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The Last Debate

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Distinctly Catholic

Boca Raton has not been kind to Governor Romney. First, there was the videotape of his remarks to donors about the 47% at a fundraiser in the Florida city. Then, whatever President Obama had for dinner before the first debate in Denver must have been on Governor Romney's plate before last night's final debate, also in Boca Raton. Romney seemed flat all night and seemed to forget that in a debate, it is one thing to be agreeable, and something different to consistently be in agreement with your debating partner.

Once again, Romney's tactic was to run to the center. The man who listens to John Bolton and Dan Senor and a host of other neo-cons who have never seen a war they didn't like, that Mitt Romney was nowhere to be seen last night. We are close enough to the election that the Amen Corner at Fox News will not pounce on Romney for his new found agreement with President Obama's policies, but can you imagine what would have happened during the primaries if Romney had spoken as he did last night? And, after three weeks of nightly "exposes" about what did or did not happen in Benghazi, Sean Hannity must have been profoundly unnerved that having created a softball for Mr. Romney, the governor did not even swing at it.

Over at the Weekly Standard, nothing but praise for Mr. Romney's performance, but wouldn't you like to know what they are saying behind closed doors? There are two options, criticism or cynicism. Either they are revolted that Romney did all he could to distance himself from their robust, reflexive commitment to military means, or they are saying to themselves, "Well, he had to look calm and talk about peace, but once he is in office, he will do our bidding." One thing is certain about Governor Romney's performance last night: No one thinks they can defend George W. Bush's foreign policies. In that sense, the emergence of what amounts to a foreign policy consensus, the big winner last night was the nation. Of all the ugliness to emerge in politics in the past few years, the ugliest has been the collapse of a foreign policy consensus that has governed America's policies abroad ever since Sen. Arthur Vandenberg effectively

stamped out the lingering isolationism within the GOP and joined hands with Harry S. Truman to forge the policy of containment of communism after World War II. I am far less concerned about this policy or that, than about the need to create a renewed consensus about foreign policy, and I hope last night was a step towards such a consensus.

Romney is only really good at debates when he is being aggressive, and his debate coaches clearly warned him that even if he was mouthing words of peace, his previously aggressive demeanor would tell a different tale. But, even his rehearsed lines fell flat. In only his second response of the night, he began a sentence by saying, "Attacking me is not talking about how we are going to deal with the challenges?." He repeated the phrase about "attacking me" at least twice more and it fell flat those times too. It had none of the panache of Reagan's famous "There you go again," which had no self-pity in it and kept the focus on his debate opponent. President Obama, who is not a great debater, missed the chance to go for the jugular and say, "Governor Romney, I am not attacking you. I am pointing out your record. If you perceive that as an attack, you are not debating me, you are debating yourself." Or, as Truman once said of the GOP of his day, "I'm not giving them hell. I am giving them the truth and they think it is hell." By the third time Romney repeated this "Attacking me is not going to help?" line, I couldn't help thinking of that ad about indigestion, where the woman is sitting at the table and her spaghetti starts slapping her in the face, and the voiceover says, "Is your food attacking you?" Romney, like the woman with spaghetti all over her face, looked rather pathetic.

As mentioned, I do not think Obama is a particularly good debater. He is not that quick on his feet with the verbal dagger that is both unplanned and devastating. He could not provide an over-arching narrative for his foreign policy, nor explain why the Mideast may be in more tumult today than the year before, but that is because tyranny gives a veneer of stability, even while it is laying down the seeds of revolution, while freedom is often messy and halting and tumultuous. At some points in the debate, Romney seemed to think the Arab Spring was a good thing, and at other times a bad thing, but the key point is that it is an Arab thing, not an American thing. Mr. Obama defended policies that reflect that fact, and on Afghanistan he scored well in arguing that it is time for the Afghans to take control of their own security needs. He should have made a similar point about the Arab Spring.

For the second debate in a row, the key line came not from either candidate but from the moderator. Just as Candy Crowley in the last debate gave the lie to the whole Benghazi frenzy with her devastating, "He did, in fact, sir?" comment, exposing Romney's penchant for inflating the facts, last night Bob Schieffer blew open Romney's penchant for bromides when he assured the governor, "I think we all love teachers." It was devastating and easily the best line of the night.

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