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DSR-TKA: Reflective Thoughts

Larry Schnoor

When I was asked to write a short article about Delta Sigma Rho – Tau Kappa Alpha for the 50th anniversary issue of the *Speaker and Gavel*, I had no idea of how the project would bring so many memories. As with many former directors of forensic programs that were involved with DSR-TKA, I realized that when I had the opportunity to visit with some of them, we would have some memories we shared about a specific DSR-TKA national tournament. In doing some research for this article however, many additional memories came floating back into my mind.

My first contact with DSR-TKA happened when I was an undergraduate at Mankato State College in the late 1950's. I had returned to college from a 4-year period of service in the U.S. Navy and while a student in an argumentation class where I had to take part in a debate, I was asked if I would consider joining the debate team. Little did I know then how this would affect my future. I did so and in my senior year I attended my first DSR-TKA debate tournament.

In the 1950's and early 1960's, the tournaments were focused on debate. If there were any individual events at all, they were limited to extemporaneous speaking and original oratory. Trophy awards were presented in debate, but individual event recognition was limited to certificates.

In 1966 the DSR-TKA Tournament was hosted by the University of Nevada in Reno. A total of 52 schools attended. A unique feature of this tournament was that everyone attending the tournament was invited to attend an evening social at the home of one of the members of the Reno debate team. His father had discovered uranium in Nevada and the home was one of the largest many of us had ever seen and located in a mountain area that was quite beautiful. My students and I would later talk about that experience and when we saw each other in later years, it would often enter into our conversations.

When it comes to memories, there is one tournament that is clearly ranked by many others and myself that attended, as perhaps the most memorable. In 1968 the tournament was hosted by George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The tournament hotel was the famous historic Willard Hotel, located just a few blocks from the White House. The term "lobbyist" has been credited to have come about because it was the lobby of the Willard where many individuals tried to make contact with members of the government to push their various agendas. The Battle Hymn of the Republic was written in one of the suites at the Willard Hotel, and many Presidents stayed at the Willard on the eve of their inauguration.

I can remember leaving Mankato with 5 students and driving to Washington, D.C. On our way we had to stop for an evening in Illinois and that evening, we listened to Dr. Martin Luther King give his speech to the striking garbage collectors in Memphis, TN. The next morning, we had breakfast at the motel and heard some individuals talking about Memphis – but did not hear exactly what

they were saying. As we started our drive to continue on to Washington, we heard on the radio about Dr. King being shot and as we continued to listen, started to hear about riots breaking out in many locations around the country and most certainly, in Washington, D.C.

We did not know what we should do as the reports were coming in on the radio that there were fires in Washington, and the military had been called in to help deal with the situation. Our discussion centered around the question – should we return to Mankato or should we continue on to the tournament, not knowing what might happen. We elected to continue and arrived in Gettysburg, PA and attempted to find a motel where we could stay and call ahead to find out about the tournament. Finding a motel was difficult as they were filled with individuals that had left Washington to escape the riots. We finally found rooms when a desk clerk at a motel saw the fraternity markings on my jacket and said he would find us a place as he was a member of the same fraternity.

We called ahead to the tournament to find out exactly what might be happening. We were told that the tournament was going to continue, and that we would have a “reasonable” amount of safety. I wondered just what was meant by “reasonable.” We were also told what to expect. We would be met at the city limits by a military unit, where our car would be searched to make sure we were not bringing any possible weapons into the city. This unit would also escort us to the Willard Hotel. On our way to the hotel, we began to notice smoke from various locations where fires had been set, windows covered or taped to avoid breakage, and at times, could even hear gun shots.

Upon arrival at the Willard, we parked our car in the underground garage and were told we would not be allowed to leave the hotel for any reason except to attend the tournament. We would be taken to the campus of George Washington University by bus and returned to the hotel in the evening. Since most of the staff at the hotel lived outside of the city, the hotel was short of personnel to provide basic services, and I can remember that at one point, they just opened the doors to their kitchen and said we could go in to help ourselves to food that they had available.

The tournament proceeded and everything went well on the campus. However, in the evenings back at the hotel, we would still hear gunfire from time to time, see fires and smoke from time to time, and one evening even had to stay in our rooms as there was a report of snipers in the hotel. As far as I know, none were found but it did cause us to be concerned. Seeing troops in the streets, the White House being surrounded by barriers and troops, and hearing reports of riots not only in Washington, but in other cities across the nation, certainly gave us concern and our discussions centered around how they made us feel.

By the last day of the tournament, things had been brought under control, and were starting to return to normal. The hotel staff was able to return and arrangements were made to hold the banquet on the final evening of the tournament. The banquet speaker was the famous CBS news commentator and analysis Eric Sevareid. In his address, he commented how the events of the past several days should remind us of how this should be a time to work for a better understanding of how important it was to maintain our ideals of freedom, of clear

recognition of how we needed to work together as individuals of all colors and ethnic backgrounds in order to maintain our individual rights and freedoms. On our return trip back to Minnesota, the car was filled with such discussion and made a lasting impression upon all of us.

The tournament of 1968 is perhaps the one I remember the most in regard to the overall impact it made upon me and those students that attended. However, there was another tournament that also had an impact upon me and one that basically framed the rest of my career as a forensic educator and involvement with forensic organizations.

In 1987, the University of Mississippi hosted the DSR-TKA tournament. It was at that tournament that I received the Distinguished Service Award. It is written that the Service Award was based on a member's long term accomplishments and contributions to the field of speech, including publishing, achievements of one's own speech team and national offices. Yes, I had been involved in a number of forensic related activities up to that time but did not expect to be honored as I was in receiving the award. However, it did serve to strengthen my belief and desire to continue doing what I could to keep working with my forensic colleagues across the nation to provide the best that could be achieved for students to increase their reasoning and analytical skills along with communication skills, to better enhance their lives.

Many things have changed in forensics since I first became a coach in the early 1960's. Depending upon one's opinion, some have been good and some have been not so good. As was stated earlier, DSR-TKA in the early 60's was primarily debate and just a few individual events: extemp and oratory, with oral interp being added in the early 70's but not divided into the various interp events we know today. That did not happen until the development of the National Forensic Association's tournament, and later, the addition of the American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament. As those two tournaments grew in popularity and acceptance by schools across the nation, I believe interest in organizations such as DSR-TKA began to decrease.

This decrease in interest may have been due to it becoming harder and harder for schools to gain budget increases to attend not just one, but now maybe two or even three, national tournament events. Choices had to be made and in that process, schools had to select which to attend. In the 60's and 70's, DSR-TKA national tournaments often had from 50 to over 75 schools attending. In the 1980's and 90's that number became less and less.

The importance of being ranked within the top 10 or 20 of schools in the nation has also become more of a growing pressure for schools participating in forensics. Competition at the DSR-TKA tournament, as with some of the other fraternity related forensic organizations was competitive in part, but a great deal of emphasis was on the development of the community relationships between the schools and the goals of forensic education.

There has been an effort to attempt to create more of the attention on the development of forensics in recent years. Several developmental conferences have been held but many feel that often the discussion at those conferences centered more on what needed to be changed at one or the other of the largest na-

tional tournaments, many times related to the method of qualification and how to determine the rankings of the results, then to the process of forensic education that could be housed within departments of communication at colleges and universities.

The traditional forensic tournaments in the 60's and 70's usually consisted of 3 preliminary rounds in individual events, and if the number of entries warranted, possibly semi and final round. In a very few cases quarter finals may have been held as well. This tournament format was usually held on a Friday and Saturday and may have left time in the schedule for some social gatherings such as a party for the students and coaches. When the AFA-NIET was formulated, a qualification system was developed to make sure that in order to get to the national tournament, a student would have had to establish a record of achievement at several tournaments. At the time no one had any concept of what has become to be called the "leg" system. It did not take long for schools to recognize that if they wanted to get as many of their students to qualify, more tournaments they could attend would be helpful. Thus began the development of what we now know as "swing" tournaments. This is led to one tournament on Saturday and another on Sunday, with just 2 preliminary rounds, semi's and finals if necessary on each day, with no time in the schedule for any time of social gathering. This system clearly enables the opportunity to gain more "legs." Depending upon whom one may talk to about this system, different results will be gained. Many like this method, while others say they would like to return to the more traditional schedule of 3 round tournaments with less emphasis on "leg" qualification.

Within the past two years, there has been a great deal of discussion about changes that could be made to the description of the various events presently most common at forensic tournaments. Some of those changes have been adopted and others are still being considered. Whatever changes are made by one of the two largest national tournaments, they will ultimately affect all other forensic organizations in the country. DSR-TKA, while no longer having a national tournament, is in the position of still playing a strong role in the development of forensic activity and forensic education. There are discussions and developments presently taking place that will allow DSR-TKA to continue its historical legacy.

In checking on Honor Societies and Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha, I discovered that the society is to provide a trophy to the winner of the annual National Forensic League tournament for high school public speakers. It states that the society awards a Student Speaker of the Year trophy to a college member who is chosen for the honor by the vote of the entire national membership. Another Speaker of the Year trophy is awarded to a nonmember who, in the view of the society, epitomizes effective, intelligent, and responsible public speaking. If these awards have not continued, then I urge the society to return to this practice of recognition of individuals and programs that demonstrate outstanding public speaking skills. There is still a role that can be played by this outstanding organization.

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