

Florida Has Spoken; Cue the Fat Lady

✘ Mitt Romney's victory in Florida is a big deal, a very big deal, and not just because Florida is the first big state in the 2012 run for the GOP nomination. Florida matters more than all the races that came before because unlike Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, Florida is a microcosm of the whole country. It's urban, it's rural, it's liberal, it's conservative, it's old and it's young, it's white, it's black, it's Latino, it's rich and it's poor. In other words, if you can win in Florida you can win in a general election.

Newt Gingrich came into Florida looking strong and leading in the polls. He had just won South Carolina in a breeze and the "experts" were talking about a Gingrich win in Florida and the possible end of Mitt Romney. The turning point for Gingrich—who had been left for dead not once, but twice in the campaign—came at that debate when he smacked down John King of CNN for asking about Newt's messy personal life as the first question out of the box.

The audience gave Newt a standing ovation. Sure, they hate the so-called impartial, unbiased mainstream media, which they know isn't any of those things. But there was something else going on. Conservatives were hungering for someone to stand up and show some guts; someone who would show passion; someone bold who could go head-to-head with Barack Obama and make him look small and weak. Romney, many of them felt, wasn't that guy. Gingrich, they thought, was. Romney, to many GOP voters, was too cautious. Gingrich was anything but.

Still, I was never convinced that voters necessarily wanted Newt Gingrich, *the person*. He was lugging around a lot of baggage, after all. And the big question was: Can he really beat Obama? What those voters wanted, I think, was what

Gingrich *represented*: someone who had energy and enthusiasm. They might embrace Romney if he could show Newt's passion. In the Jacksonville, Florida debate he did just that. In that debate, Romney was the fighter. Gingrich was the one who looked tired.

Remember those old Frankenstein movies, where the lifeless monster gets a few jolts of Z-shaped electricity and the mad scientist cries, "He's alive! He's alive!" That was Romney at the debate. Somewhere along the way between South Carolina and Florida he was jolted with electricity, infused with passion and energy. He became the fighter conservatives were looking for. Somehow, somehow, Mitt got a shot of the old Newt – and it worked.

That doesn't mean, of course, that the civil war between the Romney and Gingrich factions is over. The visceral feelings are still there. But at some point, Republicans are going to have to decide who has the best chance of beating Obama. The polls say that's their number one priority. Before South Carolina the conventional wisdom was that Romney was the only candidate who could defeat the president. The others were too weak or too divisive. When Gingrich won the South Carolina primary Mitt's inevitability went out of the window. In Florida, it may have come back.

The fat lady isn't singing yet. But she's in the wings warming up.