FOREWORD: SPEECH AND DEBATE AS CIVIC EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Like many others, I began my experience with speech and debate as a participant in competitive activities in high school and college. I initially was urged to become involved by high school teachers who had worked with me and thought I might do well. The experience was transformative. To begin with, it was fun to match wits with others who were interested in current events. I discovered that I was good at it, and since I was lacking in athletic and musical talent, this was an important source of self-esteem. Fellow students became my close friends, and we formed a sense of community within large and somewhat anonymous schools. My coaches remain my lifelong friends. Participants at other schools became a network in which I was pleased to be involved. I learned valuable life skills, ranging from time management and sophisticated library research to dealing in a mature fashion with victory and defeat and recognizing that neither is final. I learned that winning was not unethical per se but that there should be educational benefit in wins and losses alike.

Valuable benefits, all. I learned more from speech and debate than from any high school or college class—and I was fortunate, especially as an undergraduate, to have had many stimulating classes. But in retrospect, something was missing. I had no sense that what I was doing was contributing powerfully to my civic education, although in fact it was. I don't think I even knew what civic education was, and if I did, I took it for granted. Since I want to discuss it now, let me define the term. By *civic education*, I mean, broadly, the acquisition of knowledge and skills to enable understanding of and participation in public

life. The emphasis is on that part of our lives that we live together with (often anonymous) others, as opposed to our lives alone or with our families and close friends. There are many ways to equip oneself for a rich and rewarding private life. But if there is a better preparation for public life—a better means of civic education—than speech and debate, I have yet to find it.

Looking back, I can recognize several ways in which I was receiving a good civic education without realizing it. First, I was learning about timely and important public policy topics. While the Kennedy administration and Congress were locked in conflict over federal aid to education, I debated the resolution that the federal government should equalize educational opportunity by means of grants to the states for public elementary and secondary education. Right before the landslide 1964 election made it possible, I debated the resolution that Social Security benefits should be extended to include complete medical care. And at the height of the Vietnam War, the debate topic was that the United States should substantially reduce its foreign policy commitments. Meanwhile, in extemporaneous speaking I spoke about current events, and in original oratory I addressed the mood of the country in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination.

Second, I learned that all these matters are uncertain and contingent; that is a characteristic of public life. Debating both sides of the question, making opposing arguments in successive hours, was a powerful teacher. It did not induce vicious relativism—even my emerging convictions were stronger than that—but it did induce some sense of humility rooted in the recognition that we might be wrong. It helped teach me that there is very little we know *for sure*. When it works well, public life is the province of restrained partisans, people who are committed to their viewpoint yet respectful of and willing to engage alternative views. When it malfunctions, public life is under the sway of those who apply the certainty of their unshakeable convictions to matters about which certainty is not given to us.

Third, I was learning about what I call the *topoi* of public life—the common values and premises, the ways of thinking and talking by which we manage our differences and through which we confront public life's core predicament: needing to make a decision but lacking all the information about which it ideally would be based. Especially in American culture, these *topoi* are often tensions, because American public life was born in argument and was marked by the embrace of contradictory positions. We never finally resolve, but continually contest, liberty versus equality, freedom from versus freedom to, the role of the state versus the role of the individual, centralized versus localized control,

commitments to the present versus commitments to the future, and similar *topoi* too numerous to list. Speech and debate teach how we carry on in the face of critical yet unresolvable conflicts and, thus, how we manage uncertainty. This may be the essence of democratic deliberation, working out our differences case by case and recognizing that the outcomes are always subject to reexamination.

Fourth, speech and debate provided some exposure—too little, but some—to cultural difference. Competing against students of differing social class, ethnicity, gender, and occasionally race helped me to see that my own perspectives, which I was tempted to universalize, were only partial. Having attended an elite, racially segregated public high school and an elite private university, this recognition was particularly valuable. In today's increasingly segmented society, activities like speech and debate may be among the first occasions that students of diverse backgrounds encounter one another. The resulting tensions have raised issues for public discussion about the role and importance of civility in discourse.

Finally, without realizing it, I was experiencing the kind of deliberation with which a democracy addresses problems and makes decisions. There are real differences of interest and opinion, not mere misunderstandings. Yet that condition must be the beginning, not the end, of democratic deliberation. It is easy to resolve differences when the parties share the same worldview and one can convince the other through conversation. But far more often, neither party will convince the other nor be convinced. Both will appeal for the decision of a third party, acting as arbiter, and will agree to abide by that person's judgment. The third party models the citizenry at large: people who are not personally involved in a controversy but who will be affected by the decision. The speech judge—and especially the debate judge—models a citizen audience, and the contestant models the policy advocate. Repeated hundreds of times over the course of one's speech and debate career, a participant gains experience and insight into how a democracy deliberates and decides.

So it turns out that I gained quite a bit of civic education without fully realizing it at the time. My argument is that speech and debate would be better off if we made this realization explicit and deployed it far more prominently in our justifications of our competitive activities. Doing so would put a nobler face on our enterprise than that of a self-satisfying activity for intelligent people without athletic prowess, or a rewarding intellectual game, or a contribution to school spirit or alumni generosity alone. It would give us more confidence and less trepidation when a school or university administrator, learning that there is a speech or debate tournament on campus, asks to stop by and watch a round.

And more important, it would give us a normative standard against which to evaluate our practices in the hope of narrowing the gap between standard and practice. To be sure, a healthy dose of civic education will take place even if we ignore the concept of civic education altogether. But the public understanding and stature of speech and debate could be far greater if we led with this justification and connected it more explicitly to our actual practices.

What's stopping us? Some simple things, such as inertia or the tendency for day-to-day needs to drive out long-term thinking. To some degree, it is the tendency to view things from the perspective of the individual competitor rather than from the perspective of the activity as a whole. And to some degree, it is the fact that too few of our programs are directed by professionals with a long-standing commitment to the activity and an academic orientation that will incline them to think in these terms.

But it is also the case that our professed commitments may be undercut by some of our practices. These tensions represent challenges if we are to live out our commitment to speech and debate as civic education. For example, dealing with ongoing disputes on a case-by-case basis, utilizing the *topoi* of public life, is strengthened by perspective taking and deliberation. But it is weakened by advancing nondebatable claims to identity that are said to justify rejecting competing arguments out of hand. The question is not whether identity claims should be advanced as arguments; of course, they should. Encountering them is part of what is involved in coming to terms with diversity. The question, rather, is whether they will function as arguments or whether they will function to prevent arguments, whether they will promote candor in discussing difference or whether they will shut the discussion down.

For another example, competition is an amazingly good motivator of strong performance, making the testing of ideas and claims more rigorous and reliable. The knowledge that one will be confronted by a worthy opponent stimulates advocates to formulate the strongest claims they can, thereby promoting the cause of democratic deliberation. But one must not confuse the means with the end. If competitive success is regarded as the ultimate reward, then why should one hold out for rigorous and sound argument? Competitive success becomes its own virtue, whether or not it serves the cause of civic education, and the *techné* of speech and debate can become separated from the larger purpose.

A third example: becoming familiar with the *topoi* of public life is enhanced by engaging them, framing and refuting arguments that employ them and set them into competition with one another. This is promoted by smart selection of topics that correspond to issues actually being discussed in the public forum,

especially those issues on which attitudes are divided, and by a wide range of experience on different types of topics, such as those concerning military policy, diplomacy, economics, and social welfare. But this benefit is offset if one concocts bizarre arguments in order to evade any reasonable understanding of the topic, or if one designs all-purpose arguments that can be advanced regardless of what the opponent says, in order to divert the discussion away from the topic and toward something else that an advocate might prefer to talk about. This is not to suggest that all claims one advances must be predictable. Surprise has a place; it enables one to practice thinking on one's feet when one is not fully prepared with a developed argument. But the relationship between means and ends once again should be kept in mind. The goal, after all, is to employ the *topoi* of public life, not to escape them.

Yet a fourth example: participation in speech and debate allows those involved to constitute themselves as a community, sharing at least some common experiences and values as well as a sense of friendship and solidarity. It is not unusual for participants and coaches to self-identify as a community. Yet there also are strong centrifugal forces in speech and debate. Organizations proliferate, usually championing one or another format or pedagogical practice. Too often, however, these differences are seen not as reflecting matters of taste but as embodying righteous indignation. It is not necessary to castigate proponents of a different approach to speech and debate in order to champion one's own. The speech and debate community is not so large that it can afford civil wars without losing sight of the larger goal of preparing students to understand and experience public life. Against that goal, the quarrels of the community can seem incredibly petty, if not altogether quaint.

A final example: public life presupposes agency—the belief that people can make a difference. The field of action is understood to be open; change is thought to be possible. This is not a Pollyannaish belief that anyone can do whatever he or she puts the mind to; constraints on action are real. But they are far from total. Indeed, the challenge of public life often is to find maneuvering room in the face of constraints. The ability to do this is strengthened by focusing on the real-world applications of speech and debate arguments. But it is weakened if, caricaturing critical theory, participants ground claims in overly deterministic assumptions about seemingly oppressive hegemonic social systems. Trying out these critical-theory positions in speech and debate competition often does not work very well. If things really were so hopeless and agency altogether lacking, there would be no reason to participate in speech and debate or to seek to engage public life at all.

I have described these five concerns in general terms, because it is not my desire to point fingers or to indict particular programs or individuals. If nothing else, I myself am too far removed from participation in speech and debate activities to do so with any credibility. I want instead to make the more gentle suggestion that if we were more conscious of our contribution to civic education, we could advocate more effectively for our programs and could be more aware when our practices in speech and debate unintentionally undercut our goals.

Let me instead close with a more positive challenge. The world of speech and debate is highly pluralistic, and that is to the good. Programs make choices about the participation base, the speaking formats they will use, the places where they will compete, and a host of similar matters. But there is a place, especially in our leading academic institutions, for a more comprehensive speech and debate program. I am thinking of places like Penn State, where there was a historic commitment to speech and debate but where the program lay fallow for many years. Recently, a commitment to revive and strengthen debate at Penn State has created the possibility of doing so much more, with an abundance of goodwill and resources dedicated to the effort. Let such institutions model the comprehensive speech and debate program: one with both curricular and cocurricular components, featuring both competitive and noncompetitive activities, involving both speech and debate, on the local and national circuits, oriented both to the campus as a protopublic space and to public life generally. Such a program should have both a disciplinary foundation in argumentation and rhetoric, and also a multidisciplinary aspect. It should involve tenure-track faculty as well as graduate student instructors, and it should include a curriculum in argumentation at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, utilizing both face-to-face and online instruction. A program like this would achieve national leadership by precept and example, exerting the agenda-setting power illustrated by the revived program at Penn State.

This is a tall order and may not be fully achievable. Only a small number of institutions are able to offer this comprehensive a program, though if they succeed at it they will strengthen us all. But let us adopt ambitious goals in the service of civic education. The health of our public life makes it necessary, and what we have to contribute makes it possible.