The Night Romney Attacked PBS

By Mel Lavine

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A week after the first presidential debate it is still a topic of discussion. The format – loose – and the moderator, Jim Lehrer – ineffectual, have been targets of dismayed viewers, mostly Democrats.

President Obama's deputy campaign manager, Stephanie Cutter, weighed in with the comment, "I sometimes wondered if we even needed a moderator because we had Mitt Romney."

Romney's people implied this was evidence of sour grapes – the White House criticizing Lehrer

to cover up for the president's own poor performance. At one point an irritable president complained that Lehrer had cut him off before his time was up. "I had five seconds before you interrupted me," said Obama.

For most of the 90 minutes both Obama and Romney took no notice of the former anchor of the PBS "NewsHour," who presided over eleven such forums between 1988 and 2008.

Lehrer had said he was through with the job but the Commission on Presidential Debates urged him to return in 2012. What persuaded him, the New York Times reported, was the new setup for the debate. It called for six 15-minute conversations, each starting with a question and two-minute answers from each candidate.

"The format was appealing to Mr. Lehrer, who has consistently said that his job as moderator is to get out of the way and get the candidates talking," the paper said.

But as the debate played out, Lehrer, who is 78, was not only out of the candidates' way but reduced to a plaintive cry when he tried to interrupt them, as in "excuse me" and "please." At one point Romney ignored the moderator's plea – "No, but" – taking a minute of extra time to refute the president's claim that Romney was short on specifics about his plans for the economy.

The day after the debate – Thursday – Lehrer said in an e-mail that he thought the new format worked. It “accomplished its purpose, which was to facilitate direct, extended exchanges between the candidates about issues of substance.” His only regret was the debate could not be longer, since “90 minutes was not enough time in that more open format to cover every issue that deserved attention.”

There may be something to that. But as Romney took command of the evening, the governor may have gone a step too far on social media. Who can ever forget Romney telling the hapless Lehrer that if he’s elected president he’s going to stop the subsidy to PBS. “I like PBS,” Romney said. “I love Big Bird. I actually like you, too. But I’m not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for it.”

Since the Oct. 3 debate Romney got a lift in the polls. However, judging by the explosion in cyberspace and in letters to the editor over his messing with Big Bird, Mitt Romney may rue the day he trifled with PBS and Jim Lehrer, too.

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