



PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE 2012: PRESIDENT OBAMA SNOOZES AND LOSES

Roger Simon¹

One word of advice for Barack Obama before his next debate: caffeine.

I had a Pepsi right before the debate started Wednesday night and was tingly for the next 90 minutes.

President Obama looked like someone had slipped him an Ambien.

The first presidential debate of 2012 took place at the University of Denver and was between Obama and Mitt Romney. But only Romney showed up.

For much of the debate, it appeared as if Obama, the former professor, and not Obama, the presidential candidate, was on stage.

It's not that Romney's performance was perfect or polished — it wasn't — it's just that Obama's was so mediocre.

It is possible Obama was overconfident, but I doubt it. He is not a foolish man. So I think he was just overtired or over-distracted or over-something. But he sure wasn't over-energetic.

Maybe Jen Psaki, his traveling press secretary, was preparing us when she said on Air Force One Sunday that Obama "has had less time to prepare than we anticipated. That's just a fact. It's difficult to schedule significant blocks of time when you're the president."

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Mitt Romney, by comparison, seemed bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. He seemed to enjoy being there.

He was far from profound. "My priority is putting people back to work in this country," he said.

And: "I love great schools."

Trite? You bet. But at least he spoke in reasonably short sentences.

Obama often sounded like he was defending a doctoral dissertation. His thoughts seemed to range from lengthy to endless.

Mr. President, shorter is better. Really. We are a society with a short attention span.

Complex problems do not require complex answers. Not on TV, they don't. Once a candidate is safely elected, he can be as long-winded as he wants in the White House and even before Congress.

But he has to get elected. And it's a little early for Obama to fall on the ball. Which is where he seemed to spend most of the evening Wednesday.

And, by so doing, he let Romney get away with a lot.

"Mr. President, you're entitled to your own airplane and your own house, but not to your own facts," Romney said in one of the few zingers of the debate.

Couldn't Obama have replied in kind? Obama could have said something like: "And you, Gov. Romney, think you're entitled to car elevators and Swiss bank accounts!"

Too nasty? Too unpresidential? OK, you may be right.

But how does Obama get through an entire debate without referencing Romney's infamous "47 percent" statement even once?

I didn't expect Obama to bring up how Romney caged the family dog on the roof of his car, but I thought at least Obama might bring up Romney's refusal to release any significant number of his tax returns.

But, no, Obama took the high road. The very long high road. Here is Obama on the health care crisis. I don't expect you to read all 190 words of it, but I will reprint them anyway.

Obama: "There are two ways of dealing with our health care crisis. One is to simply leave a whole bunch of people uninsured and let them fend for themselves, to let businesses figure out how long they can continue to pay premiums until finally they just give up, and their workers are no longer getting insured, and that's been the trend line.

Or, alternatively, we can figure out, how do we make the cost of care more effective. And there are ways of doing it. So at Cleveland Clinic, one of the best health care systems in the world, they actually provide great care cheaper than average. And the reason they do is because they do some smart things. They — they say, if a patient's coming in, let's get all the doctors together at once, do one test instead of having the patient run around with 10 tests. Let's make sure that we're providing preventive care so we're catching the onset of something like diabetes. Let's — let's pay providers on the basis of performance as opposed to on the basis of how many procedures they've — they've engaged in."

You know what? On the merits, Obama was absolutely correct in his analysis. And at least several people were still awake by the end of it.

Am I arguing for triviality and sound bites and acting dumb? Absolutely not. Obama's goal can be to become the smartest one-term president in history.

But I think his supporters, those people who really believe in him and what he is trying to do, will be expecting a little more from him in the next face-off.

"I think this was a terrific debate," Obama said near the end of the evening.

And it was. For Mitt Romney.

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