

A Coach’s Notes¹

Everett Rutan
Connecticut Debate Association
ejrutan3@ctdebate.org

**Connecticut Debate Association
State Finals
Bethel High School
March 28, 2026**

This House believes that (THBT) the US-led, rules-based world order is irreparably broken.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the March 28, 2026, CDA State Finals tournament and topic. Previous year’s editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site. Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round presented in two formats, transcript, and flow chart.

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These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. If you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Interpretation

I was able to judge 3 rounds at the tournament. In two of the three—including the Final Round, where one team claimed my remarks earlier in the day supported their interpretation—the Government team got it wrong. This, of course, is a matter of opinion. I set the motion, created the packet of supporting articles, and was one of three Judges in the final round, so my opinion is well-grounded. That does not make it definitive. This leads to two questions: What is the right way to analyze the motion? How should a Judge evaluate a debate when the debaters go in another direction?

World Schools Advice

The [CDA Training Material](#) page points you to how to obtain a copy of my favorite debate text, Simon Quinn’s *Debating in the World Schools Style*. He offers three principles on interpreting a debate motion:²

- Where there is a clear issue, debate that issue!
- Find the issue that is most obvious, most relevant, or most debatable.
- When there is no obvious issue, choose an issue that the motion could refer to.

The third is rarely relevant to CDA motions but may apply to some motions in other leagues.

Holistic, not clever

The principles argue for a holistic as opposed to clever analysis of the issue at hand. You aren’t looking to surprise your opponents or your audience with an unusual twist on the topic. Going into the room, everyone will have a reasonable expectation of the issue to be debated, and even the arguments likely to be made. Debate isn’t about surprising your opponents or audience, but about engaging with them.

Clever interpretations tend to turn on specific words in the motion. In one round I judged Gov built their case on the words “rule-based”, saying the US never sufficiently followed or upheld rules. In the Final Gov argues something similar, by saying that a US led, rules-based world order never existed. I’m not saying these aren’t legitimate criticisms,

² Simon Quinn, *Debating in the World Schools Style*, p.10-11

and don't provide support for a Gov case. I am say they are not primarily what the motion is about.

Is there a clear issue?

The topic area, the breakdown of the geopolitical system that arose after World War II, had been on my radar for some time. Prime Minister Carney's speech was the motivation for the specific wording of the topic. That speech was a major headline and continuing topic of discussion since he spoke at Davos in January. It became even more pertinent when Iran was attacked on February 28. An "average reasonable person" can be expected to be aware of the speech and the issues Carney raises.

Debaters at State Finals have the advantage of the text of the speech as the first article in the packet. The first sentence clearly frames the round: *"Today I will talk about a rupture in the world order, then end of a pleasant fiction and the beginning of a harsh reality."* He argues that a change has occurred, and his prescription for dealing with that change is to propose an alternative.

Words and phrases

One mistake debaters often make is to define words rather than make sense of the motion in its entirety. Here, "US-led, rules-based world order" is a unitary phrase commonly used to describe the primary feature of geopolitics that arose out of World War II. Was every facet US-led? Were rules always followed? Was it an undisputed world order? No on all counts. But events evolved in a world order generally guided by rules and organizations that the US was primarily responsible for bringing into existence and supporting. Not everyone agreed with it, no one thought it was perfect, and the US often bent the rules in its favor.

Historians have noted that the "Holy Roman Empire" was neither holy, Roman, or an empire, but it persisted for a thousand years. Similarly, "US-led, rules-based world order" is commonly used in policy discussions. Google it! You will get definitions, comments, criticisms, references galore. Read through them and it will quickly become clear that everyone is talking about the same thing.

Assuming the problem

The more important part of this motion is the ending, "is irreparably broken." Gov needs to show the US-led, rules-based world order is broken, and that it is unlikely to return. Of these two burdens, I think the latter is more important to winning the round.

While I warned debaters that this was not a policy motion, I also noted it contained policy issues. In a policy debate, Gov needs to show harm and solvency: a significant problem exists and adopting the motion will solve that problem. Generally showing harm exists is easier than showing solvency will be achieved.

Gov often makes the mistake of spending a lot of time documenting the harm, and too little time explaining the solution. For topics where most would agree a problem exists,

Opp would be foolish to try to argue that it does not but well rewarded for explaining why the motion will not fix it, or why other alternatives will work better. If Gov focuses on harm, Opp can dismiss most of the PMC by agreeing the problem exists and attacking solvency. In debate you don't have to disagree with everything your opponent says, you only have to disagree on the things that are important to defeating your opponent.

Gov has a similar strategy: assume the problem. When almost everyone is likely to agree on an issue, let Opp be the one to try to deny it. Just as you don't have to disagree with everything your opponent says, you don't have to spend time justifying things your opponent is unlikely or will find hard to dispute.

For example, if the motion is, *This House supports a carbon tax*. The problem is clearly climate change. Some deny climate change exists, but it's not an argument you are likely to win in a debate setting. The Prime Minister can begin by saying something like,

“The Government believes climate change is a problem that must be dealt with. We think most reasonable people will agree with that. If our opponents wish to dispute that, we will be happy to answer their arguments. But the issue in today's debate is whether a carbon tax is an appropriate response, and we will focus on that...”

Rather than waste time on a list of the effects of climate change, the PM can spend their constructive upholding the central issue in the round. The MG should be prepared to reply on the existence of climate change, but it would be a welcome mistake if the LO wasted time in the LOC denying it.

Similarly, if the PMC spends a significant amount of time documenting the problem of climate change and the role carbon emissions play, the LO can begin with something like this:

“Government has spent a lot of time talking about climate change and the problems it is likely to cause. We fully agree with them on that point. But the existence of climate change is not the central issue to this debate. We are here to examine whether a carbon tax is an appropriate solution. The Prime Minister spent very little time on this point. I will spend my time showing why a carbon tax is unworkable, and how existing alternative approaches are superior.

Focus on change

This motion is not a policy motion, but a similar strategy is possible. Most reasonable observers would agree with Prime Minister Carney that the US-led, rules-based world order is broken, or at least under severe strain. The central issue is whether that system, with all its imperfections, will manage to right itself. Best course is for Gov to let Opp dispute whether it is broken and focus on the more important issue of whether it is reparable.

Carney's speech gives strong reasons for a Gov case based on irreparability, and this is where inspecting the phrase “US-led, rules-based world order” is valuable. Read the

packet over again and I think you will find strong grounds for both sides to dispute these supporting points:

- Will the future world order be US-led?
- Will the future world order be rules-based?
- Will the future world order be global in scope?

I leave you to fill in the details.

Judging

The hardest part of judging debate is for the Judge to keep themselves out of the debate, while still exercising judgement. As one who often sets the motion, this can be especially difficult. When I build a motion packet, I try to take great care to thoroughly research the topic and word the motion so that it is fair to both sides.

Fair motions

“Fair” here is a high standard. It does not mean simply that the topic is often argued about, or that high school students with limited background knowledge, research material, and speaking time can manage to have a debate that seems balanced. Rather, it means that well-informed parties would agree there is an issue that does not provide a clear advantage to either side. Such a debate cannot be won because either side has superior knowledge, but only by providing superior argument, refutation, and rebuttal in time-limited speeches. In other words, you can only win by debating well.

High school debate topics often don’t meet this standard. I’ve made this comment already with respect to several motions this year. High school debaters, not being well-informed, often don’t notice that one side has a clear advantage (and their Coaches often don’t notice either). The debate revolves around issues that are not quite central or uses arguments that would fail with a bit more knowledge. Well-informed parties would likely agree one side should dominate.

And let’s be clear, I understand that I may not be as knowledgeable as I think I am. We are all limited by time, ability, and bias. Research could always be a bit better; minds could always be more open to different ideas. But it is a rare high school motion that leaves me puzzling more than a minute or two as to what it’s about.

So, what should I do as Judge?

Average reasonable person

World Universities Debate asks judges to take the role of “ordinary intelligent voter” or “average reasonable person”.³ Such a person is familiar with the major headlines of the day but has no specialist knowledge of the topic being debated. This asks the Judge to put aside what they know and evaluate the debate on the basis of what the debaters say. This does not mean they must accept facts most would discard or arguments most would not

³ Sofia WUDC 2026 CAP, *Debating and Judging Manual*, found at [World Universities Debating Council](https://www.wudc.org/).

believe just because a speaker presents them, but that they will be open to hear such facts and arguments and accept them if they are well-explained.

Judging on this basis, like all of debate is subjective and imperfect. It requires effort on the part of the Judge to separate the decision process from any advice they might want to give to the debaters in their dual role as teacher or coach.

The proof of a Judge's decision is the RFD. Debaters present a case for or against the motion; Judges present a case in their RFD supporting their decision. I try to write an RFD in two parts: the decision, based ideally in things the debaters said, and a critique, with advice to the debaters regarding issues about the topic or opportunities for argument that were missed during the round.

In larger tournaments in the breakout rounds, Judges are often expected to explain their decisions publicly. This allows not just the debaters, but the audience, to evaluate the decision as well as (on hopes) they themselves evaluated the debate. This puts some pressure on the Judge to respect the "ordinary intelligent person" standard. But it also allows Judges to benchmark themselves against others, and possibly consider whether they are drifting away from that community standard.

If you read my previous editions of Coach's Notes you will see that I have published my RFDs for many of the final rounds. If you saw that round yourself, took notes, and formed your own decision, you can compare. Even if you haven't, my RFD gives you the opportunity to judge for yourselves whether I have met my own standards.

RFD

This is a slightly edited version of my RFD for final round at Bethel.

While I may be Government's favorite debate guru (or whatever), they completely misinterpret my words and the motion by arguing that a US-led rule-based-world (USLRBWO) order never existed. This is a pretty steep hill to climb given Prime Minister Carney's speech, which motivates the entire topic, laments its fading, and describes it as a "pleasant fiction" but clearly a useful one for all involved, and one which he hopes to replace by middle power cooperation.

My reading is not determinative, but Opp's reply is exactly along these lines. While their argument that Gov, by the motion, must presume an order exists to argue that it is broken beyond repair is a bit strained, their underlying analysis is spot on. Opp tells us that the USLRBWO is about practice not theory, admits that it was and is flawed (even agreeing with most of Gov's criticisms and examples), and proceeds to explain how, through the actions of many participants, the order struggles on, and how that order survived similar situations in the past and is likely to do so again.

Gov's reply to this is that the same features of the USLRBWO that led to past mistakes persist and will lead to similar problems in the future. But because Gov's analysis is based on the idea that the order never existed, they have no mechanism to counter Opp's position. Essentially, Gov argues flawed past, flawed future. Opp agrees, flawed past,

flawed future, but shared values and shared interests have allowed the system to survive the past and will continue to allow it to survive the future. Gov never engages Opp's repair process.

Gov is also trying to force Opp to shoulder the burden of showing the USLRBWO is flawless. This is implicit in how they later use the PM's characterization which is "standards based". The PMR claims Opp accepted this and the debate must be judged on that basis. But the LO never explicitly agrees to Gov's terms and explicitly states at the top of the LOC that a world order is about practice not theory, a direct challenge. The MG reply is that this isn't a policy motion, but that doesn't answer Opp's challenge. The MO repeats Opp's argument that the wording of the motion rejects the premise that the USLRBWO never existed, that such an order clearly existed after 1945, and that the Gov case is a recitation of flaws not a proof of nonexistence. In any case, no one in debate has the burden of showing their side is true in all cases, only in general or most of the time, or in a majority of examples.

So I think it is fair on both the top of case clash and on the arguments to award the round to Opp.

This was a great round, even in comparison with past State Finals. The analysis was sophisticated, arguments well presented, and there was fierce engagement by both teams with their opponents.

As a minor aside, I am of the opinion that the 30 seconds grace is not an extra 30 seconds of speaking time, whatever many debaters assume. It is intended to allow you to finish your thought without having to stop mid-word when the timer hits 7, 8, 4, or 5. I flow the last point you are making as you roll past the speech time, and then stop if you begin a new point in the grace period. If longer speeches are wanted, the rules could be changed.