

Reaching High School Debaters

By BETTINA BIEN

America's youth in search of high school debate material discover at FEE a mine of libertarian information not generally available elsewhere.

This is typical of the many letters received by the Foundation for Economic Education from high school students preparing for the national debate:

I am a student at St. John's Preparatory School, Brooklyn, N.Y., and I am also a member of the Speech Club. This year's debate topic is: Resolved, that the Federal Government Should Guarantee Higher Education to Qualified High School Graduates through Grants to Colleges and Universities. I am wondering if I can get some information on this topic, either for or against the resolution (preferably against).

The Foundation's interest in the national high school debate program, and mine, started about the same time. Shortly after I came to the Foundation in 1951, an inquiry came to my desk, written in a childish scroll, asking for help on a resolution:

RESOLVED: That all American citizens should be subject to conscription for essential service in time of war.

A few days later another letter was received from another part of the country asking exactly the same question, and this was followed by still another from yet a third section of the country. Obviously there must be a reason for these three identical inquiries. As the Foundation's published releases at that time included nothing directly pertinent to the subject, it was decided to assemble a few items and references to answer further inquiries. At the same time we set about trying to find their source.

The High School Debate Program

We soon learned they came from students taking part in a national high school debate program, which had been in operation for close to twenty years. Actually the idea of conducting debates on an organized basis had been suggested in the early 1900's. At that time the state universities were trying to broaden their cultural and intellectual influence beyond the campus by building up extension services: correspondence courses, information bulletins and package libraries.

With the coming of World War One, state universities turned to "the task of mobilizing public opinion in support of Government."¹ The state university extension services had established in 1915 a national organization, the National University Extension Association (NUEA). This organization,

believing the university extension services to be especially well fitted for the task of distributing information about government activities, asked President Wilson for financial assistance. As a result, a small fund of federal money (\$50,000) for university extension work, was set aside to be administered by the Bureau of Education in the Department of the Interior. With this appropriation, the Federal Division of Educational Extension was set up to operate within the Bureau.

University Extension Services

During the six months that the Federal Division of Educational Services was functioning, it furnished university extension divisions with considerable material to distribute among schools under their jurisdiction. Included were many federal government publications and much statistical data, as well as packaged libraries of material for "the promotion of open-minded, impartial study and discussion of such questions as government ownership and operation of the railroads, government control of prices . . ."² The university extension services found it was easy to promote debating work in high schools, for school officials were willing to cooperate with the universities "to widen the scope and improve the methods of current events study and debate on questions of public interest."³

Following the war, interest in debates lagged somewhat, but in the middle twenties the NUEA began to formalize high school debating. Gradually the idea spread. By 1933-1934, high school debating, with participants in thirty-one states, was close to national in scope. This is the origin of today's national high school debate program.

In the twenties the NUEA formed the Committee on Debate Materials and Interstate Cooperation to handle the program. Of course, no debate coach is under any obligation or compulsion to have his students debate the national topic, chosen through the facilities of the NUEA's committee. But many of them—and the number has probably grown each year—find it convenient to do so. Not only can their students then take part in local, state and regional contests, but also literature on the topic selected is fairly easy to locate.

Since the program became national the resolu-

tions presented to high school students to debate have dealt with such subjects as world government, the welfare state, American labor, youth suffrage, war and peace. Here are the actual wordings of a few resolutions:

RESOLVED: That the federal government should adopt the policy of equalizing opportunity throughout the nation by means of annual grants to the several states for public elementary and secondary education.

RESOLVED: That the several states should enact legislation providing for a system of complete medical service available to all citizens at public expense.

RESOLVED: That the power of the federal government should be increased.

RESOLVED: That every able-bodied male citizen in the United States should be required to have one year of full-time military training before attaining the present draft age.

The national debate program, as it is handled today by the NUEA, includes three resolutions, all falling under one general theme. Three general over-all topics, or "problem areas," are proposed by representatives of the national speech and debate societies for submission to referendum vote by participating high schools. Once the most popular theme is determined a Committee on Wording formulates three different resolutions.

The Current Topics

The "problem area" for the current year (1955-1956) concerns federal aid for college students, and the three resolutions read as follows:

RESOLVED: That governmental subsidies should be granted according to need to high school graduates who qualify for additional training.

RESOLVED: That the educational privileges granted to veterans of the Korean War be accorded to all qualified American youth.

RESOLVED: That the federal government should guarantee higher education to qualified high school graduates through grants to colleges and universities.

Because the program is national in scope, many organizations spend considerable time, money and effort to prepare and to furnish debaters with

literature on the topic selected. Each year the NUEA committee publishes a handbook of articles dealing with the debate subject. But, judging from correspondence which reaches my desk, high school debate coaches and student debaters find literature presenting the libertarian viewpoint pitifully scarce. For instance, a debate coach in Wisconsin, after becoming acquainted with the Foundation's debate material, wrote:

Today a great deal of material is presented by organized labor and left-wing pressure groups. It is very worthwhile to receive material showing the other side of the coin.

And from South Dakota:

... your items of a controversial nature, the unpopular opinion, the discussions of subjects not generally found in periodical literature are welcome.

The first school year that the Foundation assembled material dealing specifically with the national debate subject (1951-1952), there were about 125 inquiries—all completely spontaneous, for no effort had been made to reach high school debaters. Before the start of another school year, NUEA officials had granted us permission to use their distribution channels to announce our material to high school debate coaches throughout the country. That year requests were received from 709 different schools. Since then, the number of inquiries has topped the thousand mark each year. As of this writing (November 1) we have mailed debate packets on this year's topic to 799 different secondary schools, public and private. Smaller "student" packets have also been mailed to hundreds of boys and girls.

The demand which led the Foundation to take part in the national debate program has grown as more and more persons look to the Foundation for information on one side of the debate resolution. As a result of the Foundation's participation in this program, many students and teachers have been introduced to libertarian ideas they would not have encountered otherwise, or could have found only with great difficulty.

1 W.S. Bittner, *The University Extension Movement*, U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Education Bulletin, #84, 1919, p. 27.

2 Ibid, p. 28.

3 W.S. Bittner, *Public Discussion and Information Service of University Extension*, U.S. Dept. of Interior, Bureau of Education Bulletin, #61, 1920, p. 42.

Readers of the **FREEMAN** may have debate packets on this year's high school topic sent to any debate coach or student debater they choose to name. So long as the supply lasts, teacher packets (one free to a school, additional packets \$1.75 each) or the smaller student packets will be sent to addressees of your selection. Write to:

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