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OPINION

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Perry's Bad Night



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

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Gloom pervades the land. Some people believe it's the economy. Others blame the weather. I think it's because the country is gradually coming to grips with the fact that Mitt Romney is going to be the Republican nominee for president.

It is a scientific fact. Every minute, somewhere in America, another citizen realizes that Mitt is going to be in our face for the next 14 months. Conceivably for the next nine years. Children now in third grade might graduate from high school without ever experiencing a totally Romney-free day.

This is not something I'm happy pointing out. For one thing, I don't want to believe I live in a country that would seriously consider bestowing the nation's highest office on a man who once drove to Canada with the family dog strapped to the roof of the car. Plus, we have barely gotten started on Rick Perry, the last great Mitt alternative. Have you noticed how huge his chest and shoulders are? Looming over his lectern at Thursday's debate, he looked like a float.

But it was impossible to watch that debate without realizing that Perry is not presidential timber, or even presidential polyurethane.

Here was Perry's answer to the inevitable question about what he'd do if the White House phone rang at 3 a.m. In this case, the hypothetical call informed the hypothetical President Perry that the Taliban had gotten control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

"Well, obviously, before you ever get to that point, you have to build a relationship in that region. And that's one of the things that this administration has not done. Just yesterday we found out through Admiral Mullen that Haqqani has been involved with - and that's the terrorist group directly associated with the Pakistani country - so to have a relationship with India, to make sure that India knows that they are an ally of the United States."

He went on to tell a story about how the Obama administration wouldn't sell upgraded F-16 fighters to India. Which never happened.

Romney, meanwhile, was very much on his game, glib and grinning madly. He lashed into Perry for the Texas version of the Dream Act. ("If you're an illegal *alien*, you get an in-state tuition discount!") One of the very few silver linings in this story is that over the next year we'll all have a number of opportunities to revisit the saga of the undocumented immigrants who used to mow the Romney lawn.

The debate stage was crowded with other would-be candidates, most of them pretty well worn. The only newbie, former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson, made a big splash with a joke about how his neighbor's two dogs produced more shovel-ready projects than Barack Obama did. Johnson cracked the place up! Line of the night! Then on Friday everyone discovered that Rush Limbaugh had told the joke the day before.

The dog-owning neighbor joins the ever-growing throng of Republican Imaginary People, along with the woman who told Michele Bachmann the vaccine to prevent cervical cancer made her daughter mentally retarded.

Perry appeared very cheerful during most of the debate - he has a way of cocking his head and grinning as if he saw a waiter entering the room with a large dessert. Perhaps he was anticipating the triumphant moment when he would be able to nail Romney for being a flip-flopper. This appeared to be something he had prepared for. When the opportunity presented itself, this is what Perry said:

"I think Americans just don't know sometimes which Mitt Romney they're dealing with. Is it the Mitt Romney that was on the side of - against the Second Amendment before he was for the Second Amendment? Was it - was before - he was before the social programs from the standpoint of - he was for standing up for Roe versus Wade before he was against first - Roe versus Wade? Him - he was for Race to the Top. He's for Obamacare and now he's against it. I mean, we'll wait until tomorrow and - and - and see which Mitt Romney we're really talking to tonight."

So there you are.

It is true that the nation has elected incoherent Texans to the White House before. But the first one had been vice president. And when George W. Bush was marching through the primaries, saying things that made no sense whatsoever, Republican voters told one another that if he got into trouble, he could always ask his parents for advice. I swear to you, that came up a lot. But I always thought it was an excuse, to cover the fact that they were really just trying to avoid John McCain.

And then in 2008, they nominated McCain just to avoid Mitt Romney. No wonder they're miserable.

Next week, give a Republican a cookie, just to show you understand.

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