

The Making of a President

By Mel Lavine

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Believe it or not, the Republican debates are a hot ticket on TV. Last month's debate on Fox in Florida attracted 6.1 million viewers. That's nearly double the numbers posted four years before in September 2007. In that debate in New Hampshire, the contenders were Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, Ron Paul, Rudy Giuliani and John McCain. At the time McCain was given next to no chance to win the nomination.

The GOP debate on Oct. 11 was on Bloomberg TV, a small cable network. Nonetheless a media study reported a sharp jump in the ratings as soon as the argument got underway.

How to account for the growing popularity of presidential debates? Cable news executives can't say for sure but their hunch – no surprise – is the economy and unhappiness with the political system. Think Occupy Wall Street.

After last week's debate, Rick Perry, who performed poorly, put a bewildering spin on American history. When a reporter asked him a question about states' rights, the governor replied: "Our Founding Fathers never meant for Washington D.C. to be the fount of all wisdom. As a matter of fact they were very much afraid of that because they'd just had this experience with this far-away government that had centralized thought process and planning and what have you, and then it was actually the reason that we fought the Revolution in the 16th century was to get away from that kind of onerous crown, if you will."

Before Tuesday night's debate in Las Vegas, Herman Cain, the former pizza executive and motivational speaker has been up there with Mitt Romney in the polls. He's admitted in an interview with David Gregory on NBC's "Meet the Press" that the hallmark of his economic plan, 9-9-9, would in fact raise taxes for many poor and middle-class families.

But although experts pointed out those people "pay little to no taxes under the current tax structure and would now pay both income and additional sales taxes under the plan," Cain insisted in Los Vegas that the plan was sound, but misunderstood. Not one of the others criticized the part that would lower taxes for the affluent.

In that “Meet the Press” interview, he said he was only joking about killing people trying to cross the border from Mexico with an electrified fence. “That’s not a serious plan,” he told David Gregory. “I’ve always said America needs to get a sense of humor.”

The subject was raised by the moderator Tuesday but the topic was overshadowed by the chorus of ridicule focused on 9-9-9.

The most incendiary clash of the night was, predictably, between Perry

who has been faltering of late and Mitt Romney, the presumed front-runner. It remains to be seen whether this was a do-or-die moment for the Texas governor. But Romney got in the last word when he warned Perry, who kept challenging his every word, “Governor, if you’re going to be president of the United States you’ve got to listen to people.” The audience roared approval.

Just before the Republican candidates gathered in Las Vegas for their eighth debate on CNN, a poll found that two-thirds of Republican voters have yet to make up their minds about whom the party should nominate to challenge President Obama.

Las Vegas was a brawl. Who won? Maybe Romney, but it’s still too early in the game. The next disputation is in November.

So lighten up and enjoy the show.

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