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Reason - Purpose - Self Esteem



March/April 2007

Topic Primer

Resolved:

The UN's obligation to protect global human rights ought to be valued above its obligation to respect national sovereignty.

Mahesha Subbaraman

Trinity Briefs

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Resolved:

The United Nations' obligation to protect global human rights ought to be valued above its obligation to respect national sovereignty.

II. TOPIC PRIMER (1/57)

I. Introduction – A Matter of Perspective

I expect that most debaters have heard the nursery tale of Little Red Riding Hood before. Nevertheless, for memory's sake, recall that this fable involves the journey of a young girl—of course, clad in red—on her way to her elderly grandmother's house. On her way there, she encounters the Big Bad Wolf who immediately desires to eat Little Red but, fearing to do so in public, sweet-talks the young lass into divulging her final destination. Long story short: the wolf tries to eat Little Red by impersonating her grandmother and almost gets away with it before being chased off and/or killed by a local hunter. Now, believe it or not, this fable contains an important lesson about this month's LD topic in terms of how to research it, write cases on it, and, most importantly, debate rounds on it. Indeed, when it comes to debating the difficult question of whether the United Nations' obligation to protect global human rights ought to be valued above its obligation to respect national sovereignty, debaters should recognize both the power and the importance of engaging this issue using a *narrative* framework. To this end, consider that in the story of Little Red Riding Hood there are four different main characters, each with their own unique perspective of what happens during the course of the story—Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf, Grandma, and the Hunter. If, therefore, we were to ask each character what happened on the day in question, presumably they each would have a different answer based on their own individual perceptions of the event and their own personal biases. Little Red, for example, might relate to us a story of fear, danger, and bravery: how she cunningly outwitted the treacherous intentions of a brutish Wolf and saved her poor innocent Grandma with the help of a noble Hunter. The Big Bad Wolf, on the other hand, might tell us about how hungry he had been for the last two weeks and how eating Little Red would have been justice for all the past suffering he and his family had endured thanks to a vicious Hunter. Two very different versions of the same story, to say the least, but both founded upon the same basic set of characters and events.

II. TOPIC PRIMER (2/57)

With that observation in mind, we now possess the key to understanding what this month's LD topic is all about. Simply put, this topic is *a story waiting to be told from the perspective of one of the three main "characters" named in it*: the United Nations, global human rights, and national sovereignty. Debaters are thus burdened with responsibility of choosing from which of these characters' perspectives they want to tell the story of why (or why not) the UN's obligation to protect human rights should be valued above its obligation to respect national sovereignty. And deciding to tell the story of the resolution from the perspective of the UN rather than that of "global human rights" or "national sovereignty," for example, makes a huge difference—just like telling the story of Little Red Riding Hood from the perspective of the Wolf as opposed to Little Red or the Hunter makes a big difference. This point will become much clearer in the following sections of this primer. For the moment, however, suffice it to say that this primer will be of little use to any debater who views case-writing on LD topics as nothing more than compiling a haphazard list of arguments around some undefined, run-of-the-mill value (e.g., justice, morality, etc.). Indeed, this primer is dedicated to the opposite proposition: that the best way, if not the only proper way, to write cases on this month's topic (or any LD topic, for that matter) is through *narration*—by telling a story that argues for affirming/negating the resolution based on a coherent explanation of (1) the purpose of the United Nations (or global human rights or national sovereignty), (2) the process by which this purpose is fulfilled, and (3) the historical facts that support this explanation. Or, to put it another way, cases on this topic—affirmative or negative—should "read" as if they were entitled "This the story of ____" with the blank filled in with either the United Nations, global human rights, or national sovereignty. They should then argue for affirming or negating the topic through their answers to the following three questions: "What does ____ do?", "How does ____ do it?", and "Why should we believe this about ____?" The thing to remember in telling such a story, however, is that the perspective from which it is being told must remain constant. Just as the story of Little Red Riding Hood would make little

II. TOPIC PRIMER (3/57)

sense as story if its point-of-view kept on shifting from sentence to sentence, the same thing is true when it comes to writing cases about this month's topic in *narrative* terms. This does not mean, however, that a case/story about the UN (for example) should make no mention of global human rights or national sovereignty. To the contrary, it should—just as the story of Little Red Riding Hood told from the Big Bad Wolf's perspective will undoubtedly make reference to Little Red, Grandma, and the Hunter (i.e., even though the Big Bad Wolf is the one telling the story). What matters here is that the focus of the story remain on one character—that we see the story unfold through his/her eyes—and that through him/her we come to understand the significance of the other main characters involved. Thus, a story about the UN (for example) must make sense of global human rights and national sovereignty from the perspective of the UN—from the purpose, process, and history that serve to define this “character's” unique point-of-view.

Consequently, the following sections of this primer are dedicated to suggesting possible affirmative and negative “stories” to tell from the perspectives of each of three main characters named in the topic. Debaters should study these suggestions carefully, paying close attention to the way in which they weave purpose, process, and history together in order to transform an otherwise haphazard collection of arguments into a real story worth listening to. Yet, for these suggestions to be of any value, there are two major fallacies that debaters need to make sure they avoid in both thinking about and arguing this month's topic: the “all-or-nothing”-fallacy and the “have your cake and eat it too”-fallacy. With respect to the first fallacy, debaters need to recognize that this month's topic is not an “all or nothing” proposition. In other words, affirming the resolution does not mean completely destroying the value of national sovereignty and negating the resolution does not mean completely destroying the value of global human rights. Rather, the question being posed by the resolution is one of *prioritization*. Think about it this way: imagine for a minute that this month's resolution was: “An individual's obligation to help his immediate family ought to be valued above his obligation to help his friends.”

II. TOPIC PRIMER (4/57)

Now, I'll bet that this hypothetical topic is one that hits home with a lot of people: who hasn't had to choose at one point in life between a commitment to family (e.g., attending the funeral of a relative you barely knew) and a commitment to friends (e.g., attending the birthday party of a close friend). Yet, despite the tough choices that life often throws at us, few would argue that affirming this hypothetical topic (for example)—and thus deciding to attend your relative's funeral instead of going to your close friend's birthday party—meant that you could never have any friends or that friendship meant nothing to you. To the contrary, friendship is meaningful to you in this scenario (i.e., it wouldn't be a tough choice to make otherwise), but it is just not as *important* to you as your familial obligations. This brings us to the second fallacy debaters need to avoid in arguing the topic—one which in some ways is the exact opposite of the “all or nothing”-fallacy. Indeed, while the “all or nothing”-fallacy dictates that you can only choose one thing forever, the “have your cake and eat it too”-fallacy operates on the seductive notion that you don't have to choose in life at all—that you can, for example, protect “global human rights” and respect “national sovereignty” at the same time all the time, even if these values are in direct conflict with one another. To this end, I expect many debaters will attempt to co-opt their opponent's position in their cases, arguing on the affirmative, for example, that by protecting global human rights, the United Nations ultimately respects national sovereignty. But such an argument is nothing more than a disingenuous evasion of the tough question posed by this month's LD topic—and recognizing this truth is as simple as observing that while it is possible to have both family and friends in one's life, there are times when you will have to choose between them. Likewise, for the UN, as foreign policy scholars Alan Petigny and Joshua Zeitz aptly explain: “The problem is simply stated: Sovereignty and legitimacy are crucial to modern liberal internationalism, and so is the defense of human rights. Yet they can be completely at cross-purposes. Suppose a sovereign state willfully violates the human rights of its citizens and the

II. TOPIC PRIMER (5/57)

legitimate international community fails to intervene? Which is more important, international law and the equality of states or the rights of individuals?”¹

To sum up: The conflict that the United Nations faces in trying both to promote global human rights and respect the value of national sovereignty is very real, and one need only consider the ongoing history of bloodshed in such war-torn nations as Somalia, Sierra Leone, the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Rwanda, East Timor, Congo, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq to realize just how serious the stakes of this conflict are. It is thus in no way an exaggeration to say that tens of millions of lives hang in the balance every day based on how the United Nations deals with the central issue posed by this month’s topic. Debaters should accordingly have both the intellectual integrity and the courage to give voice to this reality in their cases on both sides of the topic.

Mervyn Frost (Professor of Int’l Relations, King’s College). “Justice and Sovereignty.” Theoria: A Journal of Social & Political Theory. i.104 (Aug. 2004): 54-68. [p. 55]

Some may assume that no particular problems arise from a simultaneous commitment to state sovereignty and human rights. The [United Nations] Charter seems to suggest an unproblematic relationship between the two. However, problems arise when we start examining the relationship between these two values more closely. There often is (or appears to be) a clash between the two. When the government of a sovereign state abuses individual human rights at home or abroad, we have to decide whether it would be just for outsiders to intervene to protect those rights. If they do so, are they wrongfully overriding the sovereign state's claim to impunity from foreign intervention? What methods of interventions would be justified in such cases? Conversely, do individuals have a right to insist on their freedom of movement in the face of barriers erected by sovereign states? Do sovereign states have a right to limit the civil society rights which actors in the global market enjoy? Is the imposition of protective tariffs a wrong against individual human rights? Do states have a sovereign right to control refugee flows in and out of their territories? There are many other examples which may be used to illustrate an apparent tension between human rights and the rights of sovereign states.

¹ Alan Petigny (Assistant Professor of History, University of Florida) & Joshua Zeitz (Assistant Editor, *American Heritage*). “Disunited Nations.” American Heritage 54.4 (Aug.-Sept. 2003): 55-61. [p. 55-6]



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