



PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE: OBAMA SNAPS BACK HARD

Roger Simon¹

As well as Barack Obama did in his second presidential debate — and he did very well, indeed - - you still have to ask yourself one question: Why didn't he do it in his first debate?

If, 12 days ago at the University of Denver, Obama had delivered the same high-energy, on-target, putdown of Mitt Romney as he did at Hofstra University Tuesday night, think of where he would be today.

He would not be trailing in the polls. He would not have the media circling over his head like vultures eyeing their next meal. He would not be trying to climb out of a hole, but would be moving forward instead.

Perhaps it was mere fatigue that night in Denver. Or overconfidence. Or lack of preparation. Or the altitude. Perhaps we will never know. Perhaps he will never know.

No matter. What matters is that in the second of three presidential debates, Obama was the performer his supporters were hoping for: the Obama of four years ago, a person hungry for the job and not ground down by it.

And Romney helped him out Tuesday night. If one believes the polls, Romney's big gains have come from his improving image with women. But at Hofstra, Romney tried to steamroller the moderator, CNN's Candy Crowley, just as he had steamrolled PBS' Jim Lehrer in Denver.

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The pitfall for Romney was not that Crowley didn't let him get away with it, the pitfall was that he looked like a bully trying to put a woman in her place.

And, when Romney was trying to demonstrate the opposite, by saying he had hired many women as governor of Massachusetts, he said of his gubernatorial staff, "They brought me a binder full of women."

Women come in binders?

And Obama was better - - quicker, sharper, more fast-footed and sure-footed - - than he was the first time around.

Romney tried to make the point that Obama's retirement funds were probably invested offshore just like his own.

"Have you looked at your pension?" Romney said, then used the same hectoring repetition he had used in some of his primary debates. "Have you?"

"No," Obama said with a grin, "it's not as big as yours."

Even the reporters, who really do try not to express outward emotion during these debates, erupted into a roar of laughter in the press filing center.

Obama hit his talking points, demonstrating that rehearsal - - as silly as it is for two informed candidates to have to rehearse - - does pay off. He summed up his campaign in one answer to a member of the town hall audience.

"Osama bin Laden is dead," the president said. "Insurance companies can't jerk you around. We saved an auto industry on the brink of collapse."

And, in the most somber and bitter exchange of the debate, over whether U.S. diplomats had been provided with proper protection in Libya, at first Romney appeared to do well. He implied that today Obama cries crocodile tears over our slain diplomats but that after the Benghazi attack he flew to Las Vegas for a fundraiser.

Obama snapped back that right after the attack he denounced the attacks as terror.

Romney pounced, saying this was not true and that in reality it had taken Obama several days to denounce the attack as an act of terror.

Obama objected and Crowley ruled in his favor, saying that, in fact, Obama had used the word "terror" in the Rose Garden.

Obama's actual words were: "No acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation."

And it gave Obama a further chance to make up ground with women. Hillary Clinton, his secretary of state, has been saying she was responsible for any flaws in protection in Libya.

Tuesday night, Obama lifted any blame from her shoulders.

"I am ultimately responsible for what took place there," he said. "I have to greet those coffins."

It sounded conscientious. Gutsy. Presidential. Everything that Obama wasn't in his first debate, in fact.

Was this really the same person? Just 12 days later?

Apparently so. Though Donald Trump might insist on a DNA test to prove it.

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