

The Crimson White

Moral Forum participants debate offshore drilling

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by Will Evans

Juniors Mark Penner and Forrest Williams won Tuesday night's James P. Hayes, Jr. Moral Forum debate concerning offshore oil drilling in Morgan Auditorium.

Stephen Black, director of the Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility and instructor of the course, said the class provokes thoughtful dialogue in an effort to have students transcend their prejudices on a particular topic.

"Few of us have a fair and reasonable view of the facts going into how our country continues to proceed and how the world continues to evolve," he said.



Mark Penner and Forrest Williams, winners of the 2010 Moral Forum debate, discuss their strategy.

Moral Forum is a class that requires weeks of preparation on a selected topic that has philosophical and political implications for students to investigate.

Black said modern society often indulges in critical language to demean an opposing viewpoint rather than building constructive comprehension of the different sides to an argument.

He said the values-based debates foster critical thinking instead of shallow viewpoints.

The final round included two teams to have one affirm and one negate the resolution, "Given the current technological constraints, it is morally right for the federal government to maintain a moratorium on deep-water offshore oil drilling in U.S. territorial waters."

Neither team knew which side they would debate prior to the round, Black said.

After the toss of a coin, Sean Dave, a freshman majoring in marketing, and Marlan Golden, a freshman majoring in history, were asked to affirm the resolution while Penner, a junior majoring in political science, and Williams, a junior majoring in psychology, were asked to negate.

Dave and Golden said the low probability of an oil spill belies the severity of the catastrophe when one does occur, such as the BP Oil Crisis.

“The response to the oil spill was an utter and complete disaster,” Golden said. “The technological constraints to the response to an oil spill ... are simply inadequate at this point.”

In particular, Dave said the health and livelihood of American citizens is endangered by deep-water oil drilling because of its damage to the environment when spills occur.

“If we want to provide for the common good, we must maintain the moratorium on deep-water oil drilling.”

Penner and Williams said the moratorium does not address the problems of deep-water oil drilling because the cessation of the industry in America would not preclude the importation of foreign oil from countries that show a disregard for safety precautions and human rights.

Penner said offshore oil-drilling can be done if proper safeguards are followed. He said Norway has had four spills in 40 years of drilling, which indicates that a prohibition of offshore-oil drilling is too drastic.

In particular, Williams said the switch from domestic oil to foreign oil would be a diplomatic misstep, since many of the oil-rich countries commit human rights abuses.

“We would be simply switching where we get our oil from,” he said. “We would not be funding their prosperity. We would be fueling their engine of despair.”

After the judges took some time to make their evaluations following the close of the round, Penner and Williams were announced as the winners of the debate.

Both sides received \$2,000 per person in scholarship money for reaching the final round.

Moral Forum was able to give \$12,000 worth of scholarship money to its participants this year, Black said.

Robert McKenna, a freshman majoring in political science and a student in Moral Forum, said the class undertook nine weeks of preparation to research the topic, breaking out into discussion groups and studying different moralist philosophies to support their conclusions.

“The topic wasn’t my personal favorite,” McKenna said, “but it was broad enough to have a lot of information on it and narrow enough to be relevant to what is happening now.”

Golden said the class broadened his knowledge and critical analysis of this year’s resolution.

“It definitely opened my eyes to both sides of the issue,” he said.

Penner said he hopes to transfer the rhetorical skills he built in Moral Forum to his prospective political career.

“The class really prepared us to debate at this level,” he said, “and I’m a political science major, so hopefully I can use my persuasive skills to help with politics.”

Black said the quality of the dialogue fostered in Moral Forum and displayed in the debates continues to increase.

“The average quality of the debate goes up every year,” he said.