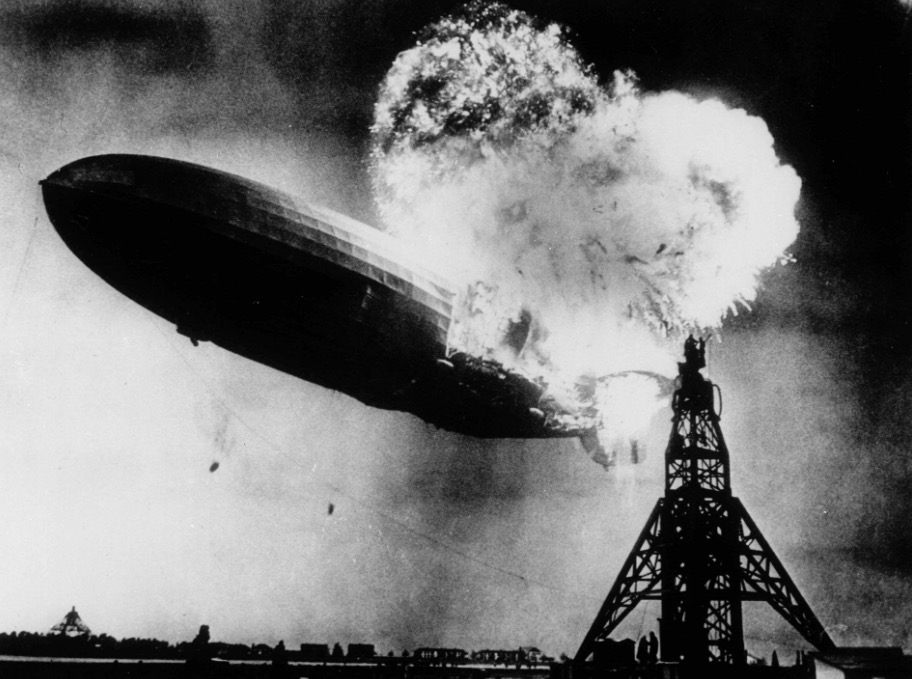
Pragmatism   
Negative Case by Travis Herche



This case argues that the term “public needs” is useless because it is used to justify just about anything, from mobile cell signals to cheerleaders.

Weak affirmatives will run a lot of incoherent or arbitrary arguments to get their nose back above water, like saying: “As the affirmative, I have the right to define public needs however I like.” If you’re running this case, you should have enough of a grasp of theory to understand why that’s bogus. Your challenge isn’t refutation, it’s restoring clarity. Speak slowly in the NR and run the fewest possible number of responses. Your goal is simply to clear the air and un-confuse the judge.

Against more competent opponents, you’re probably facing a battle over the validity of pragmatism. Explore this idea thoroughly; recruit club members to come up with arguments and dilemmas to try to “break” pragmatism by forcing you to give an answer that doesn’t make sense. The better you understand pragmatic philosophy, the more confident you’ll be going into the round.

In refutation, you need to execute absolute discipline. Don’t get sucked into the affirmative interpretation of public needs. Neither agree nor disagree. Just point out that the affirmative speaker is one more in a sea of billions of different views of public needs – and her view is not more valid or less subjective than anyone else’s.

Pragmatism

The 1920s saw the rise of an exciting new transportation technology: the airship. Many people dreamed of skies full of fast, inexpensive airships. But then came the Hindenburg disaster. An airship exploded while docking in New Jersey, killing 36 people.

The lesson we learned from that tragedy is reflected in every decision we make as a society, but ignored by this poorly-worded resolution – which is why I reject it.

# Value: Pragmatism

Pragmatism is operationally defined as: “The principle that truth and meaning can be derived from practical use.”

In other words, you should evaluate the resolution based on what the world would look like if it were upheld. Rather than splitting hairs about exactly what my opponent and I think about public needs and property rights, we should focus on how they are actually used.

This is the best way to evaluate the resolution for two reasons.

## Value Link 1: Gives Meaning

When we say that something is true, we mean that it corresponds with reality. The claim: “The sky is blue,” can be measured pragmatically - we can say that this statement is usually accurate because the real-world sky actually has a real-world blue color. On an overcast day, a pragmatist says: “The sky is gray,” even if the sky *should* be blue – because what the truth should be doesn’t indicate what it actually is.

## Application: Copernicus

Up until the 1500s, the scientific community generally agreed that the Earth was the center of the universe. There were plenty of ideals that supported this notion. Astronomer Nicoloaus Copernicus ignored the ideals and focused on pragmatic observation. He proved that the Earth is not at the center of the universe; that it revolves around the sun. This made a lot of idealists very angry. There were even official condemnations from church leaders. Obviously, the pragmatists were right.

## Value Link 2: Removes Blinders

If something is not pragmatically true, it isn’t true at all. Pragmatism gives you the only accurate way to see the world. It strips away the blinders that conceal the universe and it forces us to confront reality.

## Application: Hindenburg

The public had a choice to make after the Hindenberg explosion. The idealistic perspective said to keep using airships because they were *supposed* to be safe. The pragmatic perspective said that ascending into the clouds in a floating bomb was a bad idea. That’s why we made the switch to planes - because they have been proven useful in the real world.

So moving forward, remember: don’t ask yourself what public needs and property rights should be, but what they are: how they are used. With the framework in place, let’s go to my two contentions.

# Contention 1: Public Needs Are not Useful

My opponent is about to reassure you that public needs are always good and necessary, because technically, according to the manual, that’s how it’s supposed to work. But telling you to ignore the real world because of a definition is a textbook example of an idealistic blinder.

So let’s look away from the manual and look around at the real world. No definitions. No semantic quibbling. I’m about to give you a lot of examples. Don’t worry about writing these down; just listen to how public needs are used to advance every conceivable agenda.

The Illinois State Bar Association published a six-page flyer about scammers posing as laywers. The subtitle of the flyer was: “What the public needs to know.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Faculty members at University of North Carolina’s School of Government published an article called: “Building Community Capacity to Meet Public Needs,” about using government to support non-profits.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Illinois First Responder Network Authority maintains a page they call: “Vision of Public Safety Needs,” which lists things like making commercial cell networks more reliable and having mobile cell signals installed in fire trucks.[[3]](#footnote-3) [[4]](#footnote-4)

The Press Enterprise published a letter from Terry J. Kirk in 2013 warning that the: “Public needs to be wary of gun control,”[[5]](#footnote-5) but Susan Milligan wrote in US News & World Report a year later that: “We Need Gun Control to Stop More Than Criminals.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In 1917, three young Portugese shepherds had a vision of the Virgin Mary known as Our Lady of Fátima. The apparition entrusted them with three Secrets, which are now guarded by an organization called: “America Needs Fátima.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Hillary Clinton was referred to by feminist writer Andi Zeisler in a New York Times opinion piece as: “The [b-word] America Needs.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

According to American Cheerleader magazine, “America Needs Cheerleaders.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

According to POLITICO, “America Needs a Corporate Foreign Policy.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

According to former congressman Bob Barr, “America Needs a Cybersecurity ‘Reboot.’”[[11]](#footnote-11)

In 1984, the Iowa Farm Bureau created an organization called “America Needs Farmers.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Contrast with

# Contention 2: Property Rights Are Useful

We don’t have to quibble over the exact level to which property rights should be upheld. I just want to remind you that the concept of an individual’s right to property is a well-understood idea that has been a foundation of western civilization for centuries.

Article 17 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights says:

“(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

No surprises there. Property rights are not upheld by farmers, cheerleaders, Catholic visionaries, and mobile cell towers – but public needs are.

In the next speech, you’re going to be told about *idealistic* public needs, which are – like everything else – perfect in every way. My opponent will say: “Just ignore definitions of public needs that make it hard for me to win, and focus on the technical definition.”

But that’s just the problem. When we look at the world with pragmatic eyes, we see that the term “needs of the public,” is stretched and warped so badly that it loses all meaning. The fact that my opponent disagrees and has yet another interpretation just proves my point: that there are about 7 billion different interpretations of this incredibly ambiguous idea. So however my opponent wants to define public needs, the actual term is an all-encompassing license to trample on the individual liberties of citizens. The Hindenberg shouldn’t have exploded; the Earth should be the center of the universe; public needs should be universally agreed-upon and beneficial. But that’s not the world we live in.

Everything from the car you drive to your business decisions to your choice of a doctor falls under the purview of public needs. Giving the government a blank check to pursue any end it likes threatens our well-being. Instead, let’s affirm something meaningful and positive: our right to own property. Thank you.

Affirmative Notes

Your case is probably at least somewhat dependent on idealism, which is what makes this case so threatening. Here’s how you handle it.

In the 1AR, call a “Contention Pass.” This is a unique scenario where each side wins their respective contentions. You agree that the resolution is not pragmatically useful; your opponent has not disagreed that public needs uphold your value and property rights have a less-positive relationship with your value. So the real question is: which value do we use?

Next, point out that pragmatism is an epistemological idea – so big-picture that it’s very difficult to access on its own. Rearrange the framework debate so pragmatism is one level higher than whatever you ran. If you just ran a value, demote it to a criterion. If you ran a value and criterion, promote pragmatism to a super-value. Your goal is to keep pragmatism from directly conflicting with your core framework elements.

Then, run idealism against pragmatism. If you already have a super-value of Idealism in your AC, you’re a step ahead and should be feeling pretty confident going against this case. Look at example 3 to see how easy it is to re-arrange the framework debate to suit your needs.

Example 1: Simple Aff Framework

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| AC | NC | 1AR |
| Aff Value: General Welfare | Neg Value: Pragmatism | Neg Value: Pragmatism Aff Value: Idealism |
|  |  | Aff Criterion: General Welfare |

Example 2: Complex Aff Framework

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| AC | NC | 1AR |
|  |  | Neg Super-Value: Pragmatism Aff Super-Value: Idealism |
| Aff Value: General Welfare | Neg Value: Pragmatism | Aff Value: General Welfare |
| Aff Criterion: Infrastructure |  | Aff Criterion: Infrastructure |

Example 3: Aff ran Idealism in the AC

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| AC | NC | 1AR |
| Super-value: Idealism |  | Neg Super-Value: Pragmatism Aff Super-Value: Idealism |
| Aff Value: General Welfare | Neg Value: Pragmatism | Aff Value: General Welfare |

Of course, if you have a case that isn’t dependent on idealism, the NC was mostly a waste of time. You can accept pragmatism, run specific negative contention responses, and declare victory because of how poorly your own contentions were refuted.

1. Illinois State Bar Association, “ISBA and the Unauthorized Practice of Law - What The Public Needs To Know,” Accessed online March 19, 2017. <https://www.isba.org/sites/default/files/committees/upl/uplfaq.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lydian Altman-Sauer, Margaret Henderson, and Gordon Whitaker, “Building Community Capacity to Meet Public Needs,” Popular Government, Winter 2005.

   <http://sogpubs.unc.edu/electronicversions/pg/pgwin05/article4.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Illinois FirstNet, “Vision of Public Safety Needs,” Accessed online March 19, 2017.

   <https://www.illinois.gov/firstnet/PublicSafety/Pages/Vision-of-Public-Safety-Needs.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Since emergency responders will be able to roam on commercial networks, capacity and resiliency will improve (at a reasonable cost). Localized coverage will improve through the use of fixed microcells — like those that provide indoor coverage in skyscrapers — and mobile microcells, which can be placed in fire trucks, police cars and ambulances.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Terry J. Kirk, “LETTER: Public needs to be wary of gun control,” The Press Enterprise, April 23, 2013.

   <http://www.pe.com/articles/gun-669639-control-written.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Susan Milligan, “We Need Gun Control to Stop More Than Criminals,” US News & World Report, January 16, 2014.

   <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/susan-milligan/2014/01/16/we-need-gun-control-to-stop-more-than-criminals> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.americaneedsfatima.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Andi Zeisler, “The Bitch America Needs,” New York Times, September 10, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/opinion/campaign-stops/the-bitch-america-needs.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.americancheerleader.com/category/america-needs-cheerleaders/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Parag Khana, “America Needs a Corporate Foreign Policy,” POLITICO Magazine, January 25, 2017.

    <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/america-needs-a-corporate-foreign-policy-214691> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bob Barr, “America Needs a Cybersecurity ‘Reboot.’” Townhall, January 18, 2017.

    <https://townhall.com/columnists/bobbarr/2017/01/18/america-needs-a-cybersecurity-reboot-n2273104> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.iowafarmbureau.com/ANF> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” December 10, 1948. <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)