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WEINER: Democrats' debate debacle

Obama can still come back after poor performance

By Robert Weiner - - Friday, October 12, 2012

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

President Obama's inexplicable silence in the first debate has led to a large bump for [Mitt Romney](#) — now slightly ahead, according to the Pew poll — the game-changer that Democrats were convinced would not happen. The “Saturday Night Live” parodies were predictable: Mr. Obama mute against [Mr. Romney](#)'s assertions, Mr. Obama becoming the Clint Eastwood empty chair.

For all my love of the president, it was bad, really bad.

My wife and I happened to stay at the Westin Lake Las Vegas resort around Mr. Obama's three-night debate prep stay there. We were organizing an event in neighboring Las Vegas and wanted the remote lake and mountain scenery the hotel offered, so we stayed there before and after our event.

We could not resist asking hotel staffers what they thought of the president. “Very nice guy,” said a member of hotel security, who took photos with Mr. Obama. Without my prompting, he added, “We relaxed him too much.” Another hotel staffer, a bellman, said, again with no prompting, “We hope it wasn't the hotel's fault.” That's how obvious the poor performance was.

Looking out the windows at the soothing mountains and lakes and playing touch football (which he did) on the lawn may have been a factor in his ensuing poor presentation, but

there was another huge reason: Mr. Obama was accompanied by mock debater Sen. John F. Kerry. Mr. Kerry is brilliant on the issues but renowned for long, long sentences that Americans couldn't figure out back when he ran for president and still can't. This is not the right person to train Mr. Obama on how to land a punch. In their book "Game Change," John Heilemann and Mark Halperin describe perceptions that Mr. Kerry has "a passivity, a weakness, an inability to wield the blade in self-defense, let alone pounce at the right moment to carve up an opponent." Mr. Obama's performance seems to prove this description accurate — he learned well.

If Mr. Obama wanted to learn how to win a debate, not just expound policy, he needed someone like James Carville or Paul Begala as his debate stand-in opponent, not Mr. Kerry. If he preferred to practice against an elected official, he could have gone against Gov. Brian Schweitzer of Montana, who wowed his opposition with punchy, pithy points.

Mr. Obama let [Mr. Romney](#) get away with everything. He should have countered [Mr. Romney](#)'s line about "trickle-down government" with "trickle-down economics hasn't worked since Hoover" (and actually should have used something like that first, before [Mr. Romney](#) stole the "trickle-down" line and said "government").

When [Mr. Romney](#) compared the \$5 trillion tax-cut assertion to his five sons "saying something that's not always true but just repeating it and ultimately hoping I'll believe it," it was a perfect opening for the president to retort: "But you have proposed a 20 percent across-the-board tax cut. You can't have a family, or America, headed by a magician who miraculously pulls a rabbit out of a hat. When you refuse to say where you will get the deductions and loopholes to pay for your cuts, the American people recognize blue smoke and mirrors and want real answers, not a secret plan that can make them bankrupt. [Mitt](#), how much would you cut deductions for home mortgages, charities or health benefits that Americans need and that help our economy? And don't say, 'I'll tell you later.'"

On Social Security, it was inexcusable for the president to say, "We think alike." He should have said, "Republicans have been pressing for privatization for years." As for the Medicare \$716 billion cut, it was amazing Mr. Obama did not point out that his cut was to prevent insurance companies from overcharging and the money went to seniors' drug

“doughnut hole” coverage, adding years to Medicare’s solvency, whereas the Republicans voted to cut actual benefits.

If Mr. Obama had a few good lines like that, it would have been an even performance, given that [Mr. Romney](#) was masterful on rhetoric.

With two more debates, Mr. Obama can and will come back — if he revamps his attack. Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.’s performance against GOP challenger Paul Ryan will not count anywhere near as much as Mr. Obama’s own.

In 2000, Al Gore won the first debate by 15 points and lost the next two and the election. Now, the jobs picture is improving, Osama bin Laden is dead, and Americans overwhelmingly support leaving Iraq and Afghanistan. So Mr. Obama and the Democrats still have some cards — if they learn how to play them.

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