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## How to Lose the Next Debate



By Marty Kaplan

A couple of week ago, when I wrote a “Romney Wins First Debate” column, I didn’t think I was going out on a limb. Obama’s re-election was looking increasingly likely, but audiences don’t show up to watch paint dry. The business model of journo-tainment required that “Game Change!” — not “Game Over” — would be the news out of Denver. But I had no idea then that the version of Barack Obama who’d show up at the first debate would transform the media’s pseudo-suspense into an actual nail-biter of a race.

Mitt Romney’s performance should have surprised no one. A lifelong shape-shifter, he had no trouble Etch A Sketching himself from the man who secretly told millionaires that 47 percent of us are moochers who think we’re entitled to food, shelter and health care, into the Hubert Humphrey disciple who told the TV audience, “Look, the reason I’m in this race is that there are people that are really hurting today in this country.” Going into Denver, Romney had impeccable pants-on-fire credentials, so when he denied advocating what he has in fact been advocating — massive tax cuts for the rich — it was predictable Pinocchio-as-usual. With a black belt in magic thinking, of course Romney would say that he has awesome, albeit invisible, plans to guarantee health insurance for people with pre-existing conditions, and to make Medicare voluntary without destroying it, and to raise defense spending without increasing the deficit.

I bet there’s a binder in the White House with tabs anticipating every one of the whoppers Mitt Romney told in Denver, with scenarios forecasting each of his attempts to evade accountability for the hard right Republican brand he brandished in the primaries. I bet there were sections labeled 47 percent and Tax Returns and Cayman Islands and Bain. I bet that when John Kerry played Mitt Romney during the president’s debate prep sessions, he said — just as deceptively as Romney did in Denver — that Obama stole \$716 billion from Medicare recipients, and that Obama doubled the deficit, and that, yes indeed, regulation is essential for making free markets work.

I also bet that there was a debate within the debate prep about the best strategy to win swing voters, and what it means to “be presidential,” and what kind of mandate Obama needs on Nov. 6 in order to get anything done on Nov. 7 with a Republican House and a Senate prone to paralyzing Republican filibusters.

I have a rule about what happens at internal debates like that. I firmly believe that every case you can imagine being made is in fact made, that any conceivable strategy you might want to see advocated is actually at some point advocated. I don’t think these are group-thinks conducted in yes-men bubbles. They are hotly contested, high-stakes sessions, with plenty of passion and evidence on all sides.

And when the decision is made, it’s the candidate, not the staff, who makes it.

So I have no doubt that the president was advised in no uncertain terms that the worst mistake he could make in Denver would be to seem annoyed, arrogant or disengaged. Of course he was shown tapes comparing candidates who look at their opponents with candidates who look down and pretend to take notes. I know someone told him that a good offense was better than a regal indifference to lies and attacks. I know the case was made that he should hang the Republican House caucus around Romney’s neck like an albatross. When the president asked, during the debate, whether Romney is keeping all his plans secret “because they’re too good,” because “somehow middle-class families are going to benefit too much from them,” I knew he had been offered many more sly, effective ways to blow Romney off without seeming angry or unpresidential.

Maybe the strategy the president picked for the Denver debate was driven by polls, by the views of the five-to-ten percent of voters whose swing in either direction could decide the election. Those voters always say that Washington should stop the partisan bickering and solve our problems. Clearly Romney's read the same polls; that's why he traded in his primaries persona — to the right of Newt Gingrich and Rick Perry — for the choirboy he played in Colorado.

What troubles me isn't that the president may have been willing to risk alienating his base in order to appeal to the undecided. It's that the Barack Obama who showed up at the first debate looks more than a little like the kumbaya campfire singer who in his first term kept turning the other cheek to Republicans whose goal was to delegitimize and destroy him. He wasted months and momentum on bargaining in good faith with reckless nihilists. He put his agenda in the hands of hostage-takers. He fell into the trap of negotiating with himself. He may have been dealt some bad hands, but he was a lousy poker player.

Before the debate, the reason the president was surging in the polls was Mitt Romney's inadvertent 47 percent confession. It was because the elitist caricature of a Republican moneybags turned out to be precisely who Romney is that the country turned away from him. And in Denver, instead of hammering that home, the president reminded us of the guy who kept getting rolled by the right. If that candidate shows up again in Hempstead and Boca Raton, you can be sure that the next occupant of the White House will show no reciprocal mercy to his adversaries.

*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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