

## //Notas de Análisis//

### Surviving the GOP Primary

*\*By Proffesor Maria L. Fornella*

Against the background of a new Labor Day weekend job report that found zero job net growth for the month of August, Republican candidates held another debate, this time under the auspices of MSNBC, not Fox. It took place in the Reagan library, in Simi Valley, California, with the 1980s Air Force One plane used by Reagan looming behind them as a powerful yet incongruent décor.

Texas Governor Rick Perry, who entered the race three weeks ago and has already managed to reshape it, made it a contest between himself and Mitt Romney. Jon Huntsman is now a distant third in the polls, and the rest have been consigned to the back bench. Perry has consolidated support across a large swath of the Republican base, including Tea Partiers and the Evangelical right and already has amassed a war chest of campaign funds from contributors from Texas and across the country. Interestingly enough, Karl Rove, the self appointed kingmaker of the GOP and former GW Bush closest advisor, has come out against Perry, calling some of his views “toxic”.

As the first fundamental tests of the Republican primary approach, the campaign clearly entered a new stage last Wednesday during a debate that was mainly a duel between two protagonists, while the rest, acting as a Greek chorus reinforcing or challenging their responses, were given very little time by hosts Brian Williams (NBC) and John Harris (Politico). The primary field as first constituted was lackluster and therefore demanded new candidates. Perry seems to have satisfied that demand for the time being. Nevertheless, after the debate there was still some discontent among establishment Republicans, so the race is still fluid and new candidates may jump in before the first deadline in October.

Governor Perry, as the front-runner in the latest polls, was not surprisingly the target of most of the others throughout the night. He has executive experience, a commanding demeanor, and a record to run on. Although not completely articulate, and lacking Romney’s polished eloquence, he is tough and quick in his retorts, and his rhetoric resounded with the audience, drawing the strongest applause every time. His claim that he has created more jobs in Texas than Obama has managed to create nationally may be a winner with voters, but Texas’ record on almost every other issue is unflattering and thus, main ammunition for his opponents. He was reminded, for example, that of all fifty states, Texas is last on education, to which he responded that Texas’ problems stem from its long border with Mexico. That probably did not go well with the Hispanic voters watching on Univisión and Telemundo, but Perry doesn’t seem to care, since he is riding the wave of anti-Latino feelings around the country. Confronted with the claim that Texas has the largest number of people without health insurance than all other 49 states, he did not give a direct answer but chose instead to mumble something about how “all Texans want is to get the federal government out of their lives”. Both Michelle Bachman and Rick Santorum questioned Perry’s social conservatism given his policy as governor, for example, to inoculate adolescent girls against HPV, which they portrayed as a government intrusion into the family realm and a license to practice pre-marital sex. And Ron

Paul, a congressman from Texas, was a constant goad on the Governor's side, reminding the public that Perry used to be a Democrat and wholeheartedly supported Al Gore on his presidential bid in 1988.

Perry defended himself well as he dismissed all the charges against him with one-liners and a disdainful smile. A shrewd politician and experienced campaigner, he took the initiative at every turn and was able to steer the conversation to his own record of job creation as governor of Texas, contrasting it mockingly with Romney's as governor of Massachusetts. But Romney appeared unfazed as he joked that Perry could not take credit for everything that has gone well in the State of Texas, including its wealth of oil and gas, its zero state income tax and the (related) fact that main corporations made their headquarters there long before Perry was governor. Massachusetts is a much smaller state and has none of those advantages, he added. There were several quick exchanges like this: both candidates were well prepared to respond with facts and statistics, and the perception was that they both did well, with Perry defending himself aggressively at times and Romney maintaining his smooth and relaxed demeanor, even as he waited for the opportunity to deliver a blow to his new challenger.

Host Brian Williams soon gave him that opportunity by asking Perry a question about Social Security, the government pension fund that experts say, will become insolvent in the year 2036 if it is not reformed. Perry's answer, which confirmed similar statements in his recently published book, made all the headlines the next day. He called it a "Ponzi scheme" (implying a criminal enterprise) and added that it was a "monstrous lie" to tell young people under thirty that they would get their Social Security when their time comes for them to retire: they won't. This statement has been reported by the Romney campaign as Perry's Waterloo: no candidate will win an election by making this kind of claim against the "third rail" of politics, a cherished and untouchable public trust; to do so is pure political suicide. Similar claims had prompted Karl Rove's comment about Perry's toxicity and spurred doubts about his electability.

Ironically, it is the rhetoric and not the substance that separates the two candidates on this issue: as presidents, both would likely propose some privatization of Social Security, perhaps in the form of personal retirement accounts that can be managed by the workers themselves and would allow them to invest in the stock market.

Another of Brian William's questions brought an unexpected burst of applause by the all- Republican audience even before Perry had had a chance to answer it.

Williams asked how he could sleep at night knowing his state had applied the death penalty to 234 convicts, the highest rate in the nation, and some of whom were perhaps innocent. Perry said the crimes they had perpetrated deserved it, and that yes, he slept fine at night knowing that the appeals process was thorough and fair.

Of course, people are entitled to their views on the death penalty, and quotes from the Bible have been used to justify it. But it is sad and even incongruous to see a purportedly well educated middle class audience of a purportedly Christian nation cheer the notion. Patti Davis, President Reagan's daughter, later said to

an interviewer it was almost "blasphemous" to celebrate the death penalty at the Reagan library, given the fact that her father had approached the issue with a heavy heart and burden to his conscience, albeit accepting it as a necessary evil.

Mitt Romney appeared poised, fluent on the economy and self confident. It may help him knowing that he has 250 billion dollars in his own personal account, and that he has outpaced all other candidates so far in fundraising. He seems to be the choice of the business elite and of urban and suburban Republicans (60% of his donors come from big cities and their surroundings). On the other hand, Perry's supporters say that through his ten years as governor of Texas, Perry has laid the groundwork to raise all the money he might need for a national election. He has a donor network that can "bundle" millions. Texas places no limits on how much donors can give to political campaigns, even as federal law limits donations to the derisory amount of \$2,500 per person. Still, some critics say Perry would need to capture a broader donor base to compete in a national election.

Michelle Bachman's adventure into the Republican primary may be coming to an end as her star fades and Tea Partiers and Evangelicals transfer their support to Rick Perry. Her campaign is in disarray over fundraising and strategy. Ed Rollins, a veteran GOP operative who managed Reagan's 1984 campaign, resigned as her advisor after Bachman could not be persuaded to focus on campaigning in Iowa only (where the first primary caucus will take place and where she won a straw poll a few weeks ago), instead of trying to run a national campaign. She hasn't been able to raise enough money outside Iowa and that limits her campaign's choices. Perry has taken her thunder. It doesn't help that the Congress woman keeps repeating her Manichean views on every single issue, insisting for example again during this debate, that it was wrong for the US to intervene in Libya because there was no national interest involved in the region, a position that nobody in the GOP establishment shares, especially now that Qaddafi is all but defeated.

On Thursday, after two changes in schedule were forced on the White House (one due to the GOP debate on Wednesday, the other due to the opening of the NFL season shown at prime time on Thursday night), President Obama delivered his much awaited jobs creation speech. He unveiled a \$ 447 billion plan, a mixture of tax cuts and new spending programs. It includes extending cuts in payroll taxes to individuals and employers, new infrastructure spending, a new mortgage refinancing program, retraining for the unemployed and tax credits to businesses that employ those who have been out of a job for over six months. He also talked about a private-public infrastructure bank and emphasized that all this new spending would be coupled with more cuts in the deficit later. This was an attempt at a new marketing of the President's measures to stimulate the economy: he was more specific, more conciliatory and avoided using the word "stimulus" that has gotten so much bad press since most people think the initial package did not help the economy one bit.

The President spoke with new confidence and conviction; he sounded re-energized and optimistic, and evoked in the public memories of "Obama the candidate". The next morning he was on the road to sell his plan to voters first in

Virginia, speaking to 9,000 people gathered at the University of Richmond. Virginia, Ohio and North Carolina are the three states the President strategically chose to visit. Obama won all three in the 2008 election but they each voted Republicans to their legislatures in last year's mid-term elections.

The Republican response in Congress was cautiously positive. Indeed, even as Obama's numbers in the polls continue to drop (44% approval rate of his person, with 59% disapproving of his handling of the economy, is the latest), approval of Congress is at an all time low of 13%. A change in tone has registered as Republicans realize that their do-nothing strategy has gone too far and it is time to stop playing the political game and address economic recovery in earnest. It is indeed refreshing, after the acerbic debt ceiling fights, to hear House majority leader Eric Cantor say it's time to build consensus and work together. Their brinkmanship has infuriated their constituents and put at risk all the gains made in last year's mid-term elections.

It remains to be seen whether the electorate's disgust with excessive conflict and confrontation within the DC belt also extends to the presidential primary. Will voters choose the bold and aggressive governor from Texas who better reflects their anger with his provocative language (he wants to cut the "head off the snake" (meaning the federal government's interference with states policies), or the cooler, more cerebral, more conciliatory (indeed, in some ways, more Obama-like) candidate from Massachusetts that wants moderation and speaks to the middle class? In this head-to-head contest between Perry and Romney, one can assume people will ultimately choose the one they see can solve their problems, end the paralysis and get the country moving again. But the country's social fabric is torn by unemployment, anger and frustration with government and hopelessness about the future. As the more aggressive candidate, Perry may well be the one that embodies the spirit of the times.

In his first national appearance, the Texan did not make any major mistakes. He has dislodged Romney from top in national polls, but not in New Hampshire, where Romney still leads by a wide margin. From now on, the calendar will drive the candidates' strategies. If Perry wins Iowa and Romney New Hampshire, it will definitely become a two person race going forward into South Carolina, where Baptists most likely will choose a Texan Evangelist over a New Englander Mormon. That might interrupt Romney's momentum. Then comes Florida, where there is a big number of Tea Partiers and an even larger number of retirees. The vote of these two groups will be decisive. Perry could lose the retirees on his Social Security attacks, which were mainly addressed to young voters who don't vote in primaries. But there is plenty of time to adjust his views and rectify his blunders so as to become more electable.

Cocky, dark and handsome, a cross between Johnny Cash and John Wayne, Perry has a formidable presence that makes a good impression on voters. Blunt and direct in his speech, with a distinct Southern accent, his peculiar kind of charisma compensates for his lack of polish. He is tough and rugged, doesn't back down, and appeared solid in his philosophy of "detax, deregulate and deligitate". He is clearly the candidate that can win the Mid-West and the Deep South. The question is whether he will withstand the deeper scrutiny of a

presidential race he entered late, and whether he can refine his arguments and still be reassuring.

Romney still appears as the more electable candidate in a national election and the one that can more easily confront Obama. But he has two main weak points: his religion (he is a Mormon, a religion that has a bad name among other Christian denominations) and the Massachusetts health care law he signed when he was governor, that his rivals claim is a replica of what they disdainfully call “Obamacare”, which all candidates, including Romney, have avowed to repeal as soon as they get to the White House.

Will the race become a two-man contest from this point on? Americans should not hold their breath; there is still talk about new candidates entering the race: Sarah Palin and Rudy Giuliani seem to be waiting on the sidelines, ready to jump into the race at any time if prompted to do so by the polls or by the GOP establishment. The current survivors may still be challenged by others with more staying power and reality show experience.

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