

Handicapping the Contenders

I have now sat through all of the GOP debates and have come to a few conclusions. First, they should not be called debates. They are actually Meet the Candidates events. As such, they serve a useful purpose. But they are not debates. If they were, Newt Gingrich would have the nomination sewn up by this time. Unfortunately for the former Speaker of the House, the ability to speak quickly and coherently on a number of issues isn't enough.

I hasten to add that I happen to agree with Mr. Gingrich that he is the smartest man in politics. He probably has more good ideas in a day than some of the other contenders have had in their entire lives. For Gingrich, the tragedy is that he carries around more baggage than the average bellhop. It's not just that he has a checkered personal past that involves wives and lovers. There was also that multi-million dollar book deal he made with Rupert Murdoch while he was still in Congress. Nothing wrong with a congressman looking to make a few extra dollars; the problem was that Gingrich chaired a committee whose responsibilities included determining ownership of media outlets, a matter of great concern to Mr. Murdoch. When the spam hit the fan, Gingrich grudgingly gave back the money.

But from my personal perspective, money remains far too important to the man. Otherwise, why does he send my wife letters begging for donations three or four times a week, and has done so for years, long before he threw his hat in the ring? And while it's really none of my business how anyone elects to spend his own money, I must say I was flabbergasted when we learned that the man had somehow managed to run up a \$500,000 tab at Tiffany's. The question that pops to mind is whether President Gingrich would try to pass his own stimulus bill just to cover the cost of his wife's jewelry.

If I could cobble together a dream candidate, he would have

Romney's looks, Cain's charm, Santorum's values, Bachmann's decency, Gingrich's grasp of the issues and Ron Paul's passionate followers. Jon Huntsman's problems are myriad, not the least of which is that he looks exactly like every villainous politician ever portrayed on "Law and Order" whose corruption begins but doesn't end with his having a bunch of chippies on his office staff.

The good news for the GOP is that Barack Obama, the four trillion dollar man, is the most beatable Democrat since Jimmy Carter. The bad news for certain segments of the party is that Paul Ryan, Sarah Palin, Mitch Daniels, Marco Rubio, Donald Trump and Chris Christie, decided not to run. For some, the problem is that Tim Pawlenty tried but failed. For still others, the heartbreak of psoriasis is nothing compared to the fact that Michele Bachmann, Ron Paul, Jon Huntsman and Mr. Gingrich, haven't managed to gain any traction, with the Iowa caucus looming right around the corner.

That leaves Rick Perry, Herman Cain and Mitt Romney, to duke it out. Of the three, I prefer Mr. Cain, even though I don't believe his 9-9-9 (aka 9-0-9) plan would do much, if anything, to turn around the economy. I like him and I trust him and, of all the candidates, he's the one with whom I could bear to spend time. That may not be the best reason for electing a president, but it's a better reason than I usually have.

My problem with Governor Perry isn't just that he appears terribly uncomfortable on the debate stage or that he doesn't even speak as well as George W. Bush did. The reason I don't believe he is presidential material is because his attacks on Romney reek of the schoolyard. I couldn't believe it when he decided that by bringing up the old news that Romney once employed a landscaper who apparently once employed an illegal alien, he believed he had a gotcha moment that would send him soaring in the polls and straight into the White House.

Now I fully acknowledge that Romney wouldn't be my favorite

alternative to Obama, but at that moment, I felt as if I was looking at a man being attacked by a gnat and, at least in my mind, the governor's last name changed forever from Perry to Petty.

What made the attack even more embarrassing is that the Texas governor has boots of clay. After all, he would not only have seen to it that the gardener's kid received in-state tuition, but labeled any Republican who objected a heartless bigot.

I am willing to wager that Mitt Romney will be the Republican nominee, and not just because he has the most money, the most professional organization and the best-looking family. I give the American voter more credit than that.

Instead, as I see it, he will be the last man standing because he's taller than Perry and has more hair than Cain.

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