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Round 2 Goes to Obama

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Distinctly Catholic

Scoring debates is never easy. Watch a debate with a room full of partisans and they will almost always say their candidate won. (Two weeks ago, one need not put in the qualifying adverb "almost" but even Dems had to admit two weeks ago that President Obama was off his game.) And, the strangest phenomenon is that when the debates are actually clarifying, when the candidates are criticizing each others' policies, undecided voters don't like it, even though those are the moments that should impart the information they are looking for.

Scoring last night's debate is pretty easy. Obama won. He had the advantage that his performance was not only being compared with that of Governor Romney but with his own lackluster performance in Denver. But, everything from the verbal exchanges to the body language showed Obama as the big dog on the stage. His answers were fluent. When he was not speaking, his eyes were trained like steel on Romney. (Obama actually made me think of my mother at times, she of the look that could kill.) And, on almost every question, Obama found a way to feed the narrative of his campaign: We have been through some tough times together, but we are making progress and this is no time to turn back.

Romney, on the other hand, was not only worse than Obama last night, he did not match his performance of two weeks ago. In Denver, Romney argued big. He linked individual data points to his broader narrative. He must have mentioned "freedom" and "opportunity" two dozen times each. Last night, he argued small and, consequently, he looked small. He did not confront the president with a broad indictment, except once, but instead seemed to be looking for gotcha moments. One of these backfired terribly: Instead of keeping the focus on the administration's slow response to the attacks in Libya, he sensed an opening when Obama said that he had called the attack an act of terrorism the day after it

occurred. Romney called out the president, suggesting he had just lied. But, moderator Candy Crowley, who had clearly done her homework, backed the president up. So does the videotape, which was airing on MSNBC within minutes of the debate's conclusion. I do not watch morning television, but I am betting that exchange is the most-aired clip of the debate.

There are two problems with the clip for Romney, one of which will hurt him immediately and the other which should be of greater concern but won't be. First, people think that if someone will lie about a small thing, he is likely to lie about big things. If you have ever been on a jury, you know that in assessing a witness's credibility, it is often the little lies or inaccuracies that make you decide how much weight to give to a person's testimony. Romney can get away with a big lie anytime. He purports his economic plan will create 12 million new jobs. Moody's predicts that the U.S. economy will create 12 million new jobs no matter who wins. But, little lies will get you every time. Tactically, Romney's gaffe also keeps him from talking about unemployment for a few more days, crucial days at that.

The deeper problem that should concern people with the Libya exchange is this. I do not doubt that he believes no one in the administration had indicated the attack in Libya was a terrorist act for two full weeks. If you watch Fox News, when an administration spokesperson would say, "We are still investigating, but our reports indicate that extremists used the occasion of a protest??" Fox would edit out the qualifying phrase about the on-going investigation. Night after night, Sean Hannity has accused the administration of willful deceit, never mentioning the fog of war, the fact that, as Gen. Wesley Clark pointed out last night on CNN, initial reports from an attack like the one on the compound in Benghazi are almost always wrong. Fox brings out Donald Rumsfeld as an analyst - some analyst! But, if you rely on Fox for your information, your view of events are skewed. I am sure that Mr. Romney thought the president had never mentioned the word terror in association with the attack on Libya because no one on Fox has mentioned it. The nation is not only polarized in its opinions, but in its facts. This is troubling and when a politician makes himself an adjunct of Fox or MSNBC, as they have made themselves adjuncts of the campaigns, he is likely to stumble in the way Romney stumbled last night. The gaffe was not as obvious as Gerald Ford's famous liberation of Eastern Europe during his 1976 debate with Jimmy Carter, but it is more troubling in its way.

Obama did not hit every pitch. As expected, Romney accused the president of failing to deliver on his pledge to cut the deficit in half. It is true that Obama made the pledge. And it is also true that the deficit has doubled. But, there is a huge opening for the Obama campaign to remind Romney - and the voters - that something happened between the time of the pledge and the time Obama took office: The economy collapsed. Mr. Romney may have forgotten that fact. Certainly, his personal living standards were not affected by it although I assume his investment portfolio was. But, this is a huge opening for the Democrats to remind voters that while President Obama campaign on "hope" and "change," by the time he took the oath of office, triage was the order of the day. He had to clean up the mess he had inherited, a mess created by the policies Romney still advocates. It baffles me that Team Obama has not figured out how to hit this particular ball out of the park.

The race is not over. Obama can not rest on his Long Island laurels. There is one more debate to go and it is critical, for more critical than any amount of ad spending. (One of the great moments of the night came when the focus groups assembled by different networks all indicated they simply mute the TV when campaign ads come on!) On the stump, Obama is great and Romney, though good, is a minor leaguer by comparison. Romney also needs to ramp up his schedule and do more events in more cities than he has been accustomed to doing. The race is likely to remain close and Election Night may be a long night. But, I doubt it. The final debate will focus on foreign policy. The ads are so much mud thrown at a wall that is already covered in mud. Obama is a better stump speaker by a long shot. Barring a major mistake in the final debate, or some other banana peel, what we watched last night was President Obama taking a big

step towards a convincing victory in three weeks.

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