

1-1949

President's Page - "A Word for the Cause"

E.C. Buehler
University of Kansas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/gavel>



Part of the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buehler, E. C. (1949). President's Page - "A Word for the Cause." *The Gavel of Delta Sigma Rho*, 31(2), 23 & 30.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Gavel of Delta Sigma Rho* by an authorized editor of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

President's Page . . .

"A Word for the Cause"

This page concerns college forensics in general, and debating and discussion in particular. For more than 30 years as a student and teacher, I have been close to the cause of college debating. It has been a part of my bread and butter. But in recent years I confess that I have been coasting along, taking things for granted. I assumed that my cause was a worthy one and that college administrators, college students, and the general public would naturally rally to it of their own free will and accord. Of course, there are others of my profession who have been coasting along on this assumption. All of us who have held this attitude have been living in a fool's paradise, for not everyone is on our side. There are those who are actively opposed to college contest debating. The fact is that no matter how worthwhile we think forensics may be, we cannot expect a healthy, thriving interest in this activity unless we come out in the open and work for the cause. We must, from time to time, check and recheck our loyalties to college forensics and reappraise our efforts. It will help us all to count the blessings of forensics as it pertains to the welfare of the student who is participating and to society at large. In getting beyond idle talk, let us count a few of these blessings and name them one by one:

1. *Debate and discussion are the key to the democratic way of life.* From Pericles to Truman the story is the same. The Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the American Constitution, and many other similar documents are the blueprints for the pursuit of happiness of free men. These instruments owe their birth to discussions and debate; and in this day when democracies are hanging by thin threads, the need for intelligent discussion and debate has never been more urgent. Democracy thrives on talk. It believes it is better to talk it out than shoot it out. Here is an activity which cannot survive under the rule of a dictator. In every nook and corner of our democratic society where there is a meeting of a City Council, a Board of Directors, a Legislative Assembly, free and open debate and discussion is an absolute necessity.

2. *Here we have one of the best devices for education.* What technique, whether it be in or out of the classroom, can come closer to the crux of the educational process than debate? Here is an activity which motivates a student to clear and logical thought; here is an activity which encourages independent research. Here is a form of discipline which makes a student mentally tough and strong. It does much more than cultivate the mind; it makes for tolerance and open-mindedness. It trains students to recognize and respect truth wherever it is found, and develops a realistic attitude towards cooperation and compromise.

3. *Here is a personality builder.* Man is a masterpiece of the creative process. Too often this masterpiece is stunted or warped in its

growth or development. Too often man does not grow to his fullest stature. He is beset with fears, inhibitions, and prejudices. Two or three years of college debating and discussing will often do wonders toward the adjustment and organization of the human personality.

4. *Debate gives quality training to quality students.* This is as it should be. It is the few able men and women who shape and make the world of tomorrow. A chosen few are superior in vision and mental acumen and superior in courage and breadth of understanding. They will be our leaders tomorrow. Whether we like it or not, these leaders will inherit the earth. The man with many talents needs to develop all of them. Too often the man with one talent is not interested in improving what little he has. As in the parable in the Bible, the man with many talents is more prone to make the most of them. Furthermore, the records show that twenty years from now the debaters will make *Who's Who* twenty times as often as the heroes of our gridiron.

Of course, debate and discussion, being man-made activities, are subject to all to which that flesh is heir. Admittedly all is not perfection, but I fear that those who are not on our side fail to see debate in its true perspective. They lose sight of the larger values. If it is true that debate is important to the life of democracy, that it is among our best educational devices, that it is a means for the growth and enrichment of human personality and that it offers good training to our best students, why shouldn't we say a good word for it at every opportunity?

And what do they say—those who are not on our side? They say that the contest element in debate is bad, that we should not give ranks and decisions. Of course the over-emphasis on winning and losing for the sake of making an impressive showing is an abuse of the activity and should be condemned on every count. But the fault does not lie with the activity itself. Such reasoning is as faulty as it is to condemn fried chicken, gravy, and mince pie because some people use these foods to eat themselves into their graves.

They say debate teaches insincerity and dishonesty. If this is true, it is an abuse and not the fault of debate. Furthermore, honesty and sincerity are relative terms. Using the same type of logic as our critics, the salesman who talks up only the good side of his product would be dishonest; the lawyer who gives only one side of a case is a fraud; the politician, teacher, or minister who says or does anything in the form of pretense is insincere. Life is filled with situations in which pretense is a means of survival. If we spoke out frankly and sincerely at all times our real feelings about our traffic cops, our teachers, or our army officials, or even our relatives, we would probably

(Continued on Page 30)

President's Page

soon be labelled as being anti-social and placed safely behind iron bars.

They say that debaters are narrow and intolerant. On the contrary, they are among our most tolerant and broad-minded students. The debater learns that there are many sides to a question. This criticism better fits the orator whose speeches go unchallenged. Hitler started out as a debater, but his hecklers backed him off the platform. He sulked and bided his time and turned to oratory where voiced opposition was not permitted. His listeners were flanked with armed troops. There was no give and take. Had Hitler been forced to stay with debate and discussion, there would have been no Hitler.

They say that if debate is a good thing, it should stand on its own like athletics. This is poppycock. The most worthwhile ventures always need promotion and encouragement. The Christian religion did not expand without long-sustained promotion. Art and cultural ventures require the support of the more refined elements of our society. To judge the value of an activity by its popularity is social suicide. By this criterion gambling, intemperate use of tobacco and alcohol, cheap movies, and pulp mag-

azines should be generally acclaimed as good. Eddie Guest would be a great poet, and college football would be about the best and most worthwhile activity a college could offer.

If anyone is going to say a good word for college forensics, it must be the speech teacher and the debate coach. We make up the first, second, and only line of defense. The future course of forensics is definitely in our hands. I am not implying that our cause is in immediate danger, but our forensic horizon is not altogether too rosy—it is very spotted. Interscholastic debate activities among our high schools have been curtailed since late Activities Associations have taken debate under their wings. If we look at the chapter roster of our forensic honor societies, the number of dead or inactive chapters is most discouraging. The average college instructor, the average college student, and the average of John Q. Public are generally indifferent or ignorant of the merits of forensics as an extra-curricular activity. The fact is, college forensics needs promotion. We should all be alerted. We need to talk it up.

E. C. BUEHLER,

University of Kansas

January 8, 1949