

The Commentator
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Romney: For better and for worse
By Lawrence J. Haas

Gov. Mitt Romney's post-debate surge, turning what looked like an impending rout into a close race, says something that's profoundly reassuring but also something that's deeply disturbing about American politics.

Romney is surging because, in tone and substance, he's now personifying the essential moderation of American voters – a moderation that ensures the continuity and stability of American governance. That's reassuring.

What's disturbing is that he's doing so a month before Election Day, after years of campaigning to reach this spot by, of necessity, appealing to the most influential and, alas, most extreme elements of his party. That points up the profound and growing disconnect between our broad centrist politics and our extremist party system that makes governing the United States of America an ever-larger challenge.

Yes, President Obama looked strangely listless on the evening of October 3rd – unenthused about the event, disdainful of his opponent. But, Romney's victory in this first of three debates was about Romney. He passed the political “smell test,” which was to present himself as a viable President.

We Americans are centrists. We're skeptical about government's ability to deliver and cynical about our leaders, so we want change in small bites. We're raging incrementalists, not wild-eyed revolutionaries, and we punish our leaders when, we believe, they've bitten off more than we're willing to chew.

We elected Bill Clinton in 1992 and gave Congress to Republicans in 1994 when we thought he'd strayed too far left; we rejected this new GOP majority's rightist push to slash government and re-elected Clinton in 1996; we elected Obama in 2008 after eight years of “my way or the highway” Bush-ism, and we punished him for leftist overreach by giving the House to the GOP in 2010.

Heading into last week's debate, Romney faced the same test as Ronald Reagan in 1980. Then as now, the GOP nominee had been pounded relentlessly by the Democratic incumbent as extreme, if not scary. The Republican candidate needed to reassure a populace that was largely unhappy with the incumbent that he was a mainstream alternative.

Reagan did so, employing a folksiness (e.g., “there you go again”) that convinced Americans that, despite what they'd heard from President Carter, the former California governor wasn't likely to ignite World War III.

Romney did so, too. Rather than, as Obama-ites had warned, push a cruel reverse Robin Hood-ism or an extreme free market-ism, Romney reassured the viewing public that he was more interested in reasonable problem-solving than ideological purity.

Shift tax burdens from rich to poor? No at all, Romney said. “We ought to provide tax relief to people in the middle class. But I’m not going to reduce the share of taxes paid by high-income people.”

Make surging federal deficits worse by cutting taxes? Not at all. “My number one principle is there’ll be no tax cut that adds to the deficit.”

Scrap government regulation? Don’t be silly. “Regulation is essential. You can’t have a free market without regulation. As a business person, I had to have – I needed to know the regulations.”

And, just as important, Romney looked comfortable, natural, believable in displaying his moderate bona fides.

That change, *Politico* reported this week, was due to a “family intervention” in which his wife and son convinced him to break with a strategy that was putting him on the fast path to defeat and, instead, “be Mitt” – that is, be the moderate ex-governor of the strongly Democratic state of Massachusetts who was less an ideological warrior than a practical problem solver.

Fine. That may “be Mitt.” But, if so, it’s a Mitt who differs fundamentally from the ubiquitous candidate who, for the last several years, has presented himself in countless interviews and conversations, through party caucuses and primaries, as a hard-core champion of true-blue conservatism.

It’s a Mitt who has now starkly changed both the tenor and substance of what he’s selling to reach the Oval Office.

It’s a Mitt whose actual campaign proposals would, upon examination, dramatically shift tax burdens from rich to middle and poor, explode deficits, and decimate government’s ability to perform core functions.

That’s the Mitt who sold himself to his party, the Mitt who gathered the support of Republican caucus goers and primary voters, and the Mitt who gathered the convention delegates to secure his party’s nomination.

If he wins, America’s broad voting public will be expecting one Mitt while his party’s base will be expecting another.

That, as recent presidents have increasingly learned to their political detriment, is a recipe for big trouble.

Lawrence J. Haas was Communications Director and Press Secretary for Vice President Al Gore. He writes widely about foreign and domestic affairs and is the author of 'Sound the Trumpet: The United States and Human Rights Promotion' (just out from Rowman & Littlefield).