The debates can last until midnight when students from the Law School, Graduate School of Business, and other University departments gather in the Home Room of International House. The spirited exchange of ideas, opinions, and analysis began again on September 30, 2006, at precisely 7:30 p.m., when the 209th debate of the Edmund Burke Society was gaveled to order.

Steeped in tradition, the Edmund Burke Society may seem as time-honored as the legendary debate societies of Yale and Harvard. By comparison, however, the Society is young; it was founded decades later. “Most of the founders, including me, were graduates of Yale College,” explained Joseph Smith, Jr., ’91. “Yale has a rich and storied tradition of student debate, modeled on the student debating societies at Cambridge and Oxford. It didn’t take us long to notice that Chicago lacked anything like that, so we decided to start such a group.”

The first Edmund Burke Society debate, “Resolved: This House Prefers Reagan to Bush,” took place on October 18, 1989, in the Upper Burton-Judson Lounge. Like every resolution for the past seventeen years, it was chosen, in part, because of its ability to generate dissonant viewpoints among conservatives. Resolutions since have ranged from the timeless, “Resolved: The State Exists to Make Men Virtuous,” to the timely, “Resolved: On to Iran.” While the Society bills itself as a conservative parliamentary debating society, the very definition of conservative has even been a subject of debate. “There are so many factions within our conservative membership—from libertarian to social conservative to traditionalist,” noted Laura Kamienski, ’05, a “Sometime” (i.e., former) Chairman. “We try to strike a balance with our resolutions and provide something for everyone—philosophical, cultural, policy-related, et cetera.”

Edmund Burke, above, is held by many to be the father of Anglo-American conservatism. While the political theorist and philosopher published and spoke extensively, he is perhaps best known for his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790). According to Joseph Smith, Jr., ’91, the founders of the University of Chicago's Burke Society “actually considered other names, including Alexander Hamilton's. But no one speaks to modern conservatives like Burke.”
Each debate follows a set program. The Chairman calls the event to order and members make announcements. Up to three short literary presentations follow, which are often relevant to the topic at hand and range from the classic (Plato) to the contemporary (a memoir from Iraq). Finally the resolution is announced and the discussion begins. Arguments alternate between the affirmative and the negative, with "no notes, no teams, no judges, no time limits, just extemporaneous speeches, questions and answers, and of course a healthy dose of heckling and humor," said Smith.

It is the spontaneous nature of parliamentary-style debate that makes the Society unique, and the perfect complement to the rigorous classroom experience at the Law School. "The Society helped me to develop my thoughts and opinions, and taught me how to structure an argument off the cuff and defend it on the spur of the moment," said Kamienski. Smith agreed: "It was a wonderful diversion from the hard work of law school, yet also intellectually worthwhile. Many people may not regard debate as relaxing, but when one spends the morning debating, say, Professor Helmholz, and then the afternoon debating, say, Professor Currie, it is indeed refreshing to spend the evening debating, say, the editor-in-chief of the Law Review."

The Society serves refreshments at each debate, and ladies and gentlemen must follow a strict sartorial code. Any participant, not just members, may speak; the only requirements are that gentlemen speakers must wear a tie, and all speakers must debate respectfully, with an open mind and good manners.

Four debates take place each quarter, but the Society also spreads its merriment through social events as well. Occasional teas are convivial gatherings imbued with tradition. From the first-edition copy of Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France that is prominently displayed at every debate, to the sportive "awards" and "prizes" bestowed for particularly long-winded or equivocating speeches, the traditions of the Society are elaborate and varied. Many of them are known only to members—a fact that further explains the strong sense of community and camaraderie the Society generates among its faithful. Some alumni members of the Society keep up with current resolutions, and many return to participate in a special debate typically held during Reunion Weekend each year. Not surprisingly, the Society has inspired friendships and even marriages. "Some of the finest people I've ever met were part of the Burke Society," said Marsha Ferziger Nagorsky, '95, "and many are among my closest friends today."

The history of the Burke Society is now nearly as storied as that of the Yale and Oxford debating societies, and members can find it difficult to pinpoint their most memorable debate. For Kamienski, it was "Resolved: This House Supports a Federal Marriage Amendment." Many of the non-members who came expected the speeches to be one-sided. They weren't, and several people commented on how surprised they were by what they heard." Nagorsky cites "Resolved: Skate, Tonya, Skate," named for the infamous incident between Olympic skaters Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding, as one of her many favorites. And for Smith? "One of the most memorable events hosted by the Society was actually not a debate but a speech, given by Judge Posner in 1991, on the topic, 'Why I am not a conservative.' It was literally standing room only."

The energetic debates of the Edmund Burke Society, with their timeless and sometimes humorous topics, have quickly become star events that can pack a room. "One thing I would say to anybody curious about the Society is that the only way to know anything about it is to attend a debate caucus or two," stated Ed Cottrell, '08, Chief Whip for the fall quarter. "What might appear from its event announcements to be a formal—some might even say "stuffy"—group of like-minded individuals actually offers a great chance to relax while exploring interesting topics in a fun, friendly, and surprisingly intellectually diverse atmosphere." For students and alumni of the Law School, the Society's blend of social and intellectual pursuits will continue to be a welcome diversion from academic and professional life.