Shameful

By Mel Lavine

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In the third and last presidential debate Tuesday night on foreign policy the president was at the top of his game. He mocked his opponent. When Mitt Romney assessed Russia as our No. 1 geopolitical foe, Obama cited it as an example of backward thinking. “The 1980s, they’re now calling to ask for their foreign policy back,” the president said.

Obama made sport of Romney’s claim that the U.S. Navy is as small today as it has been any time since World War I, a line of argument, as some in the press have pointed out, based on counting every ship equally whether an old destroyer or a modern carrier.

At the end of the debate, the PBS News Hour’s Mark Shields commented that in fact, U.S. military power is unrivaled and our spending is as much or more than the next 15 nations combined.

The president was on the attack at the start, reminding me of a professor grading a student's performance. In so many words Obama said Romney's foreign policy doesn't add up. The country is looking for "strong steady leadership, not wrong and reckless leadership that's all over the map."

But give Romney his due. "Attacking me is not an agenda," he said. "Attacking me is not talking about how we're going to deal with the challenges that exist in the Middle East."

He also insisted on keeping the economy on the agenda, arguing that a weak economy at home was hobbling the country's efforts to be a strong leader abroad.

But make no mistake about it. The night belonged to Barack Obama. The president had ground to recapture after he was all but AWOL from the first debate on Oct. 3. Some 67 million watched as an aggressive Romney dominated the 90 minutes. Obama was in fine fettle at the second debate, watched by more than 65 million. I don't know what the count is for last night (I'm writing this on Tuesday) but it was up against two big deals: the seventh game for the National League Championship between the Giants and the Cardinals and Monday Night Football.

The Lady Friend points out that many people don't watch but see clips of the debates on the news and hear the feedback. They don't want the whole thing. No overdosing on politics for them.

That said, I hold both candidates and moderators to account for failing to discuss climate, guns and Wall Street over three nights of presidential argument. Shameful.

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