

Last Night's GOP Debate

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 14, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

It is hard to discern a clear winner in last night's GOP debate in New Hampshire. Michelle Bachmann did very well in her premiere performance, Newt Gingrich was able to appear as a very intelligent, thinking man's candidate (which he is) instead of as a bumbling manager whose campaign is imploding (which he also is), and Mitt Romney looked presidential, whatever that means.

What was more obvious were the losers: Tm Pawlenty, Herman Cain, Catholic social teaching, the 14th Amendment, and non-voodoo economics.

Pawlenty needed to stand out a bit last night, start convincing people, especially potential donors, that he can overtake Romney (who leads in most polls), and can credibly challenge President Obama. Nothing in his performance last night achieved anything like a break-through for the former Governor. In fact, he had one of the worst moments of the night. CNN moderator John King asked him to repeat the charge he had made just the day before, conflating Romney's health care plan in Massachusetts with Obama's health reform law, as "Obamacare." He declined to do so. King did not let it go, and asked why Pawlenty would say it in a Fox News interview but decline to say it standing a few feet from Romney. Pawlenty again gave a weasel-like answer. Voters watching conclude only one thing from such encounters: If he can't take on Romney, how is he going to take on Obama or, if elected, take on a Qaddafi?

Herman Cain tried to extricate himself from racist remarks he made earlier, saying he would ask a Muslim candidate for a position within his administration about his or her loyalty to the United States, but would not ask a Christian or a Jew such a question, which sounds suspiciously like an unconstitutional religious test for office. He only dug himself in deeper. Cain said there were peace-loving Muslims and America-hating Muslims, and in his prior comments he was only referring to the latter. But, why would he be interviewing an America-hating Muslim for a position in his administration in the first place? Again, weasel words that made Cain look like the one thing he is not, a politician. Throughout the debate, he lacked the zest he had demonstrated last month in South Carolina.

Among Catholic social teachings, there were two losers last night: abortion policy and immigration policy. On abortion, former Governor Pawlenty gave a detailed description of some of the actual policies he had enacted in Minnesota to bring down the abortion rate. He got almost no applause. Cong. Bachmann, on the other hand, delivered a few generic slogans, but delivered them very well, and got cheers from the audience.

Immigration policy was even worse. Santorum seemed to ooze contempt towards undocumented workers in his remarks: "But we cannot continue to provide -- the federal government should not require states to provide government services. And I have consistently voted against that?" Mind you, the question specifically mentioned health care and education. Of course, the Church insists that all people, regardless of their legal status, should receive health care and education. It was especially ironic that Santorum has just delivered an impassioned defense of the human dignity the unborn and the aged, so perhaps undocumented immigrants who are unborn or aged should receive health care and education.

Tim Pawlenty jumped on the "No BirthRight Citizenship" bandwagon and, most surprisingly, so did Herman Cain. I have to admit that it was a bit shocking to see an African-American express so little concern for the 14th Amendment. Newt Gingrich started out strong on immigration, saying "No serious citizen who's concerned about solving this problem should get trapped into a yes/no answer in which you're either for totally selling out protecting America or you're for totally kicking out 20 million people in a heartless way. There are -- there are humane, practical steps to solve this problem, if we can get the politicians and the news media to just deal with it honestly." Unfortunately, this came shortly after he suggested moving the National Guard to the border states, ignoring the fact that most undocumented workers enter the country legally and then just overstay their visa. He did not suggest how the National Guard could help with that conundrum.

Much of the evening was spent discussing economics and here none of the contenders ventured far beyond the mantra of cutting taxes and regulation of business. They dumped on the recently passed financial reform, the need for which could scarcely have been more obvious given the genesis of the recent recession. No one provided anything in the way of evidence to support the theory that lower tax rates would somehow propel resurgent economic growth. It is all magic or, as George H. W. Bush once said, voodoo economics.

What was most striking about the evening was the fact that the debate questions came only from Republicans. The evening might have benefited from having some Independent voters asking questions. Within the confines of the GOP, the entire discussion is skewed so far to the right, that all of the candidates could stay in their comfort zone. But, there was very little to appeal to a non-ideological voter in the various answers offered by this crop of candidates. The more the debate within the GOP stays within those confines, the harder it will be for any of the candidates to emerge as viable general election challengers to President Obama.

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