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Malcolm X's Prison Debate Team Takes On Harvard

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The four nor'easters in March brought down trees and closed schools and nearly derailed a much anticipated, historic contest between the Norfolk Prison Colony Debating Society and the Harvard College Debating Union. But, after a storm cancellation, the debate at last took place at the end of the month, at MCI-Norfolk, a medium-security prison an hour outside Boston.

The prison, which was designed in the nineteen-twenties by a Harvard alumnus and modelled on a college campus, started a debate team in 1933. Malcolm X, who entered the prison in 1948, was a member. ("Once my feet got wet," he said, "I was gone on debating.") Its first international debate was held in 1951, against Oxford University; Norfolk, charged with arguing against free health care, won. Laurence Tribe debated at Norfolk in 1961, when he was a Harvard junior and the national intercollegiate champion. "The guys we debated that day were serving either life sentences or the rough equivalent," Tribe recalled recently. "They gave us a good fight." When the Norfolk debate team disbanded, in 1966, its record stood at a hundred and forty-four wins and eight losses.

No shirts with words on them are allowed at MCI-Norfolk; no tissues, no jewelry, no anything. Prison officials made one exception on debate day. "They let us bring in paper," Asher Spector, a Harvard freshman, said. "But not pens."

The prison team had re-formed in 2016, and since then had battled Boston College (a win) and M.I.T. (a loss, on a technicality). The month of storms had been a problem for the Norfolk debaters. They are allowed only one hour a week to prepare together, and they hadn't been able to talk through their arguments while walking around the yard, as they usually do, because it was closed. The inmates also aren't allowed to use the Internet, and had to rely on research materials brought to them by friends and family members.

The debate was held in an auditorium, with a raised wooden stage and a faded velvet curtain. The two teams of five faced each other, seated at metal tables covered with paper tablecloths. Just before the debate was to start, a guard shouted, "Code!" "Someone must have fainted, or there was a fight or something," an inmate named Sharp explained, shrugging. "Everyone has to

stay put until it's over." Meanwhile, James Keown, the captain of the Norfolk team, asked Sophia Caldera, Harvard's captain, what she thought about different forms of debate. Keown, broad-shouldered and red-headed, said he was looking for a kind of debate that would involve more people—he wanted to get more inmates onto the team. "How about British Parliamentary?" Caldera suggested. "That'd be eight per round."

Each debate topic has to be approved by the Massachusetts Department of Correction. The Norfolk team explained to the Harvard students that the idea was to avoid topics that could make the inmates resent the government. This day's topic was "The United States should abolish the Electoral College." Norfolk had volunteered to argue against the resolution, granting to their guests the easier argument, and the one that would win over the prison audience.

There was no gavel to launch the proceedings (too dangerous), but eventually the debate began. "Norfolk will take the 'con' side," a moderator announced. "No pun intended."

Harvard went first, arguing that the Electoral College disenfranchised the poor and decreased voter turnout. "O.K., O.K.!" inmates in the audience interjected approvingly, or, more enthusiastically, "Ya-ya, ya-ya!"

Steven Quinlan opened for Norfolk, seizing the attention of the room. He had a five-contention argument, much of which he recited from memory, including long passages from Cato Institute publications, Federal Election Commission rulings, and the Federalist Papers. Norfolk emphasized the importance of the Electoral College for the stability of the Republic. (This is a hard sell.)

Spector, in Harvard's first "pro" rebuttal, pointed out the origins of the Electoral College in the Constitution's pro-slavery three-fifths clause, and noted a modern analogue: just as slaves were not allowed to vote, so people convicted of felonies are not allowed to vote; nevertheless, they are included in the census count that determines each state's number of Electoral College delegates. The crowd cheered and urged him on. Collegiate debaters are not used to having an audience, and Spector, overwhelmed, briefly lost his thread.

The two teams jabbed and dodged, closely matched. The contest seemed to turn on two moments. First, Ronald (Lefty) Leftwich, for Norfolk, came to the lectern, without notes, and, in an otherwise flawless recitation, stumbled, and forgot a line. He paused. "Take your time, man," a member of the audience called out. The room fell silent, except for the crackling of the guards' radios. Leftwich stepped away from the lectern, grabbed a page of notes, and resumed.

Caldera, of Harvard, picked up on Spector's argument about felons, and added undocumented immigrants. Much of the audience rose to its feet.

When the debate was over, a panel of judges ruled Harvard the winner, sixty-eight points to sixty-one. Leftwich felt terrible about losing his place. "That never happens," he said. "We need to do a rematch. Will they do a rematch?"