



**THE BLOG** 12/12/2011 01:08 pm ET | Updated Feb 11, 2012

# Newt Winked At Me



By Marty Kaplan

Did you see how Newt Gingrich kept winking during Saturday night's Republican debate? I'll bet you \$10,000 I'm the one he was winking at.

Maybe you thought it was just a "there he goes again" wink to his Iowa audience, like the Reagan twinkle that made Jimmy Carter seem like a crabby uncle. Coming from Newt, that wink could have meant: "They can attack me all they want, but I'm Teflon. I can make my Freddie Mac millions seem tiresome to bring up. They may call my moon-mining scheme loopy, but watch me make their list of Newt nuttiness look desperate. Fire away, folks — I'm enjoying this."

Or maybe you thought he was giving a John McCain-like wink to the press corps. Its meaning: "You media types know that I know that this is just a game. We're all in on it together. Those stiff on this stage don't get it. If Mitt or Rick or Michele were to let on that they know they're too pretty, if they signaled even a shred of irony about what politicians have to say and do, then you'd like them a lot more. But they're trapped in their roles - Muppets who can't admit they're puppets. I know I'm playing a part, and you know that I know it's just theater."

Or maybe you thought he was winking at Calista. That would have meant: "I told you they'd come after me with the infidelity thing, but that only gave me just the opening I wanted to confess my imperfection and ask for forgiveness." Mr. Family Values Republican cheated on his wives? America adores giving sinners another chance. You couldn't ask for better television.

But really, I think Newt's wink was aimed at me, and what he was saying was this: "You sorry liberals think America will finally come to its senses — that my bluster will eventually get old, my bomb-throwing will ultimately seem scary, my record will inevitably come back to haunt me. You know what? Think again. I'm the most fun this country can have with politics. I'm the most entertaining a candidate can be. Let Obama sell no-drama. I'm selling id. Which show would you rather buy a ticket for?"

Of course, when John Huntsman becomes the nominee, I'll have to eat these words. Nothing underlines the unpredictability of the primaries more than the appearance of former Senator Fred Thompson in a commercial during

Saturday's debate, in which he lent his credibility and acting chops to pitch reverse mortgages to seniors. In 2008 Thompson was going to rescue the Republican field from disaster, the way Chris Christie or Rick Perry was going to save the GOP this time around. From the way the party establishment is now ganging up on Gingrich, you'd think that a Jeb Bush could be drafted at this late date and still get on enough state ballots to secure the delegates needed to get nominated, or that a brokered Tampa convention could somehow prevent the Republicans from committing Newticide.

But I think the old guard's fear that nominating Newt will cause a Goldwater-style debacle is misplaced. So is the glee of some Democrats. This is a beware-of-what-you-wish-for moment. A President Gingrich is no less plausible than a Vice President Palin was, which we were spared only because the financial meltdown, played out in real time during the campaign, made McCain seem more interested in scoring political points than solving problems.

Newt's dog-whistling to his base is effective. The lazy, inner-city kids with no work ethic: that Republican depiction of American poverty descends from Reagan's "strapping young buck" buying T-bone steaks with food stamps. But general elections turn on independents, not on the faithful. What Newt needs to reach the White House is enough swing voters who are turned on by his apparent fearlessness.

He's not afraid to say that the U.S. and Israel should bomb Iran's nuclear program, or that Palestinians are terrorists. He actually seems to enjoy it. If we voted with our heads, then Americans would weigh the upside of saying such things against their pragmatic outcomes. We'd ask, will this bring us closer to our objectives? But we vote with our gut, and our gut loves excitement. So instead we ask, how cool would it be if a candidate said that? With Obama comes steady-as-she-goes; with Gingrich come histrionics, conflict, suspense, surprise. Let's face it: Newt's better casting for the reality show we prefer to reality.

I'd love to fantasize that the 99 percent meme will gain momentum, and that Obama's recent populism will restoke his disappointed activists. In my dreams, the favorability of Congress is so fatally low that Republican efforts to disenfranchise young and minority voters will be overwhelmed by revulsion against plutocracy and injustice. In my happy place, Obama not only wins, he takes back the House and gets a 60-vote Senate. But a squeaker is far more likely than a wave toward a Democratic Congress, and probably the most we can hope for with an Obama win is more Mitch McConnell and more gridlock.

What's alarming is the alternative. If Mitt were to be the GOP nominee, and if enough independents wanted to give him a chance, then I could see a President Romney presiding over a divided Congress and cutting deals with a Democratic Senate. But if Newt is the nominee, I can see him winning big and getting a Republican Senate to boot. I can also see a Democratic Senate minority - instead of learning the lessons of these filibuster-filled years - being as wussy as it was when Reagan rolled into Washington.

I'd love to bet you \$10,000 that won't happen. But I'd also love to think that we aren't such suckers for psychodrama.

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

**Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/martykaplan](http://www.twitter.com/martykaplan)**

*Do you have information you want to share with HuffPost? Here's how.*



Marty Kaplan 