into conflicts with incalculable losses in terms of human

well-being. Given the myriad threats of global proportions that will require incisive solutions, including global warming, the spread of pandemic diseases, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cultivating a robust and effective society of critical decision-makers is essential. As Louis Rene Beres writes, "with such learning, we Americans could prepare…not as immobilized objects of false contentment, but as authentic citizens of an endangered planet" (2003). Thus, it is not surprising that critical thinking has been called "the highest educational goal of the activity" (Parcher, 1998).

While arguing from conviction can foster limited critical thinking skills, the element of switching sides is necessary to sharpen debate's critical edge and ensure that decisions are made in a reasoned manner instead of being driven by ideology. Debaters trained in SSD are more likely to evaluate both sides of an argument before arriving at a conclusion and are less likely to dismiss potential arguments based on his or her prior beliefs (Muir 1993). In addition, debating both sides teaches "conceptual flexibility," where decision-makers are more likely to reflect upon the beliefs that are held before coming to a final opinion (Muir, 1993, p. 290). Exposed to many arguments on each side of an issue, debaters learn that public policy is characterized by extraordinary complexity that requires careful consideration before action. Finally, these arguments are confirmed by the preponderance of empirical research demonstrating a link between competitive SSD and critical thinking (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt and Louden, 1999; Colbert, 2002, p. 82).

The theory and practice of SSD has value beyond the limited realm of competitive debate as well. For the practitioners and students of rhetoric, understanding how individuals come to form opinions about subjects and then attempt to persuade others is

of utmost importance. Although the field of communication has established models that attempt to explain human decision-making, such as the Rational Argumentation Theory and others (Cragen and Shields, 1998, p. 66), the practice of SSD within competitive debate rounds is a real-world laboratory where argumentative experiments are carried out thousands of times over during the course of a single year-long season. The theory of SSD has profound implications for those who study how individuals are persuaded, as well as how advocates should go about the process of forming their own personal beliefs and attempting to persuade others.

**Debate About Debate**

Since its inception, the practice of debating both sides in academic contests has consistently remained a "fruitful subject for controversy" (Ehninger, 1958, p. 128) and complaints about the mode of debate are "as old as the activity itself" (Keith 2007, p. 67). While many members of the debate community support the practice, SSD has been the subject of recurring criticism (Murphy, 1957; Ehninger, 1958; Greene and Hicks, 2005; Massey, 2006). In particular, one landmark incident that has laid the groundwork for contemporary debate about debate was the boycotting of the 1954 national topic by the U.S. military academics. On that topic, "Resolved: That the United States should extend diplomatic recognition to the communist government of China," defending the Affirmative required debaters to advocate a position that was contrary to the United States' official position of containment. Conservatives, especially those that were part of the U.S. armed forces (who adhere to restrictions on their public political views), objected to such a position as ethically and educationally indefensible, and withdrew their

teams from competition (English, Llano, Mitchell, Morrison, Rief and Woods, 2007). The resulting stir generated national discussion, including a feature in the New York Times (Greene and Hicks, 2005, p. 100). This single incident revealed the strong beliefs held by people on both sides of the issue.

In the ten years following the China topic dispute, the debate over the merits of SSD continued to rage. Debate coaches from around the country chimed in, objecting to the ethical (Murphy, 1957) and pedagogical (Ehninger, 1958) implications of SSD. Yet, after a decade's worth of discussion, the ethical charge[1] was declared defeated by a quantitative survey of debate coaches' opinions, which revealed that an overwhelming consensus agreed that SSD was ethically sound (Klopf and McCrosky, 1964). However, as Klopf and McCrosky readily admit, "The controversy over the *pedagogical value* of debating both sides hardly has begun." Over the next thirty years, the proponents of SSD struck back, providing a series of arguments about the vast educational benefits of the practice noted above and, as can be inferred from the lack of academic writing defending the prior criticisms of SSD, gradually achieved mainstream acceptance within the policy debate community.

**Theory and Practice**

The practice of competitive debate has undergone substantial changes within the past fifteen years. The gradual introduction of two new arguments forms, the critique (or German "Kritik") and activism, have shaped both argumentative practices in debate rounds and the "meta-thinking" about debate that influences the community's perception

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[1] That switch-sides debating is unethical because it is tantamount to lying. Advocates of this belief state that debater's should not publicly declare beliefs that they themselves do not hold. Efficiently characterized by Richard Murphy's famous statement that "A public statement is a public commitment" (1957, p. 2).

of the value of SSD. First, beginning in 1991, debaters have increasingly introduced

arguments on both the affirmative and negative that challenge many fundamental

assumptions and practices of policy debate. As an argument category, the form of

critiques are so varied that they practically defy description. Common forms of the

argument call into question the foundational (i.e. ontological, epistemological, and

methodological) foundations of arguments and the linguistic (including specific rhetorical

criticisms and indictments of framing) justifications for decision-making (Solt, 1993). By

the late 1990s, critiques were established as a very common argument, making it nearly

as likely for an average judge to hear evidence quoting Martin Heidegger, Michel

Foucault, or Jacques Derrida as it was to watch a debate about complex economic models

or international diplomacy. While the practice of "critique" in debate itself was not

without controversy[2], its competitive success is undeniable: in 2003, a team from

Northwestern University won the National Debate Tournament relying almost

exclusively on critical arguments. Although many critiques are used only as strategic

tools to win competitive debate rounds, much like their traditional policy counterparts,

others have claimed a different primary purpose: changing the behavior of debaters. For

instance, a popular argument in the late-1990s was a criticism of the use of gendered

language within evidence (rejecting masculine-forms of words like "mankind",

"chairman", etc.). Debates involving arguments like these were often highly emotional,

as the critique (unlike any other argument before it) arguably questioned both the

integrity of the debaters' arguments and the debaters themselves.

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[2] For extensive criticism of the use of 'critiques' in debate, see: Shors, Matthew and Steve Mancuso. "The Critique: Skreaming Without Raising its Voice" The Debater's Research Guide. Winston-Salem, NC, 1993. Online. <http://groups.wfu.edu/debate/MiscSites/DRGArticles/ShorsMancuso1993.htm> or Speice, Patrick and Jim Lyle. "Traditional Policy Debate: Now More Than Ever" The Debater's Research Guide. Oceans Policy Adrift. 2003. Online. <http://groups.wfu.edu/debate/MiscSites/DRGArticles/SpeiceLyle2003htm.htm>

Emerging slightly later, the introduction of activism into policy debate took the innovative practice of critique a step further. Rather than accepting the traditional purpose of debate—the evaluation of the consequences of a hypothetical policy proposal—activists used their arguments to call on judges to endorse the transformative potential of one team's arguments. They argued that wins and losses within debate rounds could have implications for the effectiveness of their "project" (a social cause or movement) itself. Examples of this argumentative practice include calls for the debate community to substantially increase meaningful black participation in debate (led by the University of Louisville), demands for the adoption class-conscious policies in the debate community (Kansas City Kansas Community College), or efforts to center debate's focus on the "liberation of the oppressed" (California State University, Fullerton). Activist arguments are particularly significant, and controversial[3], because they call into question the purpose of the activity of debate itself. According to the activist position, students do not exist in an isolated debate-sphere that is cut-off from the rest of the world. Rather, debaters are engaged participants in the shaping of the debate community and the world around them. They believe that the arguments made in debates are important because they influence the way that debaters will act in the "outside" world.

The activist position represents a dramatic shift in the purpose of debate from deciding which team advocates the preferable policy option to which team has the superior political purpose. Judges are expected to vote for activist arguments because they actually believe in them and wish to endorse their ideas. In this respect, activism is also controversial because it implicitly calls into question the viability of switch side

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[3] For years, debaters have pitted evidence from Mitchell (1998) and Coverstone (1995) to argue about the merits of the 'outward turn' in debate. However, it appears that their opinions are actually in substantial agreement. See Coverstone (2005).

model of debate. Conviction is a necessary component of affirming a particular political approach outside of its isolated hypothetical position in a debate round. Students on activist teams are viewed as genuine advocates of their positions and frequently do not alternate between affirming and negating the resolution, instead choosing to adopt a consistent position between rounds, tournaments, and sometimes even entire topics. While it may be theoretically possible for activists debaters to utilize the SSD method, it has not played out this way in practice. Students from some schools have essentially maintained the same argument over the course of most of the last decade.

The development of the critique and activism as competitive debate practices has been accompanied by new and renewed insights about the theory of SSD. In particular, three arguments have been the most prevalent. First, the argument about convictions has re-emerged on the other side of the ideological spectrum. As the influence of postmodern literature has become increasingly popular in debate, more and more students and coaches have accepted its tenets of micro-political disruption and skepticism toward traditional means of social change. Now, liberals (instead of the conservatives on the 1954 "engage China" topic) are objecting to the practice of SSD because it forces student to advocate "dirty" bureaucratic politics through the state. Second, critics of SSD have charged that the practice has a moderating effect on students' beliefs, drawing them toward the political center over time. While this may not necessarily be a bad thing, some have argued that this is a form of "cooptation" that strengthens the "dominant ideology" latent within debate practices (Massey, 2006). Third and most prevalently, some have argued that the practice of debating both sides should be critically scrutinized because of the way it contributes to the moral development of the debater as a subject. In 2005,

Ronald Greene and Darrin Hicks, drawing on the existing body of theory relating to SSD, wrote an article criticizing the claim advanced earlier by Day that debating both sides is the "highest ethical act" (1966, p. 7) because it subordinates personal convictions to a belief in the process of debate as crucial sustenance for the democratic system. Greene and Hicks argued that SSD problematically contributes to the ethical self-fashioning of debaters; a process by which those who embrace pluralism and openness to both sides are conceived of as the ideal liberal citizen. Switching sides in debate, after all, is premised upon the free and open expression of ideas. During the Cold War, the issue of "free speech" was a primary distinction between the societies of the United States and Soviet Union. According to Greene and Hicks, the fashioning of citizens around the norms cultivated by SSD contributed to an exceptionalist form of liberalism. They conclude that,

> The universal force of the norms embedded in discursive theories of citizenship require an appreciation of how the techniques invented for their internalization have particular national and economic histories which disrupt their universal pretensions. Our investigation of debating both sides controversy demonstrates the blind spots associated with the technical efforts to inculcate students with liberal norms of democratic decision making…. What this paper demonstrates is that debating both sides helps liberalism to produce a governing field between a person's first order convictions and his/her commitment to the process norms of debate, discussion and persuasion. This field is then managed in and through the alteration of different communicative practices. (2005, p. 120-121)

Others have taken this charge further to its logical extreme, arguing that it dangerously risks allowing debate to become a "form of cultural technology re-affirming a commitment to American Exceptionalism and global domination" (Massey, 2006).

**Methodology**

This thesis builds a defense of switch side debating in three ways. First, it consolidates and augments the "debate about debate" by extensively reviewing the body of literature related to the theory of SSD. Once a foundational history of the subject has been created, it becomes clear that some of the contemporary criticisms of SSD are merely re-hashes of previous claims that had long-ago been decided in favor of switching sides. Second, using this body as a point of comparison, I determine which of the contemporary criticisms of debating both sides, if any, warrant additional theoretical consideration. For those arguments which have not been sufficiently addressed by previous writing, I attempt to respond in a manner that generally defends the practice of SSD. The purpose here is explicitly argumentative: to provide a vigorous defense of a particular method of structuring debate. It is neither a neutral observation nor an objective and detached meta-analysis. The recent criticisms of SSD are explicitly refuted and a fundamental case for the practical, pedagogical, and social benefits of debating both sides is constructed. Finally, for issues and arguments that remain unresolved, it suggests directions for future trajectories of research and inquiry into the theory and practice of switch side debating.

**Plans of Study**

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One has introduced the subject and purpose of the thesis, including a discussion of the origin, evolution, and format of competitive intercollegiate debate, an introduction of switch-sides debating and the modern controversy surrounding it, and an explanation of the importance of SSD for those involved in debate and the larger field of communication. It has also made a case for the significance of research in this area, through the demonstration of its relative timeliness and importance for the study of argumentation.

Chapter Two is an extensive review of the literature related to SSD, undertaken in order to conceptually organize the body of theory and identify the relevant contemporary criticisms of the practice. In and of itself, creating a concise and organized review of the major arguments about SSD has great value. For many students of debate, there is an interest in the history and development of the practice of debate, but few publications are available where such information is readily accessible and organized in a clear and concise manner. My hope is that this portion of this thesis will provide a resource for those students. For the purpose of building a defense of SSD, a thorough literature review demonstrates that there are certain reoccurring criticisms that merit discussion. I also use this review to demonstrate the incompleteness of the current writing on SSD in light of the critical and activist developments in debate and to make the case for the significance of my project.

Chapter Three is comprised of the bulk of my argumentative defense of SSD, building the case for its continued relevance by responding to the criticisms identified in Chapter Two. Although this chapter has many diverse arguments defending the practice

of SSD, I argue that it is primarily beneficial for three reasons. First, the benefits of SSD for critical thinking are extremely large and justify it even in the light of some drawbacks. Second, many criticisms of SSD presume that certain arguments are "true" and that some positions are indefensible; positions that the very foundation of SSD call into question. As part of this argument, I analyze the meaning of "conviction" and argue that those who defend arguing from such a position misconstrue its meaning. Third, even if some of the criticisms are true, the pluralistic and tolerant values taught by debating both sides of controversial issues make any alternative (debating from personal conviction, etc.) undoubtedly worse for the goals that critics aspire to.

Chapter Four is the conclusion. It will include a synthesis of the many arguments made about SSD and provide the strongest possible defense of the practice in light of recent developments in contemporary academic debate. Finally, it includes a recommendation for the potential topics and method of future research on this issue.

CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

Over the past seventy or so years, switch side debating has been the subject of intense controversy and extensive discussion amongst members of the debate community. As one of the unique characteristics that separate competitive policy debate from other forms of public speaking, the practice of switching sides has received a large amount of attention from individuals interested in structuring the activity to maximize its ethical, practical, pedagogical, and social benefits. Over time, the discussion has gradually shifted from concerns over ethics (the morality of publicly advocating one position but believing another), to pedagogy (the educational value of SSD), and eventually to social benefits (the value of SSD for deliberation and political participation outside of the competitive contest round). This chapter reviews much of the prominent literature surrounding the controversy over debating both sides in chronological order. This survey has two purposes. First, the review provides a historical grounding for contemporary criticisms of SSD and an important primer to understanding the developments that precipitated the rise of critical and activist arguments in debate. Second, it generates a virtual catalogue of the major arguments about SSD, a necessary starting point for any nuanced assessment of the relevance of contemporary critiques.

Although discussion of controversy over which arguments should be considered contestable undoubtedly reaches back nearly as far as debate itself and re-occurs frequently in philosophical discussions about argumentation (Mill 1975), the scope of this

review will be limited to literature written about the role of advocacy in academic debate. This is both for the sake of narrowing the relevant body of literature for an effective evaluation and because the writing directly about academic debate more accurately describes the role of advocacy in such a specialized activity.

Switch-side debating first became widely practiced in academic debate in the United States during the 1930s. To accommodate the increasing number of schools and students participating in debate, the format of tournaments shifted from a one-on-one invitational style (where a single school would visit another to argue their position) to large, multi-school tournaments that held multiple debate rounds over the course of a day or weekend. As part of this new format, each debate team was (for the first time) expected to argue on behalf of both sides of the resolution (by going affirmative in half of their debates and negative in the other half). Accompanying this shift in tournament format, debaters experimented by advocating multiple (sometimes contradictory) positions over the course of several debates (Greene and Hicks 2005, p. 102). While pragmatic concerns related to the changing structure of tournaments initially warranted the shift in debating practices, switch side debate has eventually become tied up in numerous other controversies over the proper way to structure the form and content of competitive argumentation.

This chapter reviews the arguments made in the controversy over SSD by closely examining the literature related to the subject. It traces the development of the "debate about debate" through its early ethical stage, to pedagogical concerns, and finally discusses contemporary social critiques of the practice. Finally, it concludes with a brief

summary of the debate writ large and an argument about the uniqueness and significance of my work.

**Ethical Controversy**

Since its inception, the practice of debating both sides in academic contests has consistently remained a "fruitful subject for controversy" (Ehninger, 1958, p. 128). In particular, the selection of "engagement of China" as the 1954 national debate topic marked a particularly contentious moment that incited the first widespread written arguments about switch side debating. On that topic, "Resolved: That the United States should extend diplomatic recognition to the communist government of China"[4], affirmatives were required to defend a statement that contradicted the United States' official policy of containment toward communist China. Conservatives objected to this position as socially dangerous support for an enemy of the United States (English, Llano, Mitchell, Morrison, Rief and Woods, 2007, p. 222). Some, including the U.S. Naval and Military academies and several teacher colleges, refused to argue such a position and boycotted the topic. This generated a deep ripple effect of controversy and intense national discussion of SSD, including written coverage in *The New York Times* (Greene and Hicks 2005, p. 100).

One of the earliest criticisms of SSD is "The Ethics of Debating Both Sides", by Richard Murphy in 1957. Murphy, a professor of speech at the University of Illinois and former director of debate at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Colorado, and the University of Illinois, sets out the foundational ethical charge against debating both

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[4] A list of national topics from 1946 to the present is available on the National Debate Tournament homepage, online at: http://groups.wfu.edu/NDT/HistoricalLists/topics.html

sides by arguing that the practice is immoral because "a public statement is a public commitment" (1957, p. 2). Debaters, like politicians, policy experts, and public advocates, are expected to sincerely advocate only the positions that they personally believe. To do otherwise and abandon conviction is to lie in public—an immoral and unethical act. A major premise of Murphy's critique is that competitive debate, like other speaking activities, is a public enterprise. He argues that, "the debater… speaks before school assemblies, at the student council, to service clubs, and at a number of organizations of which he is a member" (Murphy 1957, p. 7). As a result, debate must submit to the same ethical constraints as other public activities, and cannot claim to be an isolated oasis or distinct testing ground with a primarily pedagogical purpose. A speaker advocating a position that they do not believe in could actually persuade others to adopt such a view (a dangerous form of sophistry). Thus, responsible students have a duty to only speak on behalf of arguments that they personally hold as conviction.

In response to Murphy's ethical indictment of SSD, Nicholas Cripe, another debate coach and professor of speech at Baylor University, defended the merits of the practice. Cripe took issue with Murphy's criticism on two levels: the pragmatic and the ethical. First, Cripe argues that abandoning SSD in favor of argument from conviction would render the larger tournament format of inter-collegiate debate infeasible. In a post-SSD world, students would choose their side (affirmative or negative) based solely on their personal beliefs. Using anecdotal evidence, Cripe demonstrates that large disparities in the number of affirmative and negative teams would exist on certain topics (this seems to still be true, given the debate community's generally liberal political leanings). With an uneven number of teams, pairing would be very difficult, if not impossible. As a result,

he wrote that "if the proponents of 'ethical' debate are correct… many schools would have to discontinue debate as we practice it today" (Cripe 1957, p. 209).

Second, Cripe responds directly to Murphy's contention that switching sides is immoral because it violates the debater's public statements. While agreeing with Murphy's general contention about public commitments, Cripe argues that tournament debating is a "special case" of public speaking that is altogether different from the types of open exposition to which Murphy analogizes it. Rather than being a persuasive activity where debaters primarily seek to coax the judge into agreeing with their position, competitive debate is a contest where each side attempts to prove that they are the better debaters. In fact, situations commonly arise where teams with substantively worse and less defensible arguments are victorious because of pure debating skills. Cripe regards debate as an educational, rather than persuasive, activity (1957, p. 210). Given this alternative prior goal of debate, Cripe argues that Murphy's indictment is flawed because the purpose determines the relevant ethical considerations. Debaters have an ethical duty to defend the best possible (and, in their opinion, most successful) argument. To do so, they commonly have to switch sides and argue the case for positions that they do not personally believe.

Five years later, Murphy replied to the defenses of SSD voiced by Cripe and others by reinvigorating his original case for debating from conviction. While still defending his original claim that switching sides violates the ethical norms that govern public speaking, he develops several additional arguments that indict the value of training students by debating both sides. First, Murphy claims that those who view debate as a training ground for practicing the form of argumentation risk lapsing into support for

dangerous forms of disputation that have been criticized by rhetoricians since Socrates (1963, p. 246). Second, he fears that SSD may corrupt students' views of important issues by causing them to change their opinion after becoming pseudo-advocates for certain positions. Murphy writes that, "there seems to be an abundance of experimental evidence that verbalizing tends to strengthen one's belief" (1963, p. 247). Finally, Murphy attempts to discredit the practice of debating both sides by positing another fundamental purpose and "ultimate end of public debate": reaching a decision on complex and controversial issues. He fears that SSD may teach students all of the arguments surrounding contentious issues and how to argue them, but not motivate them to coalesce those thoughts into a final conviction about which side to support.

While the Murphy-Cripe debates were certainly a prominent feature of the early controversy over the ethics of SSD, they were not the only members of the debate community to comment on the practice. A. Craig Baird (1955) and George Dell (1958) were also prominent proponents of debating both sides. Both largely agreed with Cripe's central contention that contest debating is an activity that is categorically different than other forms of public speaking and thus exempt from its rigid ethical limitations on advocacy. Additionally, Baird advanced the discussion about the role of conviction in debate by arguing that a rigorous testing of all sides of an argument including switching sides was a prerequisite to conviction—the opposite of what Murphy had argued. Baird argued that sound conviction was the result of "student exercises" that allowed debaters to thoroughly understand the issues at hand before rendering a conclusive judgment upon them (1955, p. 5). This, once again, redefined the purpose of debate. Here, debate became

a testing ground: a pedagogical playground where debaters could role-play different

positions in an isolated space in order to investigate their relative merits.  Baird wrote that,

> Debate and discussion training is essentially training in reflective thinking, in the
>
> defense of different sides ("role playing" as some call it), and in the revelation of
>
> the strength and weakness of each position. In essence we are practicing
>
> techniques of problem-solving. (1955, p. 6)

Thus, according to Baird, those who defend arguing only from personal belief defend a

method of pure dogmatism and not true conviction, a level of understanding that can only

arise *after* both sides of an issue have been examined.

Despite his vigorous critique, it soon became clear that Murphy's indictment of

SSD was unsuccessful at persuading his colleagues to abandon the practice in

competitive debate contests. Empirical data confirmed the consensus supporting the

ethical value of SSD. After conducting a survey of debate coaches in the American

Forensics Association and the National Forensics League, Donald Klopf and James

McCrosky found that over ninety percent of coaches found SSD to be both ethical and

good debate practice (1964, p. 38). Interpreting this result as a demonstration of an

"overwhelming collective opinion" in favor of switching sides, they declared the

controversy over the ethics of SSD to be finished. Klopf and McCrosksy attempted to

refocus the debate about debate, arguing,

> The relative ethic has been accepted by a large majority of those involved directly
>
> with academic debate. Both by their opinions and their actions they believe
>
> switch-sides debating is ethical. So do we. The controversy over the *ethics* of

debating both sides is pau! The controversy over the *pedagogical value* of

debating both sides hardly has begun. [Emphasis Added] (1964, p. 39)

After this time, due more to consensus of opinion than a resolution of Murphy's

arguments, the "debate about debate" shifted to a discussion of the educational merits of

such a practice and the controversy over ethics was closed.

**Pedagogical Controversy**

A second major area of discussion about the merits of switch side debating has

been the question of its educational efficacy. Extending the themes raised by Murphy in

his reply to Cripe, some have argued that, regardless of its ethical nature, SSD is a poor

method for teaching students. Douglas Ehninger (1958, Ehninger & Brockereide 1963), a

professor of speech at the University of Florida, wrote in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech,*

arguing that there are many "defects" in the arguments put forward by the pro-switch

siders and that allowing SSD risks turning the activity into purely a game with little

educational merit (1958, p. 131).

Many have responded with a variety of defenses of the practice. The first major

argument was that of Dennis Day, writing in the *Central States Speech Journal* in

February 1966. Day, the Director of Forensics at the University of Wisconsin, grounds

his defense of switching sides in a democratic ethos of free and full expression of ideas.

Between Murphy's conception of conviction as a *precursor* to argument and Baird's view

of conviction as a *result* of it, Day posits that conviction lies in the commitment of

debaters to the democratic process of debate and that, to fully actualize that commitment,

debaters must be willing to argue both sides of every issue. For Day, SSD has both an

ethical component (insofar as it subordinates the interests of the self to the larger interests of democratic society) and a pedagogical benefit of training students to become proper citizens. He argues,

> "To present persuasively arguments for a position with which one disagrees is the highest ethical act in debate because it sets aside personal interests for the common good … personal conviction can have moral significance only so long as the integrity of debate is maintained" (1966, p. 7).

For Day, the means of democratic decision-making are far more important than the ends. Society accepts certain choices because the have been decided in a manner that vests them with "moral integrity" (1966, p. 7). Additionally, Day argues that debating only from personal conviction may have the insidious effect of resulting in a covert suppression of minority views. If debaters are held personally responsible and accountable for each argument that they make, they may not be willing to voice certain unpopular opinions in a public forum (like a contest round). As a result, minority views will not be shielded as they are in a SSD format, resulting in a suppression that, as Day argues, is "the greater threat to democratic processes because it is clandestine and is more difficult to overcome" (1966, p. 8).

Ehninger wrote a later piece that made his position on the issue of switching sides somewhat more ambiguous. In "Argument as Method" (1970), Ehninger states that experiencing the arguments from the position of the other side is a "constitutive" act of being human that transforms one's opponents from mere objects into people (110). This act of empathy appears to be a reason to prefer switch side debate over other alternatives. It seems that, while wary of over-emphasizing the competitive aspects of debate and

risking the prioritization of the game value of role-playing over sound decision-making,

Ehninger still values the ability of the activity to generate empathy and tolerance in

debaters.

knowledge, and is a major rationale for switch-side debate" (1993, p. 285). By taking the side of the opposition, debaters see all the angles, and are more likely to make a reasoned, reflective decision. Over and over, students in competitive debate go through the process of carefully scrutinizing the arguments on both sides of controversial arguments before rendering a judgment, instilling a "lifelong pattern of critical assessment" (Muir 1993, p. 286). This is an extraordinarily important benefit of SSD, so much so that it has been called "the highest educational goal of the activity" (Parcher, 1998). The argument for SSD based on critical thinking has been echoed by others as well, including Parcher (1998), Dybvig and Iverson (2000, Bellon (2000), and Rutledge (2002).

**Social Controversy**

Coinciding with the introduction of critical and activist arguments into academic debate rounds, the controversy surrounding switch side debating has shifted once again, from the previous focus on pedagogy to an intensely political prioritization of the social value of debating both sides. Debate teams, most notably from the University of Louisville and California State University, Fullerton, have questioned the division between isolated contest rounds and broader political participation, arguing that the local and personal is immanently political. Thus, debaters have been called to regain convictions prior to the initiation of debate, and defend practices that have optimal social utility.

Coincidental to this development in academic debate, Darrin Hicks, professor of communication at the University of Denver, and Ron Greene, professor of communication at the University of Minnesota, revived the academic debate about debate

by prominently arguing that the conviction in the process of debate fostered by SSD contributed to "liberal discourses of American exceptionalism" during the Cold War. (2005, p. 102). Specifically, after conducting a review of the development of arguments about SSD, they focus on Day's argument that conviction is neither *conceived prior to,* nor a *product of* debate, but grounded in the *process* of argument itself. Hicks and Greene posit that SSD, including the "free and full expression" defended by Day (1966, p. 13), has been presented as a cultural technology and deliberative technique that defines the "hallmark[s] of citizenship" according to a series of rhetorical practices (2005, p. 112). The subordination of individual convictions to the collective benefit of debate touted by Day, they argue, is partaking in a particular political morality that secures the superiority of liberal values. During the Cold War, a specific moment in time when the United States was particularly invested in its ideological struggle against the communist influences of the Soviet Union, debating both sides was a benchmark of proper moral citizenship. This "game of freedom", in turn, transformed students into a "discursive citizen of liberalism" (2005, p. 120).

Jackie Massey, director of debate at the University of Oklahoma, takes the argument advanced by Hicks and Greene a large step forward, stating that SSD, as a cultural technology, serves to solidify an acceptance of undesirable forms of American exceptionalism in students. Citing a number of reasons to re-open the debate about switch side debating, he argues that a primary concern should be:

> The need to reclaim our agency as debaters and educators to address personal,
> local, and global problems. Not to allow debate to be form of cultural technology

re-affirming a commitment to American Exceptionalism and global domination.

We need to regain local control first and personal agency first. (2006)

Massey also revives several prior arguments, including Murphy's claim that a public statement is a public commitment and Ehninger's criticism of the disconnection between debate and its educational foundations. In a significant addition to the controversy surrounding the social value of SSD, Massey argues that the requirements of SSD in contemporary policy debate (centering on public policy resolutions that require action by the United States Federal Government) risks making student's views more moderate, which "is a common tactic in attempts to liberalize the radical" and "mold[s] students into exceptionalist subjects" (2006). Instead, he argues on behalf of an expansive and unrestrictive topic that allows students to debate their prior convictions.

The generalization and extension of Hicks and Greene's argument about SSD and liberalism to contemporary debate education by Massey and others has, so far, been addressed in two recent papers. First, using the works of Jürgen Habermas as his starting point, Matt Stannard, director of debate at the University of Wyoming, argues that debate produces "the deliberative human being" instead of the liberal-citizen subject envisioned by Hicks and Greene (2006). Since global processes, which risk amplifying imperialism and ethnocentrism, are already on-going and inevitable, participating in debate offers students an avenue to "collaborat[e] across cultures" and "foster resistance to domination" (2006). Further, he raises several additional responses to Hicks and Greene, including the lack of superior alternatives to switch side debate and the lack of connection between a commitment to liberal democracy and exceptionalism. Finally,

Stannard concludes contrary to Massey, arguing that the problem isn't *too much*

deliberation, but *too little*. He writes:

> Habermas's defense of the unfinished Enlightenment is my defense of academic
>
> debate: Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, seek to expand this
>
> method of deliberation to those who will use it to liberate themselves, confront
>
> power, and create ethical, nonviolent patterns of problem resolution. If capitalism
>
> corrupts debate, well, then I say we save debate. (2006)

Stannard thus questions the casual connection between SSD and processes of

exceptionalism.

Second, the Debate Authors Working Group (DAWG) at the University of

Pittsburgh recently published a collective piece defending SSD against charges of

exceptionalism (English, Llano, Mitchell, Morrison, Rief and Woods, 2007). Led by

Gordon Mitchell, an author commonly cited in debate circles for his writing on reflexive

fiat and the activist "outward turn" (Mitchell 1995, 1998, 2000; Mitchell & Suzuki 2004),

the group takes a position contrary to Hicks and Greene, arguing that "rather than acting

as a cultural technology expanding American exceptionalism, switch-side debating

originates from a civic attitude that serves as a bulwark against fundamentalism of all

stripes" (2007, p. 224). Citing former debaters, like Laurence Tribe and Neal Katayal,

who have gone on to ardently contest the exceptionalist "with us or against us" mantra of

the Bush administration, the group argues that debate trains students to become effective

advocates of progressive change. Switching sides is a "secret threat to absolutism" that

teaches "intellectual experimentation in an age of orthodoxy, and reflexivity in the face of

fundamentalism" (English, Llano, Mitchell, Morrison, Rief and Woods, 2007, p. 224).

**Uniqueness of My Work**

  The controversy surrounding switch side debating has progressed through three phases: ethical, pedagogical, and social. While many arguments, such as the ethical claim that "a public statement is a public commitment," are long closed (Klopf and McCrosky 1964), a significant amount of disagreement still exists about the educational and social value of debating both sides. As some have suggested (Hicks and Greene 2005; Massey 2006), now may be a particularly important time to "re-open" the debate about debate (if it was ever closed at all).

  At least three arguments stand out as being either unaddressed or emergent after the most recent writing on the subject. First, the theme of "co-option" present during the 1954 China topic debates has re-emerged in a next generation form. Instead of emanating from the political right and claiming that students will become more accepting of practices such as communism, the activist left has become the key locus of anti-SSD criticism. Now, it is claimed that debating both sides will seduce debaters into supporting moderate politics, a stance that defuses the potential of radical positions (Massey 2006). Second, once again, some have argued that certain issues are "off limits" and should not forced upon debaters (through topic selection and norms of competitive debate, such as topicality). The focus of most academic debate on issues of public policy and the enactment of federal policy has been a frequent target of critique, with some claiming that state-centric and bureaucratic focal points train debaters to become instruments of imperial violence (Ellis 2004). Finally, the argument about American exceptionalism advanced by Hicks and Greene, once a limited claim about the specific political context

of the Cold War, has been expanded by opponents of SSD to argue that the practice continues to produce a virulent form of liberalism in its students.

My work attempts to produce a strong defense of switch side debate by updating the debate about debate, applying previous arguments in favor of SSD in new ways, and producing original arguments to answer these claims. Given the history of the discussion about SSD, this alone is a significant task. Moreover, the recent introduction of activist and critical arguments in competitive debate makes the present an especially important time for a strong academic review of SSD. The inquiry into the merits of debating both sides of controversial issues has implications that extend well beyond the relatively insular practice of academic debate. For other processes of social deliberation, it is easy to see that the benefits of critical thinking, argumentative pluralism, and empathy taught by SSD have enormous value. As William Keith, a researcher and professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, has noted, these debates about debate are highly significant because they "illuminate the political and theoretical heart of speech teaching in the early field" (2007, p. 83). The insights generated by my work, although purposely limited to academic debate, then, should be read as a lens for understanding and evaluating the larger role of debate in society.

CHAPTER THREE:

A DEFENSE OF SWITCH SIDE DEBATING

**Introduction**

Every truth has two sides. It is well to look at both sides before we commit ourselves to

either side.

– *Aesop's Fables*[5]

Given the long, contested history of switch side debating and the recent criticisms

of the practice emerging from the critical and activist schools of argument, it is necessary

to examine the continuing merits of requiring debaters to advocate both sides of an issue.

Due to the "closed" nature of the controversy over ethics (Klopf and McCrosky 1964)

and the focus of contemporary discussion, this paper will primarily respond to

*pedagogical* and *social* critiques of SSD. In particular, three arguments against debating

both sides will be addressed in depth. Opponents of SSD have charged that switch side

debate defuses radical activism by moderating the beliefs of debaters, forces students to

speak on behalf of dangerous ideas, and contributes to a form of political morality that

fuels American exceptionalism (Hicks & Greene 2005; Massey 2006). While this is

hardly an exhaustive list of current criticisms of SSD, these critiques raise issues that cut

straight to the heart of the debate about debate. In responding to these criticisms and

developing a defense of SSD, this paper builds the case for the continuing utility of

debating both sides. As a method of teaching students to engage in the crucial educational

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[5] Aesop. (1992). Moral of "the mule". *Aesop's Fables (Zipes, J., ed.)*. Signet Classics, p. 61.

practice of critical thinking, SSD is virtually unparalleled. Thus, while there may be some minor drawbacks to SSD, the benefits are strong enough to justify its practice.

This chapter is divided into four sections, paralleling the three previously discussed arguments against SSD and ending with a conclusion summarizing the debate. First, it responds to the claim of cooption, arguing that one of the most fundamental premises of switch side debate undermines the claim that extremist views can be understood as desirable without first debating both sides. Second, it defends SSD against the charge that some issues should be off limits. As part of this defense, I draw on the work of John Stuart Mill and develop a defense of a limited form of argumentative pluralism. Third, in order to refute the claim that SSD creates a form of exceptionalism, it argues the SSD is the opposite: an *antidote* to exceptionalism and perhaps the best check against dogmatism and argumentative intolerance in contemporary society. Finally, it concludes with an on-balance assessment of the costs and benefits of the switch side approach.

**Don't Fear Cooption**

Critics of SSD have argued that debating both sides is a tactic of cooption by dominant beliefs because speaking on behalf of "evil" ideas moderates extreme views. Instead of sharpening and refining the prior beliefs of debaters, the argument goes, engaging in switch side debating changes the beliefs of students, slowly drawing them "close[r] to the middle" (Massey 2006). Mirroring the broader critical move toward a "depoliticized expression of struggles," they argue that this is undesirable because only extreme views are "pure," in the sense that they avoid entanglement in bureaucratic

structures of government (Boggs 1997, p. 773). Essentially, the argument boils down to "brainwashing": switching sides causes students to abandon their original (presumably correct) beliefs in favor of more moderate and less politically effective ideas.

Three responses effectively dispatch with this criticism and support the benefits of SSD. First, the *foundational premise* of the case for switch side debating indicts the notion that true conviction can be held prior to a rigorous analysis of all sides of an issue through debating both sides. As far back as A. C. Baird (1955), proponents of switch side debating have argued that conviction was a *result* of reasoned consideration of the issues surrounding a particular policy rather than a *pre-condition* for it. For instance, Baird argues, "Sound conviction... should stem from mature reflection. Discussion and debate facilitate the maturing of such reflective thinking and conviction" (1955, p. 6). Many debaters, especially those new to collegiate debate, do not yet have calcified opinions about many controversial subjects. Instead, they develop their beliefs over time, as they spend time thinking through the nuances of each relevant argument in preparation for competitive debating. By arguing on behalf of both the affirmative and the negative sides of a given resolution, switch side debaters are exposed to many avenues to test their initial thoughts on controversial subjects.

Traditionally, the formation of belief in this manner has coincided more closely with the meaning of "conviction." Defined as beliefs that are formed as a result of "exposing fallacies" through the "give-and-take of rebuttal," sound convictions can only be truly generated by the reflexive thinking spurred by debating both sides. While some students may honestly believe that they have thoroughly considered the merits of a particular opinion before arguing for or against it in a debate, experimenting with ideas in

a competitive SSD is still a necessary endeavor. Only in debate, a relatively isolated political space, are many arguments able to be presented in an ideally open, no-holds-barred manner (Coverstone 1995). Moreover, when faced with the prospect of being forced to advocate a position, students receive the necessary motivation (through competitive and other impulses) to thoroughly research all of the complexities of a given subject. Also, through the requirement of advocacy, students are encouraged to actively *listen*, a crucial element of rich argumentative engagement (Lacy 2002). In the end, the switch side debater emerges with a deeper understanding of more sides of an issue and may be ready to come to some degree of conclusion and conviction about which side to support.

Conviction generated through debating both sides is almost universally preferable to dogmatic and non-negotiable assertions of belief (Baird 1955, p. 6). Switching sides grounds belief in reasonable reflective thinking; it teaches that decisions should not be rendered until all positions and possible consequences have been considered in a reasoned manner. This method is closely linked to the value that debate places on critical thinking. Unsurprisingly, many authors have noted the importance of SSD for generating such rigorous decision-making skills (Muir 1993; Parcher 1998; Rutledge 2002; Speice & Lyle 2003; English, Llano, Mitchell, Morrison, Rief and Woods 2007). The critical thinking taught by SSD provides the ultimate check against dangerous forms of cooption. Over time, certain arguments will prevail over others only if they have a strong enough logical foundation to withstand thorough scrutiny. Debaters will change their minds to support the "moderate" side of certain positions only if—after reasoned reflection and sound conviction—doing so is found to be preferable. While such a "marketplace of

ideas" may be marked by some imperfections, one of its most effective incarnations is undoubtedly in academic debate rounds. There, appeals to wealth, status, and power are minimized by a focus on logic and formal rules, which protect the ability of all participants to contribute in an honest and open manner. As a result, it should be assumed that the insights generated through debate's dialectic process will be generally correct and that any shifting beliefs are the reflection of a social good (the replacement of false ideas with truth).

Conceiving of conviction in this manner redefines the role of debate into what Baird calls an "educational procedure": the formation of a pedagogical playground to experiment with alternative ideas and coalesce assertions and unwarranted beliefs into sound conviction (1966, p. 6). Treating debate as a training ground for advocacy and decision-making has several benefits: it allows debaters the conceptual flexibility to experiment with minority and extreme ideas, protects them from outside influences, and buys them time before they are forced to publicly put forward their opinions (Coverstone 1995). As a result, the primary focus of the activity shifts from *arguing* to *deciding*, giving critical thinking its crucial importance. A fundamental premise of the anti-SSD's claim about cooption is thoroughly indicted: it is impossible to lose one's convictions before they have truly been discovered.

Second, the link between debating both sides and the moderation of student's beliefs is far from clear. Admittedly, there has been little to no formal empirical research investigating this connection. Yet, it seems equally likely that SSD may bolster the original beliefs of debaters (especially if they held beliefs that are found to be desirable after all related issues have been discussed) by allowing him or her to develop thoughtful

responses to the best arguments against their original position. If a debater's beliefs are altered because he or she realizes that he or she has made an error in their initial conviction, then that seems to be a clear benefit, rather than a drawback, of SSD. Incidentally, if a position is so weak that debaters are likely to alter their opinion about it as a result of merely temporarily positioning themselves as advocates of it, then the utility of such a view must surely be held with a high degree of skepticism.

Moreover, even if SSD does moderate the beliefs of debaters, this alone is not evidence of an insidious plot to undermine radical activism. The statistical notion of regression to the mean can explain a great deal of this phenomenon. Referring to the purely statistical tendency for extreme results to become more moderate over time, it explains how, when beginning from intellectually extreme positions, debaters can *only* become more moderate over time. Thus, *any form* of debating—from conviction or SSD—is likely to have the same moderating effect and SSD should not be subject to unique criticism on these grounds alone.

Third, there is an important question of means. Even the best activist intentions have little practical utility as long as they remain purely cordoned off in the realm of theoretical abstractions. Creating programs of action that seek to produce material changes in the quality of life for suffering people, not mere wishful thinking in the ivory towers of academia, should be the goal of any revolutionary project. Frequently, for strategies for change, the devil lies in the details. It is not possible to simply click one's ruby red slippers together and wish for alternatives to come into being. Lacking a plausible mechanism to enact reforms, many have criticized critical theory as being a "fatally flawed enterprise" (Jones 1999). For activists, learning the skills to successfully

negotiate hazardous political terrain is crucial. They must know when to and when not to compromise, negotiate, and strike political alliances in order to be successful. The pure number of failed movements in the past several decades demonstrates the severity of the risk assumed by groups who do not focus on refining their preferred means of change.

Given the importance of strategies for change, SSD is even more crucial. Debaters trained by debating both sides are substantially more likely to be effective advocates than those experienced only in arguing on behalf of their own convictions. For several reasons, SSD instills a series of practices that are essential for a successful activist agenda. First, SSD creates more knowledgeable advocates for public policy issues.  As part of the process of learning to argue both sides, debaters are forced to understand the intricacies of multiple sides of the argument considered. Debaters must not only know how to research and speak on behalf of their own personal convictions, but also for the opposite side in order to defend against attacks of that position. Thus, when placed in the position of being required to publicly defend an argument, students trained via SSD are more likely to be able to present and persuasively defend their positions. Second, learning the nuances of all sides of a position greatly strengthens the resulting convictions of debaters, their ability to anticipate opposing arguments, and the effectiveness of their attempts to locate the crux, nexus and loci of arguments. As is noted earlier, conviction is a *result*, not a *prerequisite* of debate. Switching sides and experimenting with possible arguments for and against controversial issues, in the end, makes students more likely to ground their beliefs in a reasoned form of critical thinking that is durable and unsusceptible to knee-jerk criticisms. As a result, even though it may appear to be inconsistent with

advocacy, SSD "actually created stronger advocates" that are more likely to be successful in achieving their goals (Dybvig and Iverson 2000).

Proponents of abandoning SSD and returning to debating from conviction should take note. Undoubtedly, many of their ideas would be beneficial if enacted and deserve the support of activist energies. However, anti-SSD critics seem to have given little thought to the important question of how to translate good ideas into practice. By teaching students to privilege their own personal beliefs prior to a thorough engagement with all sides of an issue, debating from conviction produces activists that are more likely to be politically impotent. By positing that debaters should bring prior beliefs to the table in a rigid manner and assuming that compromising is tantamount to giving in to cooptation, the case of debating from conviction undercuts the tactics necessary for forging effective coalitional politics. Without such broad-based alliances, sustainable political changes will likely be impossible (Best & Kellner 2001).

**Tolerating the Intolerable: A Defense of Limited Argumentative Pluralism**

A second criticism of SSD that has recently been voiced is that, because the practice places some restrictions upon what debaters may argue (by forcing them to take the position of the both the affirmative and the negative), it requires students to become advocates for certain intolerable ideas that should be "off limits" for discussion. For example, the increasingly prevalent usage of postmodern arguments in collegiate debate rounds has caused many teams to argue that they should not be forced to defend the "dirty" bureaucratic politics of the federal government (Solt 2004). A similar phenomenon can be seen in wider spheres of deliberation as well. During rallies by the

Ku Klux Klan, many liberal activists who generally defend freedom of speech have questioned their right to spread their racist message. On the opposite side of the spectrum, some conservatives have objected to United States negotiations with the government of North Korea because of its poor human rights record, instead choosing to "shun" the nation through diplomatic restrictions and economic pressure.

Each of the previous examples demonstrates that, in certain extremes, the principles of free speech and pluralism encounter contradictions. To allow each individual to voice his or her own opinion, in the most absolute sense, means to accommodate even those who seek to silence others from speaking. To reject views that many consider intolerable or repulsive may reproduce intolerance. Because argumentative pluralism, as an expression of opinion and a litmus test of societal values, is crucially important for advancing tolerance, resolving these dilemmas in a manner that most effectively facilitates respect for difference is an essential task for engaged citizens of liberal democratic societies.

With this goal in mind, philosopher John Stuart Mill and other scholars of rhetoric and argumentation have taken up the cause of providing a meta-theory to guide public deliberation. While Mill is correct in his argument that no opinion, no matter how minor, should be suppressed on the basis of its falsity (a position supported by recent writing on argumentation), his position should be modified to account for two "special cases" in which suppression of certain views is desirable. First, on the occasion where one interlocutor is actively attempting to silence another, advocates of openness must, paradoxically, be willing to say "no" and seek closure. Second, for the purpose of

argument, a common starting point, or *stasis*, is required for debate to begin and must be delineated with clear lines of relevance.

The Importance of Argumentative Pluralism

The relevance of argumentation for advancing tolerant politics cannot be underestimated. The willingness to be open to alternative views has a material impact on difference in at least two primary ways. First, the rendering of a certain belief as "off limits" from debate and the prohibition of ideas from the realm of contestation is conceptually indistinct from the physical exclusion of people from societal practices. Unlike racial or gendered concerns, certain groups of people (the religious, minority political parties, etc.) are defined almost exclusively by the arguments that they adhere to. To deem these views unspeakable or irrelevant is to functionally deny whole groups of people access to public deliberation. Second, argument, as individual advocacy, is an expression of belief. It has the potential to persuade members of the public to either support or oppose progressive politics. Belief itself is an accurate indicator of the way individuals will chose to act—with very real implications for openness, diversity and accommodation. Thus, as a precursor to action, argument is an essential starting point for campaigns of tolerance.

Argumentative pluralism can be defined as the proper tolerance for the expression of a diversity of ideas (Scriven 1975, p. 694). Contrary to monism, pluralism holds that there are many potential beliefs in the world and that each person has the ability to determine for himself or herself that these beliefs may hold true. Referring back to the opening examples, a pluralist would respect the right for the KKK to hold certain beliefs,

even if he or she may find the group offensive. In the argumentative context, pluralism requires that participants to a debate or discussion recognize the right of others to express their beliefs, no matter how objectionable they may be. The key here is *expression*: although certain beliefs may be more "true" than others in the epistemic sense, each should have equal access (at least initially) to forums of deliberation. It is important to distinguish pluralism from its commonly confused, but only loosely connected, counterpart, relativism. To respect the right of others to hold different beliefs does not require that they are all considered equal. Such tolerance ends at the intellectual level of each individual being able to hold their own belief. Indeed, as Muir writes, "It [pluralism] implies neither tolerance of actions based on those beliefs nor respecting the content of the beliefs" (288). Thus, while a pluralist may acknowledge the right for the Klan to hold exclusionary views, he or she need not endorse racism or anti-Semitism itself, or the right to exclude itself.

Even when limited to such a narrow realm of diversity, argumentative pluralism holds great promise for a politics based on understanding and accommodation that runs contrary to the dominant forces of economic, political, and social exclusion. Pluralism requires that individuals acknowledge opposing beliefs and arguments by forcing an understanding that personal convictions are not universal. Instead of blindly asserting a position as an "objective Truth," advocates tolerate a multiplicity of perspectives, allowing a more panoramic understanding of the issue at hand (Mitchell and Suzuki 2004, p. 10). In doing so, the advocates frequently understand that there are persuasive arguments to be had on both sides of an issue. As a result, instead of advancing a cause through moralistic posturing or appeals to a falsely assumed universality (which, history

has shown, frequently become justifications for scape-goating and exclusion), these proponents become purveyors of reasoned arguments that attempt to persuade others through deliberation.

A clear example of this occurs in competitive academic debate. Switch-side debating has profound implications for pluralism. Personal convictions are supplemented by conviction in the process of debate. Instead of being personally invested in the truth and general acceptance of a position, debaters use arguments instrumentally, as tools, and as pedagogical devices in the search for larger truths. Beyond simply recognizing that more than one side exists for each issue, switch-side debate advances the larger cause of equality by fostering tolerance and empathy toward difference. Setting aside their own "ego-identification," students realize that they must listen and understand their opponent's arguments well enough to become advocates on behalf of them in future debates (Muir 1993, p. 289). Debaters assume the position of their opponents and understand how and why the position is constructed as it is. As a result, they often come to understand that a strong case exists for opinions that they previously disregarded. Recently, advocates of switch side debating have taken the case of the practice a step further, arguing that it, "originates from a civic attitude that serves as a bulwark against fundamentalism of *all stripes*" (English, Llano, Mitchell, Morrison, Rief and Woods 2007, p. 224). Debating practices that break down exclusive, dogmatic views may be one of the most robust checks against violence in contemporary society.

Mill and Minority Views

Undoubtedly, there are many who reject argumentative pluralism in all or nearly all cases. Absolutists maintain that there are certain positions where no other side exists or where one side is of such a minority opinion that it does not warrant being the subject of debate. For those who hold a mainstream political view, statements such as, "the State is beneficial and anarchy would be chaos," "capitalist globalization is inevitable," or, in the most extreme, "human life has value," are taken as givens. For pluralists, the previous statements can be true but still be open to debate. For argumentative monists, such positions are so "true" that further discussion would not only be a waste of time, it may also risk changing the minds of some of the debaters to be more tolerant of a dangerous position (as discussed above). Although commonly associated with the practices of the majority, absolutism is not limited to only proponents of the dominant position. In academic debate, a substantial amount of controversy has existed in recent years over the state-centric nature of policy resolutions (the subject of debate). Liberals complain that being required to debate about state politics defuses radicalism by teaching students that bureaucratic politics is the means to all ends (Massey 2006). This is the flip-side of the previous discussion of absolutism: critics can be so convinced of their positions, even if in the minority, that they refuse discussion of dominant principles altogether.

In On Liberty, philosopher John Stuart Mill provides a persuasive rebuke of the absolutist position and a strong argument in favor of both argumentative pluralism and switch-side debate. Fearing the development of a closed society that resists bold individual intellectual gestures, Mill rejects the position that certain issues should be "off limits" for discussion and argues that no accordance of governmental or public opinion

can justify silencing a minority viewpoint. Even in cases where there is an extremely broad consensus, Mill strongly supports free expression. He argues that, "If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind" (1975, p. 10). To make his case, Mill divides possible examples into two hypothetical cases: first, where the minority opinion is right, and second, where it is wrong. In each outcome, Mill eloquently argues that the majority silencing the opinion is making a mistake because:

> If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of
>
> exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as
>
> great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth,
>
> produced by its collision with error. (1975, p. 10)

Although controversy over these claims continues, the theoretical foundations for Mill's argument remain as strong as ever.

Mill's first premise is the most easily defendable. If a minority viewpoint is actually correct, society would be making a grave error by silencing it. Like the scientific revolutions spurred by Galileo's defense of a heliocentric model of the solar system (incidentally an argument once suppressed by the majority), societal progress is driven forward by a progression of truths. New and more refined ideas come forth and replace older, slightly misguided beliefs. Immunizations that saved millions of lives from disease and the political concept of universal human rights are but two examples of how the triumph of truth over fallacy has materially improved the world we live in. To suppress

the truth is to stunt this important process—an act that Mill calls a "peculiar evil" (1975, p. 10).

Of course, this argument relies upon the supposition that some of the things that the vast majority of people think are true are actually false. While it is undoubtedly the case that many people holding strong convictions about a certain argument maintain unwavering certainty in their correctness, Mill refutes the infallibility of their belief, writing:

> Those who desire to suppress it…have no authority to decide the
> question for all mankind, and exclude every other person from the
> means of judging. To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they
> are sure that it is false, is to assume that *their* certainty is the same
> thing as *absolute* certainty. All silencing of discussion is an
> assumption of infallibility. Its condemnation may be allowed to rest
> on this common argument, not the worse for being common. (p. 10)

Moreover, to justify silencing the expression of a minority or majority opinion on the basis of personal conviction, one must come to the determination that a belief is incorrect not only from their own personal opinion, but that it is *so false* that all others would also come to that same conclusion, such that others do not even need to participate in the same process that informed one's own opinion. For any one individual to presume to meet all three of these criteria is precisely the inaccurate *assumption of infallibility* that Mill criticizes.

The second premise, that the truth is strengthened through collision with error, is slightly more contentious but ultimately correct. Some absolutists have maintained that

opening up all issues for discussion is more likely to draw the public's opinion to the middle than strengthen the original correct position. While empirical support for this claim is sorely lacking, it can also be rebuked purely on theoretical grounds. Debating both sides of important issues is far more likely to refine and strengthen the support for truthful positions than weaken it. Dissent and disagreement challenge adherents of the dominant opinion to constantly refine and reconfigure their position, driving it towards truth. Moreover, the risk involved in this process is slight, because if the dominant position is more "correct" than the minority, then the chances that the silenced position would sway a large number of people are very slim. Further, Mill's premise here accounts for a third (very likely) stage—the position where both the dominant and minority arguments contain elements of truth and error. In this instance, the collision of the two in public deliberation will (hopefully) produce a combination of opinions that is more error-free than either of the original positions. Even the relatively conservative Roman Catholic Church understands the merits of such an argumentative method. Until the practice was abolished by Pope John Paul II in 1983, the Church would summon an individual to assume the role of the "Devil's Advocate," or *Advocatus Diaboli*, to present all the arguments against the canonization of saints. Once all opposing arguments were stated, the case for canonization was often greater because it was understood that *no possible argument* could render the case unjustified.

One additional benefit of free expression that Mill does not explicitly foreground, yet remains critical for scholars of rhetoric, is the question of advocacy. Not only does the refusal to silence minority positions generate a more error-free position, it also makes the proponents of those positions much more effective in their attempts to persuade

others to accept their views. Debaters trained to see both sides of the issue learn the nuances of all positions and understand the strongest opposition arguments. Thus, they begin the process of deliberation a "step ahead" and can defuse their opposition from the start (Dybvig and Iverson). This insight is crucial: only skilled and trained advocates can generate the widespread adherence necessary to make "newfound truths" meaningful. Without strong and persuasive opponents, even the most error-free arguments will remain confined to the margins of society.

Refining Mill

Mill's argument works because of the relative conceptual strength of the marketplace of ideas—the principle that, all else equal, the most intellectually sound idea will "win out" over all competitors, and the best policy is created when all available alternatives are also considered. Despite many criticisms, it is hardly clear that a more effective alternative model for policy deliberation exists. This theoretical foundation, however, creates potential contradictions for Mill similar to those discussed earlier. Should openness and free expression be allowed in the instance where the opinions that are permitted directly undermine the process of deliberation? If so, does that undermine the truth-generating potential of public debate? While Mill is generally correct in his argument that no opinion, no matter how minor, should be suppressed on the basis of its falsity, his position should be modified to account for two "special cases" where suppression of certain views is desirable. First, on the occasion where one party is actively attempting to silence another through violence or coercion, advocates of free expression must be willing to exclude offenders from deliberative processes. Second, a

common starting point is required for debate to begin and must be delineated via clear lines of relevance, even if this requires suppression of irrelevant arguments.

To preserve an open and accessible space of deliberation, limits need to be placed on the ability of participants to use violence or coercion to prevent others from voicing their own opinions. Some groups are so convinced of their position that they are willing to do anything, including forcefully silencing opposition, to ensure that their argument wins. Thus, some degree of exclusion is inevitable—the relevant questions are only *who does* that silencing and *what circumstances* it occurs under. As Ruth Lessl Shively, professor of political science at Texas A&M University notes:

> The most radical skepticism ends in the most radical conservatism.
> In other words, a refusal to judge among ideas and activities is, in the
> end, an endorsement of the status quo… To fully support political
> contest, one must fully support some uncontested rules and reasons.
> To generally reject the silencing or exclusion of others, one must
> sometimes silence or exclude those who reject civility and
> democracy. (2000, p. 181)

Violence seeks to destroy the open circulation of ideas that generate the progression towards truth. The arguments that prevail in an atmosphere of coercion are those promoted by the powerful elite, not the most intellectually sound. To ensure effective deliberation, certain communicative norms must be established to govern the conduct of participants. Even though the elaboration of clear rules may sometimes result in the exclusion of certain perspectives, it is a necessary means to protect the greater end of productive debate.

A second exception to the rule of free expression must be made to limit irrelevant discussion and establish a common starting point for debate. In the rhetorical tradition, the belief in the necessity of a mutual topic of disagreement, known as *stasis* (meaning "standing" and derived from a Greek word meaning "to stand still"), has a long history dating back to Aristotle (although greatly expounded by Hermagoras). Through several modes of proceeding, the topic of controversy between interlocutors is established and an implicit contract—that *here* is the point where we agree to disagree—is created. Without stasis, opponents may argue back in forth, without really disagreeing with each other because they are not truly speaking about the same subject. For example, when one debater argues that the United States should refuse to negotiate with North Korea to avoid legitimating its harmful human rights policies and the opponent responds that President Clinton's accommodation of North Korea in the 1990s was the source of its current human rights dilemma, there is no true disagreement. Each position can be entirely true without undermining the other. In this instance, the truth-generating function of deliberation is short-circuited. To eliminate errors, fallacies must gradually be replaced by truths, correct positions must win out over incorrect ones, and strong arguments must gain more acceptance than weak ideas. This process requires conflict; it necessitates rejection. To determine that something is "true" requires that its converse is "false." The statement that "snow is cold" requires the dismissal of its contrary. Such choices can only be made when there is a point of disagreement for debate to revolve around. Without stasis, the productive potential of deliberation is profoundly undermined.

To avoid this scenario of "two ships passing in the night," argumentation scholars have recognized the importance of a mutual agreement to disagree and have attempted to

create guidelines to facilitate productive discussion. "Some agreed upon end or goal must

be present to define and delimit the evaluative ground within which the interchange is to

proceed," writes Douglas Ehninger, professor of Speech at the University of Iowa,

"When such ground is lacking, *argument itself* … becomes impossible" (1958, p. 108).

Shively concurs, stating that, "we must agree about what it is that is being debated before

we can debate it" (2000, p. 181). In the academic context, policy debates create stasis by

utilizing a year-long resolution that sets the topic for discussion. Affirmative teams must

present a topical advocacy (one that fits within the bounds of the resolution) or they are

procedurally disqualified. In public fora, the task falls upon moderators and discussion

facilitators to set clear lines of relevance. Advocates, who frequently have strategic

political incentives to avoid direct disagreement, need to be institutionally constrained by

the framework for discussion.

Grappling with the contradictions and limitations of free expression is a difficult

task. While a tolerant politics of difference seeks to include as many perspectives as

possible, there are instances where some degree of exclusion is unavoidable. To allow

each individual to voice his or her own opinion, in the most absolute sense, means to

accommodate even those who seek to silence others from speaking. To reject views that

many consider intolerable or repulsive may reproduce intolerance. John Stuart Mill's

emphasis on creating space for the views of the minority is an important guiding principle:

it generates the crucial value of argumentative pluralism, breeds stronger and more

effective advocates, and resists dogmatism and bigotry. Yet, it needs to be supplemented

by accounting for two special cases where full and free expression undermines the

deliberative process itself. In the instance where the speaker seeks to coerce others with

the threat of violence or where the common point of disagreement is disrupted by irrelevance, advocates of openness must be willing to say "no" and seek closure. Once these circumstances have been resolved, any and all viewpoints, no matter how minor, should be allowed to circulate freely.

A position that favors a limited form of argumentative pluralism undermines the claims made by those who oppose SSD and wish to render certain controversial issues "off limits" from debate. Limits should be placed on the content of debate only because such choices – as to what is debatable – are inevitable and, given that, it is preferable to choose the path that best protects the forum for deliberation by minimizing exclusion. The arbitrary choice about what content should and should not be "up for debate" threatens to do just that – either all issues are up for debate, or none can be.

**An Antidote to Exceptionalism**

A third and final criticism of SSD is an argument linking the practice of debating both sides to the development of societal norms that reinforce American exceptionalism. While originally a limited and context-dependent claim, this line of argument has been expanded to argue that the dominant practice of debate colludes with forces of domination that seek to marginalize and silence alternative methods and styles of communication (Ellis 2004; Massey 2006). This critique is fairly complex, and thus requires a moderately lengthy explanation before the pro-SSD responses can effectively be laid out.

<u>Debate as Liberal Training?</u>

In 2005, Ronald Greene and Darrin Hicks, drawing on the existing body of theory relating to SSD, wrote an article claiming that debating both sides "helps liberalism create a governing field" between an individual's personal convictions and their belief in the process of deliberation and debate (2005, p. 121). Drawing on the case study of the previously discussed 1954 "Red China" controversy, in which several debate programs boycotted the topic based on ideological opposition to engaging the communist nation, Greene and Hicks demonstrated that, during the Cold War, SSD colluded with forces of liberalism to contribute to exceptionalism. They argue that this is the case for two reasons. First, during this period of time, the idea of "free" speech emerged as a way for the United States to distinguish itself from others and claim a moral superiority over closed societies. As part of many liberal elements of society, the promotion of free speech allowed the United States to posit itself as the bearer of reason and civility in opposition to the Soviet Union. Second, Greene and Hicks criticized the shift to process conviction advocated by Day, in which he has argued that debating both sides is the "highest ethical act" because it places absolute faith in the "free and full expression" of the democratic process of debate (1966, p. 7). They claimed that Day's subordination of personal convictions to a second-order conviction in the belief in debate as a process provided critical sustenance to societal norms governing the proper behavior of democratic citizens. Instead of providing an epistemic defense of SSD (in that it facilitated good decision-making or critical thinking), Day's model of SSD was argued to be preferable because it best met the defining characteristics of democracy. As part of this, Day's defense of SSD shifted the order of conviction from the personal ("I say what I believe") to the process

("I do not always say what I believe, because I believe in the benefits of switch-side debate"). A necessary component of a firm belief in the process of SSD is the norm of "free and full expression" (Day 1966, p. 13). During the Cold War, the American promotion of free speech, as opposed to the repression and restrictions imposed on people living behind the "Iron Curtain", was a key element of the case for the superiority of democratic society. Greene and Hicks picked up on this theme, arguing that:

> By instantiating a desire for full and free expression, the pedagogical technique of debating both sides became a mechanism by which the student-debater-citizen becomes an exceptional 'American' – the bearer of universal norms of liberal democracy. (2005, p. 117)

Thus, by debating both sides, democracy is sustained on the level of an individual's self-fashioning which, as was very prominent at the time, contained an element of exceptionalist thinking about liberal values vis-à-vis communism. Additionally, Greene and Hicks noted that, during the debates over the "Red China" issue, there was a widespread fear that affirming such a topic would turn the American youth into communist sympathizers (Greene & Hicks 2005, p. 114). Instead of questioning the core liberal belief inherent in such a claim (that sympathizing with communism should be rejected), the defenders of SSD chose not to take issue with this claim and instead only questioned whether the link to such an outcome was valid. The pro-SSD advocates claimed, along the lines of Baird, that debating both sides would produce a stronger conviction that would be impervious to communist propaganda—a reinforcement of liberalism.

In contemporary debate, others have taken this charge much further, to its logical extreme. Teams participating in debate rounds arguing on behalf of extreme positions, such as radical critiques of humanism, conventional morality, or the state, have drawn upon the work of Greene and Hicks to claim that SSD dangerously risks allowing debate to become a "form of cultural technology re-affirming a commitment to American Exceptionalism and global domination" (Massey, 2006). To do so, they extend the argument made in "Lost Convictions" in two ways. First, they expand the scope of its analysis beyond that of the Cold War and "Red China" controversy and apply it to contemporary debate practice. Second, they explicitly connect American exceptionalism to the worst instances of U.S. global violence: the "kill-to-save" mentality of American soldiers in the Vietnam war, the preventive invasion of Iraq, and the unending "war on terrorism" that prioritizes national security over all else. Some have gone so far as to claim that the practice of switch side debate, revolving around state-centric issues (as mandated by the resolution), is meant to produce more effective policy wonks, imperial planners, and even engineers of genocide (Ellis 2004).

<u>Misapplication</u>

This extension of the previous claims of Greene and Hicks is where my defense of switch side debate takes issue. Many of the elements of Greene and Hicks position are undoubtedly true. Like any principled approach to communication, SSD is laden with ideological presuppositions and biases. It presumes that the marketplace of ideas operates with a degree of efficacy, that democratic and deliberative approaches to problem-solving

produce strong outcomes, and that there is a gap between the "private" debate round and the "public" realm of advocacy-after-conviction.

However, the arguments in "Lost Convictions" alone should not be read as a sweeping indictment of SSD for two reasons. First, Greene and Hicks make a specific and context-dependent claim about the Cold War that cannot be easily applied to contemporary discussion of the merits of SSD. 1954 was a time of McCarthyism and anti-Communist witch-hunts. It was quite possible then that one justification for debating both sides was a re-affirmation of liberalism against the communists. Now, in the midst of the "war on terrorism," widespread restrictions on civil liberties, and President Bush's mantra of "with us or against us," it seems like the opposite is truer. Fidelity to the American cause is performed through the willing silence of its citizens. Dissent is quelled and the public is encouraged to view the world through the singular lens of "freedom" against the forces of terrorism. Debating both sides—and lacking immediate conviction—is a sign of weakness and waffling in the face of imminent threats to national security. Thus, in the contemporary context, to reject SSD and promote argument only through conviction is far more conducive to supporting American exceptionalism than debating multiple sides is as a liberal democratic justification.

Second, the fact that certain communicative practices like SSD are implicated in operations of power does not alone make them undesirable. Consistent with the Foucauldian basis of such a criticism, one cannot blanketly assert that power is a monolithic entity that can be deemed either "good" or "bad." Instead, it is imperative to examine the "specificity of … practices in order to delineate their forces and effects" (Muckelbauer 2000, p. 78). Many actions were taken during the Cold War under the

pretenses that they would contribute in some way to the case for U.S. superiority over the

Soviet Union. For example, it could be argued that the racial integration of schools in the

United States was complicit with a narrative of plurality and openness that was, in at least

some ways, exceptional. Does this make the fact that schools were integrated undesirable?

Assuredly not. Bracketed off from the benefits derived from SSD, the interweaving of the

practice with liberalism may be a cause for some concern. However, once the advantages

of such an approach are considered, they do not alone merit a whole-sale rejection of the

process. Greene and Hicks acknowledge this when they write that, "In a world

increasingly dominated by fundamentalism (religious and otherwise) the development of

a respect for pluralism, tolerance and free speech remains political valuable" (2005, p.

121). Yes, as instructors and practitioners of debate, it is our responsibility to remain

cognizant of precisely what type of "moral development" is being taught. But, once that

awareness has been raised, the fact that it may not be totally neutral (an impossible goal)

does not warrant abandonment of the switch-sides approach.

Other Responses

The arguments advanced by Massey and other vocal critics of switch side

debating are susceptible to several other persuasive responses. First, as have been

previously argued by Stannard (2006), many of the processes that have contributed to

American exceptionalism—globalization, infiltration of academic institutions by agents

of imperialism, etc.—are on-going, inevitable, and independent of the institution of

competitive debate. As Alan Coverstone has noted, the disengagement of the public from

political participation and adoption of a pure "spectator mentality" has now become the

"predominant mode" of politics (2005, p. 5). Any citizen who been attentive to political developments over  the past eight years can tell that American politics has been overtaken by an administration bent on pursuing illiberal policies while wrapping themselves in the clothing of liberalism.

Given the now almost all-consuming exceptionalist mantra, debate is one of the last arenas that reward anti-institutional thinking and oppositional rhetoric (Stannard 2006). It is a tremendous "stretch" to attribute the causal source of exceptionalism to debate (Lacy 2006). Debate isn't Vietnam. Nothing in the activity *makes* students participate. Once involved, there are no thought-police who control the content of students' speeches. Those who argue otherwise show a profound lack of respect for the magnitude of violence that their comparisons draw likeness to. Instead, the *exact opposite* seems truer: a major and endemic problem, that contributes to American exceptionalism, is the *lack* of debate at all levels of society. Stannard agrees, warning:

> Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, seek to expand this method of deliberation to those who will use it to liberate themselves, confront power, and create ethical, nonviolent patterns of problem resolution. If capitalism corrupts debate, well, then I say we save debate. (2006)

The proper task of critics is not to retreat into speaking only from conviction. It is to strive to expand SSD to new avenue and to make ideas that were once considered dogma contestable. The very nature of the approach acts as a counter-weight to imperialism and "foster[s] resistance to domination" (Stannard 2006).

Second, switch side debate's emphasis on tolerance and empathy, which have been noted by many authors (Sanders 1982; Muir 1993; Bellon 2000; Lacy 2002), may

indeed by one of the strongest "antidotes" to the disease of exceptionalism (Mitchell & Suzuki 2004, p. 7). Debate combines a commitment to reason and logic over emotive and political appeals, a priority placed upon quality research, and vigorous norms of openness and plurality to create a forum where unwarranted and inappropriate forms of exceptionalism cannot survive. English et al. have referred to this deliberative attitude as a "bulwark against fundamentalism of *all stripes*" (2007, p. 224). SSD teaches that no argument is "off limits," that issues are more complex than black and white, and that reflection and contemplation are preferable to rash and preemptive decision-making. It is thus no surprise, as the Debate Authors Working Group has noted, that many of the most vocal contemporary critics of the Bush administration's exceptionalist (and debatably imperialist) policies, including lawyer Neal Katyal and law professor Laurence Tribe, received a portion of their training in the pedagogical bull-pen of debate.

In particular, SSD is an especially effective tool to combat the "with us or against us" absolutism of contemporary neoconservative ideology. Debating both sides increases debater's appreciation of the arguments made by the opposition (English, Llano, Mitchell, Morrison, Rief and Woods, 2007, p. 222). Oftentimes, as is frequently the case with complex issues, a reasonable party may conclude that two positions, which are polar opposites may each contain an element of truth. It is revealed that a compromised position is preferable to either extreme and that the discrete "with us" and "against us" stances are arbitrary and inaccurate categorizations. Finally, switch side debate prioritizes deliberative, rather than majoritarian, democracy (Lacy 2006). As far back as Day (1966), there is an emphasis on the expression of minority view points. Debating both sides allows debaters the intellectual flexibility (through un-attachment to their personal beliefs)

to express dissent and critique even the most firmly established policies and norms. This ensures a vibrant activist influence in debate that can provide at least a modest check against the most extreme governmental abuses.

**Conclusion**

The popularization of certain strands of thinking has contributed to the controversy over switch side debating in new ways. However, after consideration, none of the major criticisms are sufficiently sound to merit a rejection of practice. The foundational claims of the pro-SSD position, that conviction is a *product* of debate, that the social good is served by replacing falsities with progressive truths by keeping all issues open for discussion, and that debating both sides is an act of tolerance that poses a potent challenge to the forces of exceptionalism, remain strong. Even if some elements of these criticisms are true, they still must be balanced against the strong benefits of the switch side approach. Given the advantages for activists and advocates for change, the creation of strong decision-making and critical thinking skills, the pluralistic method of argumentation, and the promotion of tolerance inspired by debating both sides, an on-balance assessment of SSD must conclude that the practice has both pedagogical and social benefits that should not be rejected.

CHAPTER FOUR:

CONCLUSION

**Introduction**

As it is with many arguments, the debate over switch side debating has followed a winding path, characterized by changing foci and differing planes of disagreement. Over the past sixty years, SSD has been a battleground for theorists about debate and argumentation because of its connections to conviction, pure argument, and the ideals of debate. While this thesis has explicitly attempted to defend the practice of debating both sides, most opponents would agree that it is necessary to periodically assess the state of the discussion and to push forward discussion. In service of this goal, the final chapter of this thesis is an attempt to advance the meta-debate about debate, encourage the participants on all sides to come to agreement where agreements can be found, and to refocus their collective energies on emergent areas of contention.

The final chapter is divided into six sections. First, it re-caps with an assessment of where controversy over SSD stands today, including an assessment of the crux of the areas of disagreement between pro- and anti-switch side advocates. Second, it takes a concluding review of the arguments against SSD and draws an on-balance recommendation about its continued merit and utility. Third, it makes the case for the uniqueness of the competitive debate forum for fostering the benefits of SSD, responding to claims that the epistemic, moral, and political advantages of the process can be generated in other ways. Fourth, it reviews one issue that has thus far been unaddressed but is nonetheless central to the debate about debate: the role of topic construction in

influencing SSD. Fifth, it suggests possible trajectories for future research, lines of argument, and empirical research about switch side debate. Finally, it ends with a conclusion that defends the study and practice of SSD.

## Points of Disagreement

In order to maximize the value of theoretical inquiry, periodically it is important to review and assess the state of any given field of study. Argumentation and debate, encapsulated by the controversy over switching sides, is no different. This section tackles the problem of determining the current primary points of disagreement. To this end, three insights derived from my defense of SSD deserve particular note.

First, the points of stasis in the debate about debate should shift. Over forty years ago Klopf and McCrosky noted an "overwhelming collective opinion" supporting SSD, and Mill persuasively made the case for rarely silencing minority opinions. Where the two positions meet is the question of ethics. Scholars seeking to collectively advance the quality and depth of the discussion about debate, however, should be willing to put aside certain issues in favor of others. The ethical controversy should be shelved in the absence of new insights that contribute significantly to the half-century old debate. The distinction between pedagogical and social benefits of SSD can be dispensed with, as critical insights have effectively collapsed the increasingly less clear division between the public and the private. As has been argued earlier, scholars should consider using the conceptual framework of "decision-making" as a rubric for understanding the arguments about SSD. Such a frame encompasses both pedagogical and social concerns and has the additional

benefit of aligning more closely with the core purpose of competitive debate (Parcher 1998).

Second, it is useful to note the shifting political landscape that encompasses the debate about debate. While traditionally it was conservatives who rejected the practice of debating both sides (such as those who refused to "engage China"), today the primary opposition to the practice is located within liberal quarters. Two possible explanations may account for this shift. First, the debate community is generally populated by liberal-minded people (mirroring the political preferences of college-aged students and faculty at-large). Given the pure numerical disparity in beliefs, it should be expected that more criticisms would be voiced from the left than from the right. It should be noted that the contemporary criticisms of SSD from the political right are not entirely absent. For example, before the 2006-2007 debate season, a topic that centered on several Supreme Court cases[6], there was a brief but heated discussion about the merits of including a discussion of abortion in the topic. Some conservatives objected to such arguments on principle. Second and most plausibly, the shift is the result of the integration of critical and activist arguments into competitive debate rounds. Many contemporary critiques of SSD, such as the liberal rejection of bureaucratic state politics that is common in many debate rounds, mirror arguments that are prevalent in such writing. Regardless of the cause, this ideological shift has occurred and frames the ensuing discussion of SSD.

Third, the three arguments against SSD that I specifically isolate in my defense should serve as a starting point for future study of switch side debate. Collectively they strike at the heart of issues relating to conviction and advocacy and are the main centers

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[6] "Resolved: The United States Supreme Court should overrule one or more of the following decisions: Planned Parenthood v. Casey, 505 U.S. 833 1992); Ex parte Quirin, 317 U.S. 1 (1942); U.S. v. Morrison, 529 U.S.598 (2000); Milliken v. Bradley, 418 U.S. 717 (1974)." Available online: http://groups.wfu.edu/NDT/HistoricalLists/topics.html

of contemporary controversy, the charges of cooption, relevance/content, and exceptionalism (discussed in Chapter 3) and can guide any future academic treatment of the subject. My work should be considered both a historical grounding of recent critiques of SSD and a preliminary defense of the practice of SSD, but this thesis alone is far from the conclusion of the controversy over debating both sides.

**The Best Case**

As with most argumentative positions, the defense of SSD that I have established can be charged with presenting a view of debate that, by selective consideration of opposing argument, unfairly favors the SSD position. Anticipating charges of bias and to recognize merit in alternative views, this section reviews what I find to be the strongest case for debating from conviction. Many anti-SSD arguments are persuasive, yet I conclude that when viewed holistically and compared to the benefits of a SSD approach in an on-balance fashion, they do not warrant a rejection of the practice.

From one perspective, anti-SSD critics make a reasonable argument. To debate from a position outside of one's own beliefs because of topical constraints gives up a certain degree of freedom. Instead of possessing absolute flexibility to choose the content of his or her speech, students are forced to compromise and accept limitations about what is and is not relevant content for debate. The relative discomfort associated with such a rhetorical position is compounded by a necessary assumption of risk—that of opening one's self up to the possibility of rejecting their prior beliefs and accepting something new. Moreover, as will be discussed later, the way in which current debate topics are written (mandating prescriptive policy action by the United States Federal Government)

adds an element of tension to this equation by forcing some debaters to compromise on their strict opposition to the traditional mode of politics. In some contexts, the risk associated with such a confluence of events is apparent. With a shallow understanding of SSD, it may appear that debate has a pro-institutional and anti-radical agenda that seeks to channel dissent through avenues familiar to elites; a lens of privilege that sustains the *status quo*.

Yet, the arguments of this defense of SSD indicate that such discomfort may be justified—if not *necessary*—to fulfill the epistemic, moral, and political objectives of debate. The process of SSD mandates an acceptance of the idea that all currently held ideas are not correct and that, over time, some will come to be replaced by others. This may be momentarily upsetting, but the social good is clearly served by such a process. Morally, the acceptance of tolerance and empathy requires the willingness to set outside of our own egocentric beliefs and stand in the position of the other. It does not necessarily require rejecting our own beliefs. Instead, debaters are asked to be willing to consider a position from multiple simultaneous points of view. Finally, while debaters are required to argue on behalf of state politics, in the long-run the training, skills, and knowledge that they receive from doing so will make them much more effective advocates of the anti-bureaucratic cause. Given all of this, while the anti-SSD view is understandable based on the short-term sacrifices that it may require, it alone does not warrant a reversion to a process of debating from conviction.

**Uniqueness of the Debate Space**

It has been argued that many of the benefits of switching sides could theoretically be achieved through alternative means (Murphy 1957; 1963). After all, debaters should live well-rounded lives and have many academic pursuits outside of the competitive arena. The benefits of tolerance and critical thinking generated through intensive research and understanding of the opposition's arguments might be created by simply spending time reading and understanding multiple sides of complex positions. Practice rounds that simulate actual debating but are conducted in the privacy and seclusion of the debate office away from public tournaments can expand debaters' experiences without requiring SSD. All of this, the anti-SSD advocates such as Murphy say, can capture the benefit of debating both sides without risking its ethical or social downsides.

However, even if many of the strengths of switch side debate can be achieved in other ways, it does not mean that they necessarily would be. Some students will seek out avenues to broaden their range of thinking and encounter beliefs that are contrary to their own. Others will not. For many students, the competitive aspects of contest debating are the primary motivation for their initial engagement with the tedious and complex literature featured in policy debates. Without the push of SSD and the competitive drive associated with wins and loses of competitive contest debating, most would not step outside their narrow personal beliefs and enter into a meaningful dialogue with opposing arguments. The task of educators is to make the tough choices about how to direct the learning of their students in order to maximize their educational benefit. SSD is a time-tested way to do that.

Moreover, as was noted by Greene and Hicks, there may be something different and special about actively assuming the position of the advocate for the other side in a public way that is qualitatively distinct from merely researching the "offending" arguments.  They write that, "a unique value of debating both sides is that it works as a technique of *embodied* speech performance. To produce a liberal citizen requires more than the presentation of different points of vi

limiting the extent of SSD in this way is suspect. As Klopf and McCrosky have previously noted (1964), a strong consensus has emerged rejecting the ethical charge against SSD. Tournament debating is clearly different than other forms of public speaking. Given the norm of SSD, it is generally clear to all the participants, judges, and observers that tournament debaters are not arguing from personal belief. Truly, intercollegiate debate is a "special case" where the ethical charge against breaking public commitments rings especially hollow (Cripe 1957, p. 210). Without an ethical advantage, there seems to be no reason to prefer this reserved form of SSD.

**Resolutional Construction**

One outstanding issue that deserves further consideration is the form of the debate resolution and its impact on switch side debating. One question that has been raised is whether or not the current method of topic construction mandates true switch side debating. Presently, a norm exists that the year-long topic for debate should be written to allow for significant latitude in affirmative case selection. As a result, it is frequently possible for teams to select a case that they do not personally disagree with when affirmative. For example, on the aforementioned 2006-2007 Courts topic, affirmative teams who did not want to debate about abortion could choose from three other decisions (dealing with enemy combatants, school desegregation, or federalism) instead. When negative, the mainstreaming of affirmative-inclusive arguments like counterplans and critiques has allowed teams to agree with nearly all parts of the affirmative case. Thus, the question arises: is the current form of argumentation really "switch side" debate?

Some have said no: the core areas of controversy are allowed to go uncontested as long as debaters wish (Ellis 2007).

The fundamental mistake here is the assumption that some issues are more "switch side-worthy" than others. The current requirement that teams debate on both the affirmative and negative of the topic *does* require, at some level, switching sides. True, not all issues relevant to a given topic receive this treatment. However, at least one major issue must be debated from both sides. On the Courts topic, the resolutional stem ("Resolved: that the United States Supreme Court should overrule") was the point of pivot, a normative statement that had to be contested regardless of which specific decision was being debated. To say that this is not true SSD places an undue priority upon certain parts of the topic (the "branches" rather than the "stems") based on personal preference for controversy.

**Future Trajectories**

The debate over SSD is far from complete. As is demonstrated by the argument section of this thesis, the controversy over debating both sides has remained strong over time. Issues related to the pedagogical and social utility of SSD will undoubtedly stay prominent in the near future. Even as consensus slowly emerges, as occurred with the "ethical" concern, developments in the theory and practice of competitive debating threaten to unravel the carefully woven strands of agreement. To encourage productivity in future discussions, it is important to set careful parameters to focus future research. With this in mind, I have the following three suggestions for where the debate about debate should go from here.

First, there is a widespread need for empirical research and study to substantiate the claims being made on all sides of the controversy over SSD. The question of whether debating both sides makes one's views more moderate or extreme can be answered by surveying debaters' opinions before and after debating a given topic. A model for such research already exists in the studies surrounding debate's effect on critical thinking skills over time (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Louden 1999; Colbert 2002; Mitchell 1998; Freeley & Steinberg 2005; Hill 2002; Rutledge 2002). An emphasis on creating testable and observable results for claims about the relative merits or downsides to particular styles of debating should be applied across-the-board. After all, it is necessary to definitively know that a learning bias exists before the debate community can be charged with fixing it.

Second, there should be greater discussion about the relationship between the way that the yearly debate topic is constructed and its influence on switch side debating. As mentioned above, some have suggested that the way the resolution is written affects the amount of debating that occurs outside of conviction. If such a claim is correct, it would be a justification for giving a preference to narrow topics in the future, in order to encourage debaters to debate from both sides. Also, the debate about SSD may provide insights about how to construct the proper *form* of resolutions. If the branch/stem model of the Courts topic allows debaters to too easily skirt the discussions that the debate community finds important, then it would be advisable to revert to the "single-statement" model of previous years[7].

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[7] One example would be the 1998-1999 CEDA resolution, "RESOLVED: "That the United States Federal Government should amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, through legislation, to create additional protections against racial and/or gender discrimination". Available online, at: http://groups.wfu.edu/NDT/HistoricalLists/topics.html

Third, given the enormous influence of activist strategies in competitive debate, and the way they have driven theoretical developments related to SSD, additional research should be conducted to assess "project related" issues. In particular, study should be devoted to creating an accurate record of aggregate participation rates in debate, broken down by gender, race, class, etc. This would either substantiate or refute one of the primary claims of many activist "projects"—that the current model of debate structurally excludes certain types of participation. It would be useful to discuss the possibility of reconciling activist goals, including the transformation of the style of debate and the training of students in identity politics, with switch side debate. It may be possible to integrate many of their goals without abandoning the concept of debating both sides.

**Conclusion**

This thesis has sought to establish a reasoned defense of the practice of switch side debating. It began by detailing the history and development of competitive academic debate, from a one-on-one style competition to large tournaments, from policy arguments to the critical to the activist, and from debating from conviction to SSD. It reviewed the relevant literature about switch side debate, identifying a weakness in the treatment of arguments spurred by the theory and practice of contemporary debate. It then developed an argument for the continued practice of SSD, based on its strong critical thinking curriculum, creation of tolerance and empathy, and resistance to exceptionalism. In doing so, it responded to three primary criticisms of SSD: that debating both sides risks changing the beliefs of debaters and defusing radical potential, that certain issues should

be off limits, and that it is a technique of liberal exceptionalism. In the end, none of these

arguments is persuasive enough to justify a rejection of SSD in favor of arguing from

prior conviction. Although there is undoubtedly some discomfort associated with the

process of being forced to step outside of one's own beliefs and assume the position of

the other, the benefit of training students to make smart, well-reasoned, and incisive

decisions makes the value of SSD well worth any attendant costs.

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