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# Romney Wins First Debate



By Marty Kaplan

If the media-industrial complex obeys its usual laws of supply and demand, the political headlines over the next four weeks are fairly predictable: Romney Wins First Debate. Ryan, Biden Debate to a Draw. Obama Wins Second Debate. It All Comes Down to the Last Debate.

I'm of course exempting Fox News, which — as the official GOP Talking Points Network — is required to declare that Gov. Romney and Rep. Ryan successively mopped the floor with, ran rings around, cleaned the clocks of and delivered a knockout punch to the Democratic ticket.

But the rest of the commercial commentariat has a rooting interest in depicting a presidential campaign going into overtime, a seven-game World Series, a thriller in Manila. I realize that's out of step with last week's media storyline, which is that after his 47 percent spy cam candor, Romney is toast, but hey, those down-ballot races sure are nail-biters. That consensus can't last, because much as control of Congress and state houses matters, it's hard to keep national audiences glued to their screens by suspense about Indiana and Iowa.

Think of mass media as Sheherazade, and think of us, the audience, as the Sultan. If the campaign narrative is a snooze, we'll sentence its storyteller to death and turn the show off; Romney-is-a-Goner is totally a ratings-killer. But if each night's episode is a cliffhanger, we'll keep coming back to find out what happens next.

The drama of the debates isn't the only campaign X-factor that's tailor-made for marketing. The two jobs reports between now and the election will also be hyped and spun. The tens of millions that billionaires will secretly spend late in the game will be framed as a looming November surprise. Even if Romney persistently lags by several points, voter suppression laws and Election Day vigilantism will inject tension into the ending. All these are legitimate reasons — independent of the media's stake in a photo finish — to believe that Obama doesn't have it in the bag. But the hoopla surrounding the four debates is the industry's best opportunity to attract eyeballs, sell them to advertisers and keep the story going down to the wire.

You might think that Romney's plastic performances in the primary debates will make it challenging to give him high marks for his one-on-ones with Obama, but debates are graded against expectations. By now we are so used to seeing him as a robot, an empty suit, a high school bully, an Etch-a-Sketch panderer, a Monopoly caricature, a contemptuous elitist, an out-of-touch opportunist, OK I'll stop, that anything he does in the debates to counter that image will be greeted by the media with thunderstruck awe. It's alive! It's alive!

So it's not hard to imagine some of the advice he's been getting in debate prep.

- *Be self-deprecating.* "Mr. Obama, that's simply not true. In fact, I'll bet you 10,000 that - oops, there I go again."
- *Be human.* "This campaign has been a humbling experience. Do you know what it's like to be lower in the polls than Herman Cain?"
- *Show compassion.* "Black teenage unemployment is 40 percent. We can't have that, Mr. Obama - you're running for office, for Pete's sake."
- *Demonstrate your bedrock commitment to principle.* "I have never wavered, not once, in my commitment to anyone I'm speaking to."
- *If Obama demands that you release your tax returns:* "Really? You're saying you want me to go *what* myself?"

In mock debates, Romney is no doubt practicing political jiu jitsu, hoping to do the equivalent of Obama's owning the demonized Obamacare. Though Romney's recent feint at acknowledging his paternity of Romneycare caused some conservative howls, if he does it again on the debate stage, the press will acclaim it as a shrewd calculation, a seemingly gutsy attempt to court swing voters, though at little cost because his base has nowhere else to go. If Romney leverages an Obama attack on Bain Capital into his own

attack on predatory (non-Bain) business practices, or if he flips an Obama complaint about the mess George W. Bush left him into his own complaint about the Republicans' profligate past, the maneuver will win admiration from the chattering class, even if he doesn't believe a word he's saying.

In the big picture, it hardly matters how professional debate judges score each 90-minute bout, or what the snap polls say, or how the Twitterverse calls it. The industrial purpose of the debates is to create demand for the spectacle that the media supply, a melodrama that keeps people on the edge of their seats and distracts them from noticing, and possibly being enraged by, our democracy's descent into plutocracy.

I'd love to be proven be wrong. Maybe the debates really will educate Americans about the great issues of the day and provide clear contrasts that enable thoughtful, open-minded voters to make up their minds. Or maybe Romney's free fall will have acquired so much velocity that even the media's best efforts to keep audiences in suspense about the outcome will prove hopeless. Or maybe something real will actually happen during one of the debates, some unscripted moment that breaks through the kabuki and reminds us that this Thousand and One Nights of perpetual campaigning isn't entertainment — it's our life.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.*

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**Marty Kaplan**   
USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director

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