

# Rubio Destroys Trump at the Debate; Will it Matter?



It took a long time, but Donald Trump's GOP primary competitors finally figured out that battling for second place was an ineffective campaign strategy. With all but one of the early states going to Trump, and national polls showing more to soon follow, Marco Rubio and Ted

Cruz understood that they needed to focus their efforts on chopping away at the *big dog*.

They showed up at last night's CNN debate wielding axes.

Viewers who tuned in to hear about policy and fresh ideas were likely disappointed, but the reality is that the rise of Trump has proven that a significant portion of the base just doesn't care about such things anymore. They want attitude. They want soundbites. They want a fight. They got all of those things, but for the first time, it wasn't Donald Trump who walked out as the victor of such a contest. He was the decisive loser. And though Cruz did well and helped himself, it was Rubio who came out as the clear champion.

Rubio bested Trump in their head-to-head exchange of personal insults and one-liners. He made Trump look weak, portraying the billionaire's success as having been inherited rather than earned. He mocked Trump as a lightweight for his faux conservatism and his robotic repetitiveness (a criticism Rubio himself had to deal with a few weeks back). He effectively branded Trump as a hypocrite for his bulk-hiring of illegal immigrants. While Cruz attacked Trump for not divulging his tax returns, Rubio ridiculed Trump's business failures and his

inclination to liken the Middle East to a real estate venture.

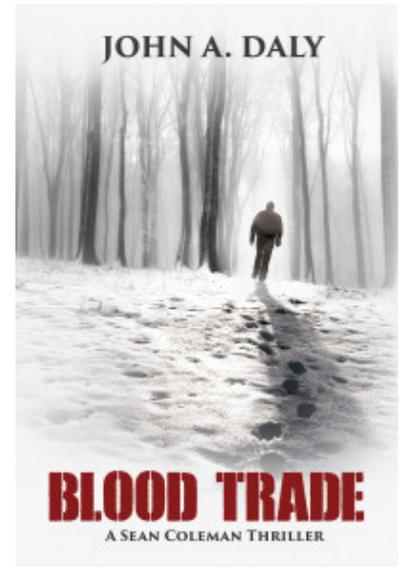
Perhaps most importantly, Rubio drew attention to some of Trump's controversies (like *Trump University*) that, up until today, had largely been overlooked by a media.

This is significant because the media hasn't been vetting Trump to the level they would typically vet a GOP presidential front-runner. Sure, journalists have been reacting to Trump's controversial, often dishonest rhetoric, but there hasn't been a serious effort to shed light on questionable business practices, lawsuits, associations, etc. (like there was with Mitt Romney). Now, with Rubio publicizing such topics in a high-profile, national debate, the media's going to have to react.

For Trump, the optics of the two-way assault were bad. He looked rattled. He flailed. He turned "low-energy" (as Trump likes to put it) fairly quickly, and he never quite recovered. He wasn't funny like he usually is, and he never landed any significant *counter-punches*.

As disheartening as it is that *style* and *optics* have become the most important elements in a run for the presidency, it was Trump who set these schoolyard ground rules. And last night, the bully got knocked to the ground.

As of this morning, Rubio hasn't let up. He's been mocking Trump on the campaign trail using the kind of attack-lines we'd previously only seen from Trump himself. He's been deriding Trump's tweets, proclaiming Trump had a meltdown backstage. Rubio even went as far as suggesting that Trump may have wet his pants at the debate. He's framing Trump as small and inconsequential, and he's doing it in front of roaring crowds. It's an all-around optics win.



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Is any of this conduct dignified? No. Is it presidential? Absolutely not. But it's an effective attack strategy against a man who has skated to front-runner status on little more than his crass, loud slogans, and a larger than life persona.

The big question is this: Has it come too late? Conventional wisdom says yes (and I'm inclined to agree), but if we've learned anything from this campaign, it's that conventional wisdom no longer applies.

If Rubio wants to win the primary, he'd better continue his roast of the front-runner. And it needs to be relentless.

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## The Shocking Lack of Urgency

# Among the GOP Field



In September of last year, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker ended his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination with an appeal to his fellow candidates regarding Donald Trump:

*“Today, I believe that I am being called to lead by helping to clear the race so that a positive conservative message can rise to the top of the field... I encourage other Republican presidential candidates to consider doing the same so the voters can focus on a limited number of candidates who can offer a positive conservative alternative to the current front-runner. This is fundamentally important to the future of the party and – ultimately – to the future of our country.”*

No one listened.

It took nearly two months before another Republican candidate dropped out of the race, and another five weeks before two others finally departed from the ridiculously overcrowded field. The pattern has continued throughout this primary process, with presidential hopefuls staying in contention long beyond their expiration dates.

Even now, with two primaries and two caucuses in the books, and the likelihood of a Trump nomination, there are still individuals who are putting their egos before their stated visions for the country – visions that stand adamantly opposed to Trump’s.

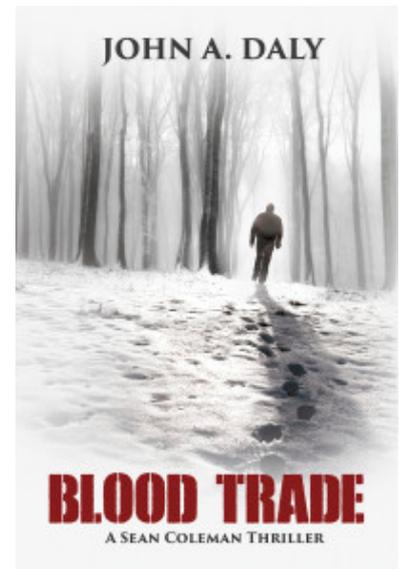
The result? While two-thirds of the Republican base don't subscribe to Trump's liberal, autocratic platform, there are too many conservative-minded alternatives for any of the other candidates to stage an effective challenge against the front-runner.

Of course, not all of the blame falls on the other candidates. Trump has been helped greatly by the media. He monopolizes national news cycles with his outlandish, offensive remarks that have proven to be a big ratings draw. He has influential pundit-friends who've been willing to compromise their long-held principles to campaign for him on-air. He even has a liberal media that seems to be holding off on any substantive vetting of him until the general election; there's a reason for that, by the way.

Still, Trump's dominance would have never lasted this long, had it not been for too many candidates more driven by their public profiles and self-pride than putting our nation on a path back to its former glory and a promising future.

These people should have heeded Scott Walker's warning, but they didn't. And now time is about up.

A strong majority of Republican voters reject Trump, and favor someone who believes in conservative principles. If that majority is to have a relevant voice in this election, and actually beat Trump, they're going to need the type of leadership that Walker described back in September. And they're going to need it *fast*.



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Ben Carson should provide that leadership by leaving the race...today.

John Kasich should provide that leadership by leaving the race...today.

Rubio and Cruz should provide that leadership by figuring out who is the strongest candidate between them. The weakest of the two should go.

This isn't the primary that most of us in the Republican party expected or wanted, but it's where we're at. Unless we're okay with being represented by an undignified leftist for the next four years, we need to join together, accept the reality of the situation, and once and for all deal with it.

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# Marco Rubio's Low Media-Bar for Failure



Anyone who has watched a majority of the GOP presidential debates can tell you that message repetition is a big part of the candidates' selling points. Front-runner Donald Trump often speaks in platitudes that include *building a wall, China, winning, and Making America Great Again*. Ted Cruz has recited his line about repealing "every word of Obamacare" countless times. John

Kasich often answers questions by invoking his record *in Ohio*. And Chris Christie, of course, has talked about being a federal prosecutor on 9/11 ad nauseam.

For better or for worse, most candidates use repetitive talking points, and it typically makes sense to do so. You never know, after all, if your audience is comprised of voters who may be closely paying attention to your case for the presidency for the very first time.

One candidate who hadn't struck me as being particularly repetitive (other than when it came to the inspiring story of his upbringing) was Marco Rubio. That of course changed last Saturday night, at the ABC debate, when he pivoted multiple times (while being heckled by opponent Chris Christie) to an obviously rehearsed line about Barack Obama's failures stemming from the president's ideology rather than his inexperience.

Rubio's intent was to address criticism of his own lack of governing experience by emphasizing his personal judgement and knowledge of the issues over his resume. His delivery,

unfortunately for him, was atrocious and strikingly uncharacteristic of his typically nimble-minded demeanor. The result was Rubio playing directly into Christie's narrative that U.S. senators don't have the necessary skill-set that state governors have to lead the nation.

Even though the rest of Rubio's debate performance that night was actually very good (especially in the realm of foreign policy knowledge), I knew his slip-up would be a compelling news item afterwards. I had no idea, however, just *how* compelling of a news item it would be.

*ABC News* pundits pounced on the incident the moment the debate ended, framing it as a devastating blow to the senator. "Rubio Chokes" read a headline in the *Politico*. The *Boston Herald* went with "Under fire, Marco Rubio crashes and burns". It was the lead debate story on all of the national news networks for the next 24 hours, with some pundits even referring to Rubio's conduct as a "meltdown." Others likened it to a malfunctioning robot. There was even speculation that Rubio's candidacy might have been permanently derailed.

The media's coverage of the Rubio incident was (and continues to be) weirdly obsessive – especially considering that the substance of what he was saying wasn't particularly controversial. And I'm not the only one who has noticed the oddity.

Renowned statistician Nate Silver, who has made a name for himself in recent years for nailing his predictions of high-profile election outcomes, tweeted that night: "I thought Rubio had a real bad night too but given the media groupthink on the issue I'm rapidly becoming less certain."

It was a good observation by Silver, one that he has qualified in other tweets over the past couple of days.

While it's undeniable that Rubio screwed up that night, the national media pile-on that ensued went far beyond a

proportionate response to a newsworthy rhetorical misstep. The media was as thirsty for Rubio's blood as Chris Christie was, and they made certain that an exchange that lasted probably less than three minutes in total defined his performance that night as nothing less than a political catastrophe.



Breaking: Presidential candidate Donald Trump endorses John A. Daly's new novel.

Part of the explanation likely comes from the matter that Rubio doesn't make many mistakes while campaigning. He typically presents himself intelligently and eloquently, and holds up well in back-and-forth arguments (as Ted Cruz would probably agree). Thus, the *surprise factor* was probably a contributor.

My guess is that the larger ingredient, as Silver eluded to, has more to do with the fact that many polls show Rubio as the GOP's best chance of beating the Democratic candidate in November. Because of that, his bar for failure has been set quite low. And it's been positioned there by the same profession that set a very low bar for *success*, eight years ago, when it came to another first-term senator who was vying for the White House.

This level of scrutiny really isn't all that inconsistent with the journalists and news organizations who believed Rubio's boat purchase, and having earned four traffic tickets over the past 20 years, were hot-ticket news items.

Was Rubio's mistake at Saturday's debate worthy of news coverage? Absolutely. But had it been Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, or even a GOP candidate who polls poorly in general election match-ups, I don't think it would have gotten a quarter of the press.

When it comes to a GOP candidate that threatens the power of the Democratic Party, the media is always prepared to make a mountain. Unfortunately, on Saturday, Marco Rubio gave them their molehill.

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## A Winning GOP Ticket?



was déjà vu all over again.

After the first two GOP presidential debates last month, I wrote a piece in this space under the headline "Two Debates – One Winner." That winner was Carly Fiorina. Last night, as Yogi supposedly once said, it

Fiorina came off as Thatcher-esque. Smart. Quick. Tough. Funny. At one point she was asked about Trump's comment about her face, a nasty insult suggesting that people wouldn't vote for her because she's ugly. When pressed right after the remark, Trump lamely "explained" that he was talking not about her face, but about her "persona." What did she think of Trump's cheap shot? Employing the wisdom that less is more, Fiorina

elegantly replied, "I think women all over this country heard very clearly what Mr. Trump said." The audience at the Reagan library cheered.

And Trump, who supposedly doesn't mince words and never admits he made a mistake, responded with, "I think she's got a beautiful face, and I think she's a beautiful woman." No one cheered that insincere comeback. Even his most ardent fans know that it was nothing more than belated damage control.

Carly's remark hit the needlessly mean-spirited Donald right between the eyes. But who knows if her poll numbers will go up or if his will go down. Nothing he says has hurt him yet. Maybe this will. Maybe.

In a post-debate analysis on Fox, I told Bill O'Reilly that if news organizations had given Fiorina the air time that they've been giving Trump, she would have been in the lead long before the second debate. I'm guessing they'll pay more attention to her now.

If GOP voters want to win, they'll give Carly Fiorina a serious look. More than any other Republican candidate she can win over those suburban women who are scared off by the tone and manner of some conservatives and who might otherwise hold their nose and vote for Hillary.

Marco Rubio also did well at the debate. He came off as smart and knowledgeable and with a father who tended bar and a mother who was a maid, he's an American success story. There are worse things for the GOP to contemplate than a Fiorina-Rubio ticket, a woman and a Latino, an outsider and an insider, middle age and youth. On paper anyway, that's formidable.

Stay tuned.

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# A Hairy Issue for the GOP Presidential Candidates



Over the past few weeks, we've been watching presidential candidates jump into the 2016 race, and have listened to them make visionary speeches about why they want to be the leader of the free world. For people like me, who follow politics closely, these speeches have been fascinating for their messaging. They've hinted at the platforms the candidates intend to run on,

as well as given us an idea of how successful they'll be in connecting with voters.

For people who don't really follow politics, however, the rhetoric has served primarily as an introduction. Much of the electorate knows little (if anything) about people like Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Scott Walker, and Marco Rubio. Their names and faces are foreign, which is clear from the national polling. Unlike Hillary Clinton, who has been in the national spotlight for decades, most GOP candidates are making their first impressions on America.

First impressions are pretty important (especially if you want to be the president), and this early in the race, a candidate's stated vision isn't nearly as significant as *how* they present them self. In the often shallow, image-obsessed society that we live in, one of the things people deem relevant is personal appearance.

That's not to say that someone has to look and dress like a professional model in order to get elected in this country. I don't believe that to be the case. At the same time, however, it seems to me that if a Republican candidate is going to present himself or herself as a young, vibrant, forward-looking alternative to the stale politicians of yesterday (which most are aiming for to contrast themselves with Hillary Clinton), they've got to look the part.

As of now, they don't. And a big reason for that is their haircuts. They're making the candidates look... well... a little dopey.

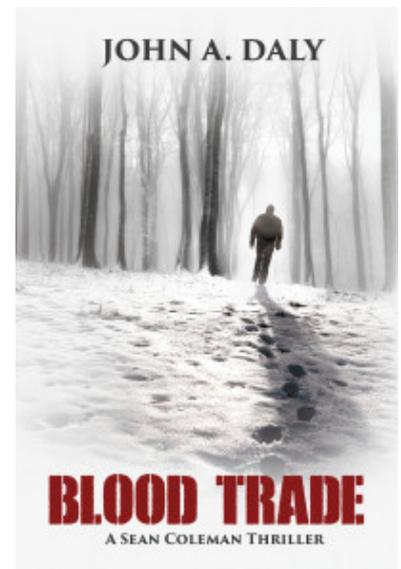
Now, I fully realize that I'm the last person who should be criticizing anyone about their hair. I've got a weird, uneven receding hairline that seems to take on a slightly different shape and direction each time I look in the mirror. My remaining locks are overly thick where they shouldn't be, embarrassingly thin where I wish they were thick, and even appear multicolored at times, depending on the angle of the sun when I'm outside... It ain't pretty, folks.

The key difference, of course, is that *I'm* not running for president. For the people that are, this kind of thing actually *does* matter.

Sure, it's a superficial criticism that in no way reflects how effective of leaders they are. But that doesn't change the fact that people (importantly voters) notice, and let it effect their perception of an individual. If a serious candidate presents them self with a look that is noticeably far-removed from what is contemporary, it keeps many people from lending them their ear.

Specifically, at this point in time, Ted Cruz looks like the aging hot-rod driver from *American Graffiti*. Marco Rubio is sporting a comb-over, which makes no sense because his hair isn't that thin, and he's not a G.I. Joe action figure from

the early 80's. And then there's Rand Paul... On good days, he looks like a freshly-trimmed Lyle Lovett. On bad days, I'm half expecting his hair to start hissing and his eyes to turn me into stone. Even Scott Walker could stand for a new look.



Learn about John Daly's upcoming novel BLOOD TRADE.

I promise you that my intent isn't to degrade these men. On the contrary, my intent is to help them. In this day and age, a presidential candidate just can't afford to let something as otherwise unimportant as their hair distract from their candidacy. The future of the country is at stake, and like it or not, personal appeal is necessary to win.

My suggestion to each of the candidates is to consult a professional, contemporary stylist—preferably one not recommended by Trey Gowdy—and let them work their artistic magic. Someone gave that advice to Paul Ryan in 2012, and there's a far bigger need for it today.

***If you're interested in a signed, personalized copy of my novel "From a Dead Sleep" you can order one from my website. It also makes a great gift!***