

Obama, Romney spar in feisty 2nd debate

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President Barack Obama rebounded Tuesday with an aggressive performance against Republican opponent Mitt Romney in a debate that at times turned argumentative. The testy candidates exchanged verbal blows on Libya, immigration policy and a variety of pocketbook issues.

The second face-to-face showdown of the campaign included a dramatic exchange over the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

The attack resulted in the deaths of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others.

Obama took responsibility but pointedly criticized Romney, a former Massachusetts governor, for trying "to make political points" out of the tragedy. The president reminded Romney that he, Obama, had greeted the returning caskets alongside the grieving families.

"The suggestion that anybody on my team -- whether the secretary of State, our U.N. ambassador, anybody on my team -- would play politics or mislead when we've lost four of our own, Governor, is offensive," Obama said.

"That's not what we do. That's not what I do as president. That's not what I do as commander-in-chief."

Kate Kenski, an associate professor of political communication at the University of Arizona, gave both candidates high marks for their debate performances but predicted the lasting impression will be more positive for Obama.

That's because expectations were low since Obama's lackluster showing in the first debate, she said. "In this one, he seemed to have more control over what he was saying and was more engaged in the moment," Kenski said.

The return of the feistier Obama came as a relief to Democrats disappointed by the president's performance in the Oct. 3 debate.

Tuesday's debate at Hofstra University in New York was a town-hall-style format that featured questions from the audience, but the results were often tense.

The exchange on Libya came after an audience member asked Obama about the consulate's security shortcomings.

Obama vowed that he would get to the bottom of what happened and hunt down the perpetrators. Although Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had on Monday accepted responsibility for embassy security, Obama said he is the one in charge.

"Secretary Clinton has done an extraordinary job, but she works for me," Obama said. "I'm the president, and I'm always responsible."

Romney said Obama was correct that the buck stops with him. He criticized the administration for initially saying the attack stemmed from a spontaneous protest over an anti-Muslim YouTube.com video.

"There was no demonstration involved," Romney said. "It was a terrorist attack, and it took a long time for that to be told to the American people."

Stopping short of calling the administration's story "misleading," Romney said, "I think you have to ask yourself why didn't we know five days later."

However, Romney stumbled by saying Obama did not refer to the incident as terrorism in a Rose Garden appearance the next day.

"Get the transcript," Obama shot back.

Moderator Candy Crowley of CNN confirmed that Obama did refer to it as terrorism.

"It was great to see the president show up tonight," said Jason Barraza, a Democratic political consultant with the Phoenix firm Veridus. "Nobody is going to be able to say that the president didn't show marked improvement, where that's going to be questionable for the governor."

'More aggressive'

John Shadegg, a former Arizona Republican congressman, described the debate as confrontational despite being required to respond to undecided voters instead of each other.

"The president was much more aggressive than he was in the last debate," Shadegg said. "But Mr. Romney responded with his own kind of aggression. Each of them went after each other."

Shadegg said Obama had a hard time defending his failure to keep campaign promises, such as cutting the deficit in half.

Shadegg praised Romney's answer to a question on public misperceptions about him. "One of the biggest issues for Mr. Romney is to get voters to understand who he is as a person and that he does care about average Americans," Shadegg said.

Romney said he cared about all Americans and listed examples of families he helped as a Mormon bishop in his church.

"I was glad he finally did talk to people about ... this other side of him that is more human," Shadegg said.

However, Barraza said Romney flopped on questions that could have helped the Republican nominee connect with women and minorities.

The candidates grappled over immigration reform, with Romney saying Obama failed to deliver on a 2008 campaign promise to pass comprehensive legislation to deal with the nation's broken border system.

Obama lamented the lack of GOP participation on what used to be a bipartisan issue. He said he has been trying to streamline the immigration system and "I've done everything I can on my own."

"What I've also said is, if we are going to go after folks who are here illegally, we should do it smartly and go after folks who are criminals, gang-bangers, people who are hurting the community," Obama said. "Not after students. Not after folks who are here just because they're trying to figure out how to feed their families. And that's what we've done."

Romney said he now believes children of illegal immigrants should be offered a "pathway to become a permanent resident of the United States," possibly through military service. Obama countered that during the GOP primaries, Romney had vowed to veto legislation aimed at providing young undocumented immigrants relief from deportation.

Romney also defended the policy of self-deportation, which critics have characterized as making life so uncomfortable for undocumented immigrants that they leave the country.

"What I was saying is we're not going to round up 12 million people, undocumented, illegals, and take them out of the nation," Romney said. "Instead, let people make their own choice. And if they find that they can't get the benefits here that they want and they can't find the job that they want, then they'll make a decision to go to a place where they have better opportunities."

At one point, Obama misspoke by accusing Romney of calling Arizona's Senate Bill 1070, the state's controversial 2010 immigration law, a model for the nation. Romney initially made the comment at a Republican primary debate in Mesa, but he was talking about the state's e-Verify law, not SB 1070.

Romney corrected Obama during the debate, but Obama pointed out that one of Romney's advisers is Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, "the guy who designed the Arizona law, the entirety of it, not e-Verify."

Romney used a question about reinstating an assault weapons ban to touch on a second Arizona-related issue: the botched government gunrunning operation known as Fast and Furious.

The operation was supposed to help law enforcement catch major gun buyers for Mexican cartels, but agents instead ended up losing track of guns, some of which were found at the scene of a firefight that killed Arizona Border

Patrol Agent Brian Terry.

'Great tragedies'

Romney accused the Obama administration of preventing a full investigation into what went wrong.

"It's one of the great tragedies related to violence in our society which has occurred during this administration. Which I think the American people would like to understand fully," he said.

Kenski criticized both candidates for talking over each other and, at times, appearing petty.

"That's not going to excite the undecided voter to go to the polls on election day," she said.

Kenski, who has researched presidential debates, said the previous debate was a game changer for Romney. No such watershed moment occurred for either candidate Tuesday night, she said. "What this means is it's still a very competitive election," Kenski said.

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Memorable moments

Memorable moments in the second debate between President Barack Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney.

1. "I'm not looking to cut taxes for wealthy people; I'm looking to cut taxes for middle-income people."

-- Romney, on taxes

2. "In addition to some tough spending cuts, we've also got to make sure that the wealthy do a little bit more. So, what I've said is: Your first \$250,000 worth of income, no change."

-- Obama, on taxes

3. "I don't believe bureaucrats in Washington should tell someone whether they should have access to contraceptives or not. And I don't believe employers should tell someone whether they could have contraceptive care or not. Every woman in America should have access to contraceptives."

-- Romney, on health care

4. "This is not just a women's issue, this is a family issue, a middle-class issue."

-- Obama, on equal pay for women

5. "I will not grant amnesty to those who come here illegally. I will put in place an employment-verification system. ... I will not give driver's licenses to those who have come here illegally. ... The kids who came here illegally, those kids, I think, should have a pathway to become a permanent resident."

-- Romney, on illegal immigration

6. "I want to close loopholes that allow companies to deduct expenses when they move to China, that allow them to profit offshore and not have to get taxed so they have tax advantages offshore."

-- Obama, on jobs going overseas

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Final debate

President Barack Obama and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney face off in a final debate before the Nov. 6 election.

Foreign policy: 6 p.m. Arizona time Monday. The debate, at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., will be moderated by Bob Schieffer, CBS News' chief Washington correspondent.

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