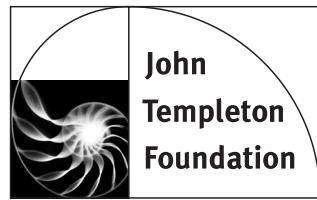


‘Character’ the Most Important Issue in the Presidential Primary Debates

**Mixed results: Reporters threw more softballs to Democrats
overall but more hardballs at Democrats on “honesty”**

SPECIAL REPORT





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*The opinions expressed in this report are those of the
author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the
John Templeton Foundation.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Presidential debates are crucial, especially for Americans who have not made up their minds about who could best lead the nation. Although reporters often focus on policy differences, many Americans are more interested in the character of the person who will occupy the Oval Office than his or her position on particular issues. Debates are a window into the candidates’ character and values. In a volatile world where crises can arise at any moment, Americans need to trust that their president is guided by something stronger than public opinion.

A short dictionary.com definition of character says it comprises “qualities of honesty, courage or the like.” One political analyst described character as: “The sum of a politician’s psyche and personality; the internal drives that provide motivation and focus. Character has many facets, and is not simply the equivalent of morality.”¹

Candidates participated in a total of 35 debates over the course of 12 months, 20 for the Democrats and 15 for the Republicans. Did the media emphasize character by asking debate questions that shine a light on candidates’ personal qualities? Did the media treat the parties fairly, by asking the candidates equal percentages of tough (hardball) and easy (softball) questions?

CMI analyzed all 1,332 questions asked during the presidential primary debates for both major parties in 2007 and 2008, and found that the media asked more questions related to character than any other single topic. CMI also found that the media’s character questions were ideologically balanced, in that they sprang from conservative and liberal premises in roughly equal percentages. No such balance existed on the

partisan level, as the media pitched Democrats twice the percentage of softballs that they offered to Republicans. Democrats, however, faced more than three times as many questions about honesty.

Major Findings

- 1. Character Is a Major Focus.** Thirty-six percent of the questions (485 out of 1,332) addressed character, the most for any topic. By comparison, only 24 percent of questions centered on foreign policy, and 19 percent focused on the economy.
- 2. Questions of character were not framed with an ideological bias.** Forty-two percent of the character questions asked to both parties were neutral, compared to 29 percent based on liberal premises and 29 percent based on conservative premises. These numbers indicate that character transcends party issues *per se* in questions that touch on candidates' psyches and motivation. Bias, however, is revealed by the disparity in hardballs and softballs thrown to the respective parties' candidates.
- 3. Democrats received more softballs.** The disparity of softball vs. hardball questions between Republicans and Democrats was notable. Of the 251 character questions asked to Democrats, 120 (48 percent) were softballs – more than double the percentage of softballs asked of Republicans. Republicans were asked 234 character questions and received only 58 softballs (25 percent). Three-quarters (75 percent) of GOP character questions (176) were hardballs, compared to the Democrats' 131 (52 percent).
- 4. But Democrats faced more questions about honesty.** Democrats received 29 questions about their honesty, all hardballs. Republicans faced only eight, again all hardballs.
- 5. Fox threw a greater percentage of character hardballs.** Of the four networks that hosted multiple debates, Fox was the toughest, throwing proportionally more hardballs than NBC/MSNBC, CNN or ABC. In five Fox debates, candidates faced 72 hardballs, 84 percent of all character questions. In nine debates, NBC/MSNBC candidates faced 108 hardballs (66 percent). Nine debates aired on CNN, during which candidates faced 76 hardballs (55 percent).
- 6. ABC seemed least concerned about character.** Until the April 16 debate in Philadelphia in which Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos posed a series of hardball character questions to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, ABC had asked only 18 hardball questions. Even with the Philadelphia hardballs, ABC still had the lowest total, with 30 in five debates, or less than half as many as Fox threw in five debates.

To be clear, CMI does not think hardball questions are unfair. On the contrary, the media should ask more of them because they reveal more about the candidates. One reason that Democrats faced fewer hardballs is that they refused to appear in any debate on Fox News Channel, whose panelists threw a higher proportion of hardballs.

Recommendations

As the two presidential candidates face a final series of debates, CMI challenges the media to continue to focus on character, but also to avoid partisan imbalance. This would entail making queries based on conservative premises as well as liberal premises and also to throw each candidate roughly the same number of hardballs and softballs. Finally, given the Fox News Channel's track record for tough but fair questioning on character, the panels of media questioners should include Fox.

‘Character’ the Most Important Issue in the Presidential Primary Debates

Mixed results: Reporters threw more softballs to Democrats overall but more hardballs at Democrats on “honesty”

By ROBERT KNIGHT AND COLLEEN RAEZLER
CULTURE AND MEDIA INSTITUTE

Presidential debates are crucial for voters who have not made up their minds about who could best lead the nation. There is no campaign ad “spin” at a debate. Candidates are in a live format where they must perform without the aid of editors or handlers.

Debates transcend policy issues by serving also as windows into the character of the candidates. A short dictionary.com definition of character says it comprises “qualities of honesty, courage or the like.” In a volatile world where crises can arise at any moment, Americans need to trust that their president is guided by something stronger than public opinion.

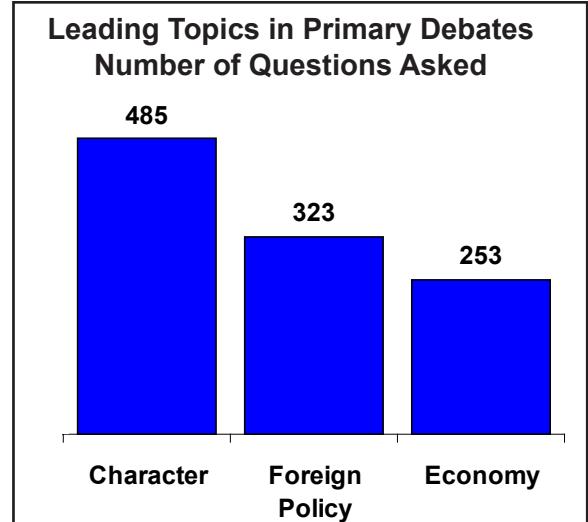
The media play a crucial role during presidential debates, by asking questions that shine a light on candidates’ character.

CMI analyzed all questions asked on the major networks, two Des Moines Register debates aired on Fox and CNN, two debates on PBS, one on National Public Radio and two on the Spanish channel Univision – a total of 35 debates over the course of 12 months. The Republican candidates had 15 debates, the Democrats 20.

Character Is a Major Focus

Character by far figured into more questions than any other topic. Thirty-six percent (485 out of 1,332) of the questions addressed character. By comparison, only 24 percent of questions (323) centered on foreign policy, and 19 percent (253) focused on the economy.

Character questions went beyond policy stances to probe what political reporter Robert Shogan describes as, “The sum of a politician’s psyche and personality; the internal drives that provide motivation and focus. Character has many facets and is not simply the equivalent of morality.”²



Methodology

Character comprises a number of attributes, but CMI found that the debate character questions focused on four qualities: honesty, integrity, leadership and courage.

CMI used the following definitions for these four qualities of character.

- **Honesty:** the quality of being honest; uprightness and fairness; truthfulness, sincerity or frankness. Questions classified under honesty deal with the truthfulness of the candidates, for example, questioning statements about supposed sniper fire or a glaring disparity between rhetoric and actual records on spending and taxes.
- **Integrity:** adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty. Questions filed under integrity measure consistency (do the candidates flip-flop their positions depending on the debate?), their moral compasses (on what do they base their beliefs?), personal responsibility and accountability (do they own up to mistakes or are they more concerned with looking perfect?).
- **Leadership:** the ability to lead. Leadership questions expose the qualifications, accomplishments and boldness that set the candidates apart from each other.
- **Courage:** the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc., without succumbing to fear; bravery. Questions that encourage candidates to make a bold statement or to defend unpopular policy positions indicate a type of courage on the candidates’ part.

Hardballs and Softballs. CMI divided the debate questions into two categories: “hardballs” and “softballs.” A “hardball” was a question that challenged the candidates by forcing them to explain flip-flops or departures from party orthodoxy, purposely revealed unflattering background information, or brought up particularly thorny issues. “Softballs” provided candidates an easy opportunity to discuss politically desirable topics, or offered flattering background information.

To be clear, CMI does not think hardball questions are unfair. The media should ask more of them because they reveal more about the candidates. Some networks were more willing to throw hardballs at the candidates than others. One reason Democrats faced fewer hardballs is their refusal to appear in any debate on Fox News Channel, whose moderators threw proportionately more hardballs.

CMI classified hardball questions as “left” or “right,” based on the ideological premises underlying the queries. Questions that centered on personalities, ethics or campaign tactics and not necessarily political assumptions were classified as “neutral.”

Assumptions from the left (liberal) include:

- Favoring collective or government solutions.
- Reflecting a bias toward group identity politics (including amnesty for illegal immigrants and pro-gay views).
- Expressing skepticism about the motives of the Bush Administration regarding the war in Iraq and the War on Terror.

Assumptions from the right (conservative) include:

- Favoring private initiative and personal responsibility.
- Supporting border enforcement over immigration reform.
- Supporting the Iraq War and the War on Terror.
- Supporting traditional cultural values, such as one man-one woman marriage.

Findings

Overall, the media framed questions of character with ideological balance.

Forty-two percent of the character questions asked of both parties were ideologically neutral, 29 percent were based on liberal premises and 29 percent based on conservative premises. These numbers indicate that character transcends party philosophy in questions that touch on candidates’ psyches and motivation. Bias, however, is revealed

by the disparity in hardballs and softballs thrown to the respective parties' candidates, and some unique questions thrown to GOP candidates that the Democrats did not face.

Here are two examples of questions based on liberal premises:

January 10, 2008 on Fox News from Chris Wallace to Rudy Giuliani:

"You announced plans for a big tax cut yesterday. And you have been running ads that say reducing taxes actually will increase revenues. But the bipartisan Congressional Budget Office, as well as two chairmen of President Bush's Council of Economic Advisors, all say that tax cuts don't pay for themselves, that in fact they add to the deficit, they don't reduce it. So, given that, do you stand by your statement?" (Premise: tax cuts "cost" government.)

January 21, 2008 on CNN from Suzanne Malveaux to John Edwards:

"I've spoken with a lot of African American voters in South Carolina this week, and a lot of them say that electing a black president, that this would change the way whites see African Americans and the way African Americans see themselves. Do you think that this is a valid consideration for voters in determining who's president?" (Premise: centrality of identity politics.)

Here are two examples of questions from conservative assumptions:

January 30, 2008 on CNN from Jonathan Rubin of Fairfax, Virginia to Mitt Romney:

"As governor of Massachusetts, Sen. McCain just pointed out that you raised hundreds of millions of dollars in additional revenue through so-called fees and loophole closings. You passed a health care bill forcing individuals to buy insurance on the threat of a fine. How do you reconcile that policy with your claim to be the authentic conservative?" (Premise: individual responsibility favored over government.)

October 30, 2007 on MSNBC to all the Democratic candidates from the late Tim Russert:

"Would you pledge to the American people that Iran will not develop a nuclear bomb while you are president?" (Premise: supports War on Terror.)

Here are two questions CMI scored as ideologically neutral:

June 5, 2007 on CNN from Wolf Blitzer to all Republican candidates:

"In your opinion, what is the most pressing moral issue facing this country? And if you're elected president, how would you address that issue?"

January 5, 2008 on ABC from Charles Gibson to all Democratic candidates:

"Tell me one thing you've said in those debates that you wish you hadn't said. And it's your chance to take it back."

Democrats received twice as many softballs.

Of the 251 character questions asked to Democrats, 120 (48 percent) were softballs – nearly double the percentage asked of Republicans. Republicans were asked 234 character questions and received only 58 softballs (25 percent). Three-quarters (75 percent) of their character questions (176) were hardballs, compared to the Democrats' 131 (52 percent).

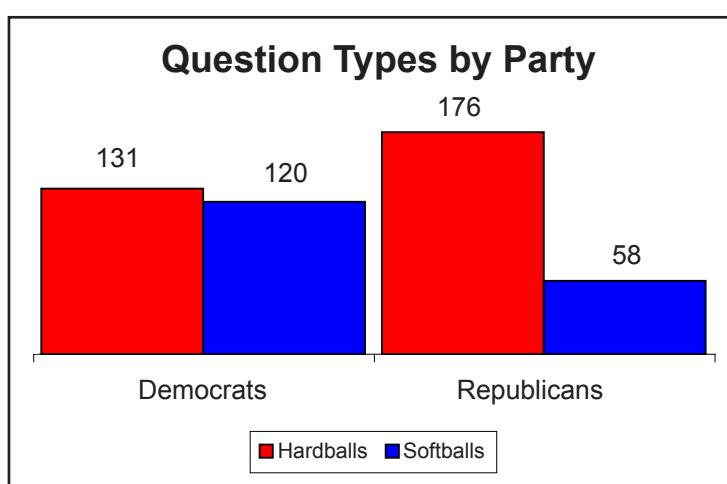
Here's a freebie from Tim Russert during the Sept. 26, 2007 Democratic debate on MSNBC:

"Before we go, there's been a lot of discussion about the Democrats and the issue of faith and values. I want to ask you a simple question. Sen. Obama, what is your favorite Bible verse?"

And another, this time from a viewer to Dennis Kucinich during the CNN/YouTube debate on July 24, 2007:

"Congressman Kucinich, how would America be better off with you as president than we would be if either Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama became president?"

To be sure, some of the questions posed to Democrats were zingers across the plate, such as this one posed by Brian Williams to Hillary Clinton on MSNBC on April 26, 2007:



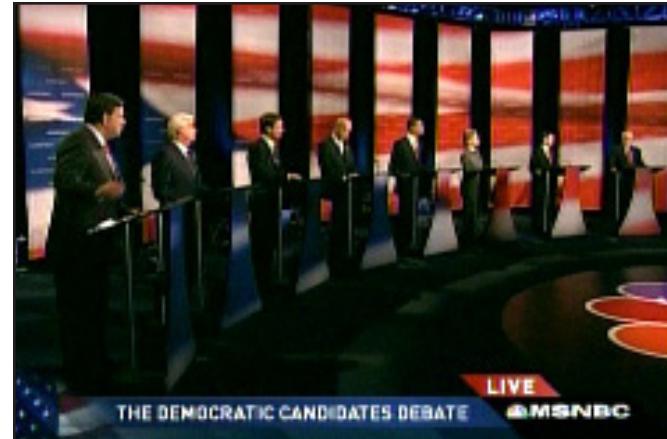
"Your party's leader in the United States Senate, Harry Reid, recently said the war in Iraq is lost. A letter to today's USA Today calls his comments 'treasonous' and says if General Patton were alive today, Patton would 'wipe his boots' with Sen. Reid. Do you agree with the position of your leader in the Senate?"

And this one to Sen. Joseph Biden during the same debate, also by Williams:

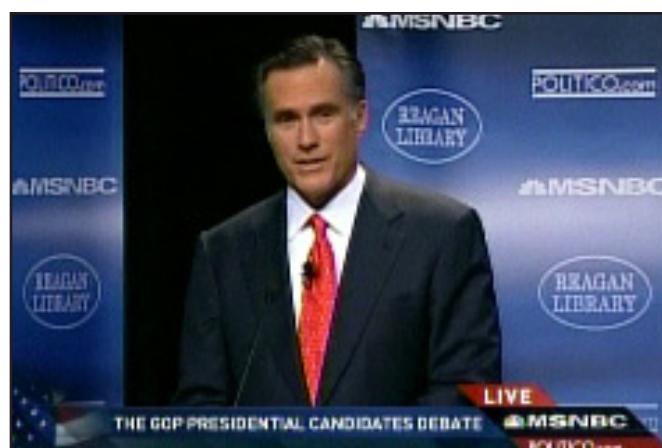
"Words have, in the past, gotten you in trouble, words that were borrowed and words that some found hateful. An editorial in the said, 'In addition to his uncontrolled verbosity, Biden is a gaffe machine.' Can you reassure voters in this country that you would have the discipline you would need on the world stage, Senator?" (Biden famously answered with one word: "Yes.")

On Oct. 30, 2007, during an MSNBC debate in Philadelphia, Tim Russert directly challenged Hillary Clinton's honesty:

"I want to clear something up which goes to the issue of credibility. You were asked at the AARP debate whether or not you would consider taxing, lifting the cap from \$97,500, taxing that, raising more money for Social Security. You said quote, 'It's a no.' I asked you the same question in New Hampshire, and you said 'no.' Then you went to Iowa and you went up to Tod Bowman, a teacher, and had a conversation with him saying, 'I would consider lifting the cap perhaps above \$200,000.' You were overheard by an Associated Press reporter saying that. Why do you have one public position and one private position?"



Democratic candidates face off in the first primary debate on April 26, 2007. From left to right: Bill Richardson, Chris Dodd, John Edwards, Joe Biden, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Dennis Kucinich and Mike Gravel.



Mitt Romney responds to this hardball from viewer Daniel Dukovnic from Walnut Creek, California during the MSNBC debate on May 3, 2007: "What do you dislike most about America?"

Republican candidates received some odd questions that the Democrats did not face, such as when Mitt Romney was asked on May 3, 2007 in an MSNBC debate, "What do you dislike most about America?"

Or to Rudy Giuliani, during the same debate, "What do you consider to be your most significant weakness as a candidate for the President of the United States?"

On the other hand, Hillary Clinton was not asked, even once, about the numerous scandals in which she was

implicated before and during the Bill Clinton presidency. Bill Clinton's character was questioned briefly on Feb. 26, 2008, when NBC's Tim Russert asked Hillary why the couple had not released their joint tax return, calling it "an issue of accountability and credibility."

Partisan Bias. Although Democrats faced some tough questions, particularly from the late Tim Russert on MSNBC and in the very last debate on ABC on April 16, 2008 in Philadelphia, Republicans faced a far greater percentage of hardball questions. Here's a summary of indicators of partisan bias, which will be more elaborately explained later in the report:

- Republicans faced more Integrity questions (144 in 15 debates vs. Dems' 126 in 20 debates) and had more hardballs (75 percent) than Democrats (52 percent).
- Republicans faced questions not only about their own integrity but on three different occasions about the integrity of their party. Democrats faced no questions about the integrity of their party.
- Some questions to Democrats were framed as if the issues involved were merely partisan ploys by the Republicans, such as: "I revved up the Republican attack machine. Please respond." In none of the debates was the idea of a "Democrat attack machine" raised.

Conservative vs. Liberal. Republicans faced questions about the label "conservative" in five debates (5/15, 6/5 and 10/21 in 2007 and 1/10 and 1/30 in 2008), while the Democrats were asked only once about whether they should be described as "liberal." (7/23/07) This mirrors typical media coverage of candidates and office holders, in which the media use ideological labels to identify Republicans far more often than they apply labels to Democrats. In a study of a recent five-year period, Media Research Center's Rich Noyes found that the three major networks — ABC, CBS and NBC — applied the label "conservative" to national politicians four times as often (992 instances) as "liberal (247).³

If some journalists' intent in labeling is to paint Republicans as ideologically driven, they may want to rethink their approach. A 2007 Pew survey says that 36 percent of Americans identify as either "conservative" or "very conservative," 39 percent "moderate" and just 19 percent "liberal."⁴

Meanwhile, a Pew study released in March 2008 found that journalists themselves identify as "liberal" (32 percent) four times as often as they do "conservative" (8 percent).⁵

Fox News asked the greatest percentage of tough questions.

Of the four networks that hosted multiple debates, Fox was the toughest, throwing a higher percentage of hardball character questions than NBC/MSNBC, CNN or ABC. Eighty-four percent of the character questions asked by Fox News were hardballs (72 out of 86 total character questions). On NBC/MSNBC, 66 percent of character questions asked of Republican and Democratic candidates were hardballs (108 out of 164 total character questions). ABC, while throwing the least number of hardballs to the candidates, did finish third in percentage, as 61 percent of the network's character questions were hardballs. CNN came in last, as its panelists threw hardballs just over half of the time, 55 percent (76 out of 139) in its character questions.

Here are a few Fox News hardballs:

CHRIS WALLACE to McCAIN. "Although Gov. Gilmore did not single you out, except by name, I'd like to ask you, because you have a record that people challenge about your conservatism. You've cosponsored campaign finance reform with Sen. Feingold. You've cosponsored comprehensive immigration reform with Ted Kennedy. You opposed, as Wendell mentioned, not only the Bush tax cut of 2001 but also the Bush tax cut of 2003. You voted against a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage but for expanded funding -- for federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. But you say that your record is clear, consistent and conservative. How do you square that with the positions and the votes that I just mentioned, sir?" (May 15, 2007)

WENDELL GOLER to HUCKABEE: "When you became governor of Arkansas, you wrote convicted rapist Wayne Dumond, told him, my desire is that you be released from prison. The parole board released him in 1999. The next year, he killed a woman in Missouri. Do you bear any responsibility for his release, sir?" (May 15, 2007)

WALLACE to GIULIANI: "You trail Clinton by four points in our latest Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll. Gov. Romney says the Republicans aren't going to beat Hillary Clinton by acting like Hillary Clinton. And the point seems to be that on a lot of the social issues, like abortion and gay rights and gun control, that there's not much difference between you and Clinton. Is there?" (Oct. 21, 2007)

WALLACE to HUCKABEE: "You have criticized the Bush foreign policy for what you call its arrogant bunker mentality. You've said that we should shut down Guantanamo and ban waterboarding. You didn't know about the national intelligence estimate on Iran more than 24 hours after it was front page news. You didn't know that martial law was lifted in Pakistan two weeks after...after it was. You said that it's a question as to whether or not it should be continued when it fact it had been lifted 10 days before...Can you honestly — let me ask the question. You can get the minute to answer. Can you honestly say that you are ready to be commander-in-chief of this country?" (January 6, 2008)

ABC asked the fewest hardballs about character.

Until the April 16 debate in Philadelphia in which Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos posed a series of hardball character questions to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, ABC had asked only 18 hardball questions. Even with the Philadelphia hardballs, ABC still had the lowest total, with 30 in five debates, or less than half as many as Fox News threw in five debates.

Once ABC hit its stride on April 16, the questions to Barack Obama in particular were so tough that some pundits attacked George Stephanopoulos and Charles Gibson. CBS reporter Dean Reynolds commiserated with Sen. Obama during the April 17 *Evening News*: "Obama said today that what you saw during the debate was the rollout for the Republican campaign against him in the fall. So it must have been painful for him to have it come out during a debate with a fellow Democrat." ABC's own David Wright expressed similar sentiments by reading the following e-mail on air during the April 17 *World News with Charles Gibson*: "This so-called debate will be shown to my communications students as an example of what shoddy journalism looks like."

It is interesting to note that Gibson will not be returning as a debate moderator for presidential debates in 2008. Three of the four moderators who hosted the 2004 presidential debates, PBS's Jim Lehrer and Gwen Ifill and CBS's Bob Schieffer, will return, but Gibson has been replaced by Tom Brokaw of NBC.

Honesty: Democrats faced more questions.

Honesty was the only category in which Democrats received more hardballs than the Republicans. In fact, Democrats received more than triple (29) the number of honesty questions asked of the Republicans (8). Every honesty question asked of both Republicans and Democrats counted as a hardball.

How the Major Networks Pitched Character Questions

ABC: 5 total debates; 49 total questions
2 GOP debates, 16 questions, 69 percent hardballs
3 DEM debates, 33 questions, 58 percent hardballs

CNN: 10 total debates; 139 total questions
3 GOP debates, 49 questions, 73 percent hardballs
7 DEM debates, 90 questions, 44 percent hardballs

Fox News: 5 total debates; 86 total questions
5 GOP debates, 86 questions, 84 percent hardballs
0 DEM debates, 0 questions

MSNBC: 9 total debates, 164 total questions
3 GOP debates, 69 questions, 70 percent hardballs
6 DEM debates, 95 questions, 63 percent hardballs

Twelve of the honesty questions asked of Democrats were directed to Sen. Hillary Clinton. Topics ranged from her record on the War in Iraq (4/26/07) to whether she would describe herself as "liberal" (7/23/07) to her claims about how many jobs she pledged to create in New York (2/26/08).

Clinton also was confronted with her admittedly inaccurate account of being under sniper fire at an airport in Bosnia in 1998 when she was First Lady.

During the April 16 ABC debate in Philadelphia, viewer Tom Rooney of Pittsburgh asked this question:

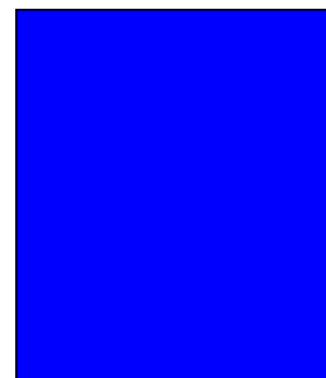
"Senator, I was in your court until a couple of weeks ago. How do you reconcile the campaign of credibility that you have when you've made those comments about what happened getting off the plane in Bosnia, which totally misrepresented what really happened on that day? You really lost my vote. And what can you tell me to get that vote back?"



Sen. Hillary Clinton prepares to respond to this hardball from MSNBC's Brian Williams on April 26, 2007: "Your party's leader in the United States Senate, Harry Reid, recently said the war in Iraq is lost. A letter to today's *USA Today* calls his comments "treasonous" and says if General Patton were alive today, Patton would "wipe his boots" with Senator Reid. Do you agree with the position of your leader in the Senate?"

Honesty Questions Asked, by Party

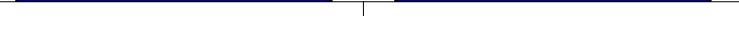
29



Democrats

8

Republicans



One possible explanation for the focus on Clinton's honesty is that the media applied a higher level of scrutiny to her as the Democratic front-runner during much of the primary race. Another possibility is that Clinton's record has drawn national attention for much longer than the other candidates, which leaves her vulnerable to more questioning.

The late Tim Russert of NBC threw some of the toughest honesty questions. Russert asked Dennis Kucinich if he had really seen a UFO (Oct. 30, 2007, MSNBC). He queried Hillary Clinton regarding a pledge she made to create millions of jobs, and whether she was hiding anything about "who was bankrolling her campaign" by not releasing her tax return (Feb. 26, 2008, MSNBC).

Barack Obama was asked five honesty questions, including the three listed below.

This hardball was from CNN's John King on February 21, 2008:

"Tonight, Sen. Obama, you've talked more about transparency. You also at one point criticized earmarks. And yet, a recent report came out that identified you - lower on the list in terms of how much money senators seek and sneak into the budget for these pork barrel spending projects, but it still said you were responsible for \$91 million in earmarks. And you have refused to say where the money went, what it's for. Why?"

Russert threw Obama this hardball during an MSNBC debate on February 26, 2008:

"Sen. Obama, let me ask you about motivating, inspiring, keeping your word. Nothing more important. Last year you said if you were the nominee you would opt for public financing in the general election of the campaign; try to get some of the money out. You checked 'Yes' on a questionnaire. And now Sen. McCain has said, calling your bluff, let's do it. You seem to be waffling, saying well, if we can work on an arrangement here. Why won't you keep your word in writing that you made to abide by public financing of the fall election?"

Hardball Pitchers

The late Tim Russert of NBC, and Chris Wallace of Fox News, each threw 41 hardball character questions to the presidential candidates during the primary debates.



Tim Russert, MSNBC, October 30, 2007.



Chris Wallace, Fox News, September 5, 2007.

From CNN's Suzanne Malveaux on January 21:

"I'd like to follow up with Sen. Obama. It was just a few days ago that Sen. Clinton asserted that she was the strongest candidate when it comes to fiscal responsibility. She says that the new programs that she proposes she essentially can pay for. She says that you have failed in that regard in the tune of some \$50 billion worth of new programs that you cannot account for. How do you respond to that charge?"

No Republican candidate was singled out in the same manner as Clinton. All eight of the GOP honesty questions were hardballs, and most addressed attacks by other GOP candidates.

On May 3, 2007 in an MSNBC debate, Romney was asked by John Harris, editor-in-chief of Politico:

“In recent months, you’ve said you were, quote, ‘always for life,’ but we’ve also heard you say you were once, quote, ‘effectively pro-choice.’ Which is it?”

And on January 6 at a Fox News debate, Chris Wallace asked Rudy Giuliani:

“You like to say that you cut taxes 23 times as mayor of New York, but in fact a number of those tax cuts were enacted over your opposition. There was a case in 1998 where you fought a city council for five months when they wanted to reduce a tax surcharge. And even before 9/11, you had left New York City with a \$3 – almost a \$3 billion deficit. So have you exaggerated your record on taxes and spending?”

Honesty conclusion: Media panels were more interested in questioning the Democrats’ honesty than that of the Republicans, but the candidates in both parties faced some real challenges.

Integrity: Republicans faced a higher percentage of hardballs.

The disparity in the number of integrity softballs and hardballs between the parties is clear. Republicans were questioned on integrity 144 times, and a great majority of 110 (76 percent) were hardballs. Thirty-four questions (24 percent) were softballs. In comparison, Democrats received 126 questions on integrity with an almost even split between hardballs (66) and softballs (60).

In some of the debates, the questioners posed very direct challenges to the candidates personally, confronting them with facts, policies or previous statements that brought their integrity into question. For example,

On May 15, 2007, Wendell Goler of Fox News pressed Mitt Romney on his integrity:

“Your critics have called you ‘flip-flop’ Mitt for, among other things, your decision to take the ‘no new taxes’ pledge this year after refusing to do so in 2002. Tell me why your decision to take the pledge shouldn’t be seen as a blatant appeal to the party base, sir?”

In the same debate, Chris Wallace of Fox News asked Romney:

“In 1994, you said you were a stronger advocate of gay rights than Ted Kennedy. As recently as five years ago, you still supported a woman’s right to choose. And as governor, you signed into law one of the toughest restrictions on assault weapons in the country. Are you a clear and consistent conservative?”

During that same debate, Wallace also questioned the conservative credentials of Rudy Giuliani:

“You’re pro-choice, you’re pro-gay rights, you’re pro-gun control; you supported Mario Cuomo for governor over a Republican. Are those the stands of a conservative?”

Giuliani’s integrity came in for more scrutiny during the CNN/YouTube debate on November 28, 2007, when Anderson Cooper posed this question:

“Politico broke a story a few hours ago questioning your accounting of taxpayer dollars as mayor. They say that as mayor, the report says, you took trips to the Hamptons and expensed the cost of your police detail to obscure city offices. One. Is that true? And, if so, was it appropriate?”

On January 6, 2008, Chris Wallace of Fox News asked Giuliani:

“Your former police commissioner, Bernie Kerik, has been indicted on corruption charges. There have been stories about your visiting your then-girlfriend when you were still married. Do you have too much baggage to lead the Republican Party?”

By contrast, Democratic candidate Barack Obama faced little scrutiny of his extensive ties to convicted Chicago swindler Tony Rezko, even as the story unwound from January through the spring of 2008. NBC’s Brian Williams did bring up the issue during the first Democratic debate, on April 26, 2007:

“You’ve promised in your campaign a new kind of politics, but just this week the *Chicago Sun-Times* reported on questionable ties you have with a donor who was charged last year for demanding kickbacks on Illinois business deals. Aren’t you practicing the very same kind of politics that many of the others on this stage have engaged in?”

It was the first and last time any such question was asked, despite a spate of newspaper coverage of the Chicago scandal. Perhaps the media panelists ignored the subject because the networks showed little interest. The Obama-Rezko connection was the subject of only two full reports (one each on ABC and NBC) and was mentioned in just 15 other reports, as noted in an MRC Special Report by Rich Noyes, *Obama’s Margin*

of Victory: The Media. CBS played it down in just part of a story, with reporter Dean Reynolds insisting “no one has charged Obama with wrongdoing, something he has been quick to point out.”

The only other time Obama’s connection to Rezko was raised was when Hillary Clinton mentioned it during the January 21, 2008 CNN debate. Moderator Wolf Blitzer did not ask any questions about it, however.

Overall, media panels posed nearly the same number of integrity questions to Hillary Clinton (40) and Barack Obama (39), but Sen. Clinton faced 26 hardballs to Obama’s 19. Many of the hardballs to Clinton came early in the debates, when she was the frontrunner. Here’s one from the June 3, 2007 debate from CNN’s Wolf Blitzer:

“Sen. Clinton, do you regret voting to authorize the president to use force against Saddam Hussein in Iraq without actually reading the National Intelligence Estimate, the classified document laying out the best U.S. intelligence at that time?”

In the September 26, 2007 MSNBC debate, Tim Russert said:

“Sen. Clinton, as you all know, you had to turn back \$850,000 in contributions from Norman Hsu because of his rather checkered past. Again, President Clinton said this, ‘Now, we don’t have to publish all our donors for the Clinton Foundation, but if Hillary became president, I think there would be questions about whether people would try to win favor by giving money to me.’ In light of that, do you believe that the Clinton Foundation and the Clinton Library should publish all the donors who give contributions to those two entities?”

On July 23, 2007, in the CNN/YouTube debate, a caller who identified himself as Chris Nolan, a Democratic committeeman from Mundelein, Illinois, asked Clinton:

“With Bush, Clinton, and Bush again serving as the last three presidents, how would electing you, a Clinton, constitute the type of change in Washington so many people in the heartland are yearning for, and what your campaign has been talking about? I was also wondering if any of the other candidates had a problem with the same two families being in charge of the executive branch of government for 28 consecutive years, if Hillary Clinton were to potentially be elected and then re-elected.”

On January 15, 2008, on MSNBC in Las Vegas, Brian Williams lobbed this softball to Sen. Obama:

“[T]here is a lot of false information about you circulating on the Internet ... How – how do you – how does your campaign go on about combating this kind of thing?”

HOT SOCIAL TOPICS: ABORTION

Sen. Obama faced no questions about two of his more controversial supporters – Louis Farrakhan and Jeremiah Wright – until Feb. 26, 2008. NBC's Tim Russert asked:

"On Sunday, the headline in your hometown paper, Chicago Tribune: 'Louis Farrakhan Backs Obama for President at Nation of Islam Convention in Chicago.' Do you accept the support of Louis Farrakhan?"

This was a hardball. Although Farrakhan has considerable support in the black community, he has made anti-Semitic and other statements that have alienated other Americans. The question put Obama at risk of alienating either the black community or Jews and other Americans. Russert followed up with this question:

"The title of one of your books, *Audacity of Hope*, you acknowledge you got from a sermon from Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the head of the Trinity United Church. He said that Louis Farrakhan 'epitomizes greatness.' He said that he went to Libya in 1984 with Louis Farrakhan to visit with Moammar Gadhafi and that, when your political opponents found out about that, quote, 'your Jewish support would dry up quicker than a snowball in Hell.' What do you do to assure Jewish-Americans that, whether it's Farrakhan's support or the activities of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, your

Republicans faced 26 questions about abortion, contrasted with 7 to Democrats. That disproportionate number could reflect that there is more disagreement among Republicans on the issue, and that a large segment of Republican voters sees the life issue as central to assessing candidates' character and values. Abortion questions for Democrats reflected the liberal view that a woman's right to choose overrides the baby's right to life. Unlike the Republicans, the Democrats received no questions on abortion that challenged their party's prevailing paradigm, although Brian Williams did press Sen. Obama on his negative reaction to the Supreme Court upholding the ban on partial-birth abortion.

Republicans

May 3, 2007 on MSNBC, John Harris of politico.com asked Mitt Romney:

"In recent months, you've said you were, quote, "always for life," but we've also heard you say you were once, quote, "effectively pro-choice." Which is it?"

May 15, 2007 on Fox News. Wendell Goler asked Sam Brownback:

"No one thinks abortion should be available casually, but there are often very, very difficult decisions to be made in this case. Tell me, since you've opposed abortion in every instance except to save the life of the mother, how you would explain to a rape victim, who does not believe that life begins at conception, why her trauma should be compounded by carrying the child to term?"

June 5, 2007 on CNN, Wolf Blitzer asked Rudy Giuliani:

"There was some news here today. A Catholic bishop in Rhode Island said some words about your position on abortion, suggesting that it was similar to Pontius Pilate's personal opposition to Jesus Christ's crucifixion but allowing it to happen anyway. How does that make you feel when you hear words like that from a Catholic bishop?"

Democrats

April 26, 2007 on MSNBC, Brian Williams asked Barack Obama:

"What about your views on the decision on partial-birth abortion and your reaction to most of the public agreeing with court's holding?"

Nov. 15, 2007, on CNN, Wolf Blitzer asked all candidates:

"Would you insist that any nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court supported abortion rights for women?"

April 13, 2008 on CNN, Newsweek's Jon Meacham asked Sens. Clinton and Obama:

"Do you believe personally that life begins at conception?"

pastor, you are consistent with issues regarding Israel and not in any way suggesting that Farrakhan epitomizes greatness?"

Republicans faced questions not only about their own integrity but about the integrity of their party. On May 3, 2007, in the Republican debate, Jim Vandehei, executive editor of Politico.com, threw this hardball at Mike Huckabee:

"This question comes from a reader in New York: 'In light of the scandals plaguing the current administration and its allies, involving corruption and cronyism, which mistakes have you learned not to repeat?'"

On September 5, 2007, Wendell Goler posed this question to Sen. Sam Brownback during a Fox News debate:

"I want to talk to you about family values...Your colleague, Sen. Larry Craig of Idaho, is making it difficult for the Republican Party to claim to be the party of family values. Now, I know that as his friend, you may forgive him. Can you expect voters to do the same? And what do you say to Sen. Craig's second thoughts about resigning?"

Democrats faced no questions about their party's ethical challenges, such as the bribery and racketeering indictment in July 2007 of Rep. William Jefferson (La.) or the sex and perjury scandals of then-Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. Several questions, however, were posed about campaign ethics. In the Aug. 7, 2007 MSNBC/AFL-CIO Candidates Forum, Keith Olbermann asked Sen. Obama about the ethics of raising money from lobbyists and he also asked Sen. Edwards, a trial lawyer, about raising money from trial lawyers.

Integrity conclusion: As a party, the Democrats received fewer serious challenges to their integrity. Some candidates, particularly Hillary Clinton, took some genuine hardballs throughout, but Barack Obama faced integrity hardballs mainly in the last two debates. GOP candidates, particularly early favorites Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney, were asked the most potentially damaging questions about their integrity. Romney faced the most integrity questions - 35, while John McCain took 17, Mike Huckabee took 14 and Giuliani faced 13. John McCain's most difficult challenges involved his evolving stances on immigration and the Bush tax cuts. McCain alone was asked whether he would consider running for only one term.



Republican candidates face off in their first primary debate on May 3, 2007. From left: Mitt Romney, Sam Brownback, Jim Gilmore, Mike Huckabee, Duncan Hunter, Tommy Thompson, John McCain, Ron Paul, Rudy Giuliani and Tom Tancredo.

Leadership: Republicans faced a greater percentage of hardball questions.

Republicans received 61 questions (26 percent of all character questions asked to the party) about leadership. Of these, 21 were softballs (34 percent) and 40 were hardballs (66 percent). Democrats received 80 questions about leadership (32 percent of all character questions asked to the party), of which 61 percent (49) were softballs. Only 31 of the questions (39 percent) posed to Democrats about leadership were hardballs.

Both parties faced a substantial number of leadership questions involving foreign policy, particularly with regard to the war in Iraq. The Democrats had 20 foreign policy leadership questions compared to the Republicans' 17. Several GOP candidates faced direct challenges about whether they had the experience to be commander in chief.

On Dec. 12, 2007 in the Iowa Public Television debate, Rep. Tom Tancredo was asked by Carolyn Washburn, editor of the *Des Moines Register*:

"Your foreign policy positions on your campaign Web site consist of five sentences on Iraq. What assures Americans you're ready to lead our foreign policy?"

On Jan. 6, 2008, Chris Wallace of Fox News played a Mitt Romney campaign ad critical of several McCain stands, including foreign policy, ending with, "If you want a leader and a person who's led in critical times and in critical ways, I think I fit the bill." Wallace then asked Romney:

"You say that we elect a leader, not an expert. But in these very dangerous times, don't we need somebody who has lived these issues and knows all the key players?"

He threw this hardball at Rudy Giuliani:

"John McCain says — talk about a backhanded compliment — that you did a great job of running New York after 9/11, but that it has ... but it has very little to do with national security. And he also points out that you still have never visited Iraq. He's sitting right over there. Explain."

On Jan. 10, 2008, Giuliani faced a similar question in another Fox News debate, this time from Carl Cameron:

"In recent weeks, Sen. McCain has suggested that your leadership in the aftermath of 9/11 doesn't quite constitute national security credentials, in so far as it's generally agreed that one of the challenges of our time is the war on terrorism. What equips you? What experience and skills do you bring that would make you a better commander-in-chief than the Senator from Arizona?"

HOT SOCIAL TOPICS: HOMOSEXUALITY

As with abortion, character-revealing questions concerning homosexuality rarely challenged the liberal paradigms: homosexuality is a civil rights issue; the military's ban on open homosexuality should be overturned, and "gay marriage" is inevitable. Not a single question raised the conflicts that gay rights pose to religious freedom, employers or to groups like the Boy Scouts. CNN ambushed the GOP with a question from a retired general who is now a gay activist, but tossed a softball to the Democrats from a liberal minister who compared gay rights to the black civil rights movement.

Republicans

May 3, 2007 on MSNBC, John Harris of politico.com asked Tommy Thompson:

"If a private employer finds homosexuality immoral, should he be allowed to fire a gay worker?"

On November 28, 2007, CNN/YouTube selected this question from Brigadier Gen. Keith Kerr (Ret.) from thousands of questions submitted by the public:

"I'm a retired brigadier general with 43 years of service. And I'm a graduate of the Special Forces Officer Course, the Commanding General Staff Course and the Army War College. And I'm an openly gay man. I want to know why you think that American men and women in uniform are not professional enough to serve with gays and lesbians?"

October 21, 2007 on Fox News, Brit Hume asked Mitt Romney:

"Among the so-called top tier candidates, you support the ban on gay marriage. What does it say that Fred Thompson, Rudy Giuliani, John McCain and Ron Paul all don't?"

Democrats

June 3, 2007, on CNN, Wolf Blitzer asked John Edwards:

"The governor of New Hampshire is here with us tonight. He just signed legislation into law in this state allowing civil unions...The question is this: Is it time to move beyond that and let gays and lesbians get married?"

July 23, 2007, CNN/YouTube selected this question from Rev. Reggie Longcrier from thousands of questions submitted by the public. Longcrier was recruited to submit the question by Faith in America, a gay activist group:

"I'm Rev. Reggie Longcrier. I'm the pastor of Exodus Mission and Outreach Church in Hickory, North Carolina. Sen. Edwards said his opposition to gay marriage is influenced by his Southern Baptist background. Most Americans agree it was wrong and unconstitutional to use religion to justify slavery, segregation, and denying women the right to vote. So why is it still acceptable to use religion to deny gay Americans their full and equal rights?"

September 26, 2007, on MSNBC, the late Tim Russert challenged New Mexico governor Bill Richardson:

"You talk about your experience. And yet, when you were the secretary of energy, there were security breaches at Los Alamos. You talked about Justice White being your favorite Supreme Court justice, someone who voted against Roe v. Wade. New Mexico ranks 48 in terms of people below the poverty line, 48th in children below the poverty line. You said that being gay is a choice. Based on those kinds of comments, and that record of performance or questionable activities, how can you tell the people you have the experience to be president?"

John McCain was asked several foreign policy leadership questions about how he would handle certain situations – including how to get Osama bin Laden – but he faced no questions on his experience or credentials, since he clearly had more of both than any of his rivals.

On January 24, 2008, Brian Williams threw a hardball to John McCain as to his record on several issues that could prove divisive within the GOP:

"... You haven't voted with your party on some core stances like taxes, and judges and immigration and campaign reform. How do you expect to unite a party behind you?"

On January 30, 2008, Anderson Cooper asked GOP candidate Mike Huckabee to explain a remark:

"You've said repeatedly you want a presidential candidate – or you think voters want a presidential candidate, quote, 'who looks more like the guy they work with than the guy who laid them off.' What exactly do you mean by that? I mean, what about leadership, ability, experience?"

On the Democratic side, Barack Obama faced few questions about his experience or suitability for being commander-in-chief.

On Jan. 5, 2008, on ABC, New Hampshire reporter Scott Spradling framed a question to Obama in a manner that made it seem as if reservations about his lack of experience were merely a partisan notion peddled by the Republicans:

"I don't know if your ears were ringing during the first debate. I asked a question about you earlier, and am interested to hear your response to what the Republican candidates for president laid out in arguments for you not being elected president. I revved up the Republican attack machine. Please respond."

Hillary Clinton came in for some tougher leadership questions than her rivals. In the very first Democratic debate, on April 26, 2007, Hillary Clinton faced this zinger from Brian Williams on MSNBC:

"Your party's leader in the United States Senate, Harry Reid, recently said the war in Iraq is lost. A letter to today's USA Today calls his comments "treasonous" and says if General Patton were alive today, Patton would "wipe his boots" with Sen. Reid. Do you agree with the position of your leader in the Senate?"

The question forced Clinton to defend her party leader after a particularly colorful and unflattering assessment while stating her position on a war that Democrats had opposed but helped fund with congressional votes. Williams then turned to Sen. Biden and asked him: "Do you agree with Sen. Reid that the war is lost?"

On July 23, 2007 during the CNN/YouTube forum, Anderson Cooper threw this softball to Obama:

"Sen. Obama, are the soldiers dying in Iraq in vain?"

It was a golden opportunity for Obama to bring out the Democratic talking point about supporting the troops but not the war. Cooper then posed the same question to John Edwards.

Leadership conclusion: The leadership questions favored John McCain in the GOP and Barack Obama in the Democrat debates by focusing more sharply on potential leadership problems among their opponents. Overall, given the larger percentage of hardballs thrown to the GOP, there was some partisan bias.



Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama face tough questions from ABC's Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos in Philadelphia on April 16, 2008.

Courage: Republicans faced far more tough questions.

The media challenged Republican candidates much more aggressively with regard to courage than the Democratic candidates. The Republicans were asked 18 hardballs and 3 softballs. For the Democrats, 11 were softballs and 5 were hardballs.

Softballs tossed to the Democrats included this one by Brian Williams during the MSNBC debate on April 26, 2007 and addressed to all:

“Do you believe there is such a thing as a global war on terror?”

During the Univision Spanish language TV network debate on Sept. 9, 2007, Barack Obama was asked:

“Do you consider that participating in a forum run in Spanish and addressed specifically to Hispanic voters is a political risk for you?”

Sen. Clinton was asked the identical question moments later. This gave both senators an opportunity to appear courageous for making a pitch to a demographic that skews heavily toward Democrats.

The Democrats did face a couple of hardball courage questions on foreign policy. During the CNN/YouTube forum on July 23, 2007, a viewer asked the candidates:

“See those three flags over my shoulder? They covered the coffins of my grandfather, my father, and my oldest son. Someday, mine will join them. I do not want to see my youngest sons join them. I have two questions. By what date after January 21st, 2009, will all U.S. troops be out of Iraq? And how many family members do you have serving in uniform?”

On Jan. 5, 2008, ABC’s Charles Gibson threw this hardball:

“Sen. Edwards, let me go to you. Some of you -- Gov. Richardson, Sen. Obama -- you have talked about a timetable for withdrawal, getting all troops out by the end of 2009, 2010. If the generals in Iraq came to you as President Edwards and said, ‘Mr. President’ – on January 21, 2009 – ‘you’re wrong, you can’t do this. You’re going to send Iraq back into the kind of chaos we had before,’ are you going to stick with it?”

This question forced the candidates to risk altering their pledges on a timetable or risk appearing to be stubborn, resisting military necessity.

One of the thorniest courage questions went to Sen. Edwards, on MSNBC on Jan. 15, 2008, from Tim Russert:

“On the conduct of foreign policy, after Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, you made a phone call to General Musharraf in Pakistan. He called you back quickly. Close to half the people in Pakistan believe the government of Musharraf or allies were involved in the assassination of Miss Bhutto. Was it appropriate for you to talk to Musharraf at that time, perhaps give him cover at a time when he needed legitimacy?”

Edwards' judgment had been called into question, which made this a hardball, but it was also an opportunity for him to demonstrate the courage of his convictions.

On the Republican side, MSNBC threw two courage softballs on May 3, 2007. One of them invited Sen. McCain to stake out his own view of the immigration issue, which he has not been shy about doing, even though it puts him at odds with other GOP candidates. Another question, to the whole panel, asked whether they would pardon convicted Bush Administration official Scooter Libby. The other softball, on Univision on Dec. 9, 2007, went to Mitt Romney, and was similar to softballs asked of the Democrats, but not quite as soft:

“Do you think that you’re taking a risk to come here to lose support from the more conservative base in your party?”

Although it gave Romney the opportunity to appear more open than other GOP candidates to this particular constituency, it still carried a small risk since controlling illegal immigration is a hot button issue in the GOP. But it’s unlikely that many GOP constituents who would be offended by Romney’s appearance were watching Univision that night.

On the hardball side, MSNBC on May 3, 2007 tossed this intraparty firecracker in California:

“Let me ask you a question regarding immigration. One of our prized guests here today, Gov. Schwarzenegger — looking this man in the eye, answer this question — I’m going to go down the line, starting with Gov. Romney. Should we change our Constitution, which we believe is divinely inspired (to allow immigrants to run for president)?”

The toughest questions came on the abortion issue during a Fox News debate on May 15, 2007. Wendell Goler asked a series of questions that could have come from a crib sheet written by the pro-abortion lobby NARAL (see box).

Taking Off the Gloves in Philly

On April 16, 2008, ABC hosted a debate between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in Philadelphia. Panelists Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos gave Sen. Obama the most difficult character questions that he faced during the entire set of Democratic debates. Afterward, the two journalists were either applauded or severely criticized for putting Sen. Obama on the defensive. They also threw some hardballs to Hillary.

To Sen. Barack Obama:

CHARLES GIBSON: Talking to a closed-door fundraiser in San Francisco 10 days ago, you got talking in California about small-town Pennsylvanians who have had tough economic times in recent years. And you said, "they get bitter," and they cling to guns or they cling to their religion or they cling to antipathy toward people who are not like them. Now, you've said you misspoke; you said you mangled what it was you wanted to say. But we've talked to a lot of voters. Do you understand that some people in this state find that patronizing and think that you said actually what you meant?

GIBSON: Sen. Obama, since you last debated, you made a significant speech in this building on the subject of race and your former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. And you said subsequent to giving that speech that you never heard him say from the pulpit the kinds of things that so have offended people. But more than a year ago, you rescinded the invitation to him to attend the event when you announced your candidacy. He was to give the invocation. And according to the reverend, I'm quoting him, you said to him, "You can get kind of rough in sermons. So what we've decided is that it's best for you not to be out there in public." I'm quoting the reverend. But what did you know about his statements that caused you to rescind that invitation? And if you knew he got rough in sermons, why did it take you more than a year to publicly disassociate yourself from his remarks?

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Senator, two questions. No. 1, do you think Rev. Wright loves America as much as you do? And No. 2, if you get the nomination, what will you do when those sermons are played on television again and again and again?

NASH MCCABE (Latrobe, Pennsylvania): (From videotape.) Sen. Obama, I have a question, and I want to know if you believe in the American flag. I am not questioning your patriotism, but all our servicemen, policemen and EMS wear the flag. I want to know why you don't.

MR. GIBSON: Just to add to that, I noticed you put one on yesterday. ...you've talked about this before, but it comes up again and again when we talk to voters. And as you may know, it is all over the Internet. And it's something of a theme that Sens. Clinton and McCain's advisers agree could give you a major vulnerability if you're the candidate in November. How do you convince Democrats that this would not be a vulnerability?

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: ... A follow-up on this issue, the general theme of patriotism in your relationships; a gentleman named William Ayers. He was part of the Weather Underground in the 1970s. They bombed the Pentagon, the Capitol and other buildings. He's never apologized for that. And in fact, on 9/11 he was quoted in *The New York Times* saying, "I don't regret setting bombs; I feel we didn't do enough." An early organizing meeting for your state senate campaign was held at his house, and your campaign has said you are friendly. Can you explain that relationship for the voters, and explain to Democrats why it won't be a problem?

To Sen. Hillary Clinton

GIBSON: You have said that he [Rev. Jeremiah Wright] would not have been my pastor and you said that you have to speak out against those kinds of remarks, and implicitly, by getting up and moving, and I presume you mean out of the church. There are 8,000 members of Sen. Obama's church. And we have heard the inflammatory remarks of Rev. Wright, but so too have we heard testament to many great things that he did. Do you honestly believe that 8,000 people should have gotten up and walked out of that church?

TOM ROONEY (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) (from videotape): I was in your court until a couple of weeks ago. How do you reconcile the campaign of credibility that you have when you've made those comments about what happened getting off the plane in Bosnia, which totally misrepresented what really happened on that day? You really lost my vote. And what can you tell me to get that vote back?

GIBSON: Howard Wolfson on a conference call recently was asked, "Is Sen. Clinton going to stick to her announced plan of bringing one or two brigades out of Iraq every month whatever the realities on the ground?" And Wolfson said, "I'm giving you a one-word answer so we can be clear about it, the answer is yes." So if the military commanders in Iraq came to you on Day One and said, "this kind of withdrawal would destabilize Iraq, it would set back all of the gains that we have made," no matter what, you're going to order those troops to come home?

GIBSON: But Sen. Clinton, aren't you saying – I mean, Gen. Petraeus was in Washington. You both were there when he testified, saying that the gains in Iraq are fragile and are reversible. Are you essentially saying, "I know better than the military commanders here?"

GIBSON: Both of you were strong advocates for licensing of guns. Both of you were strong advocates for the registration of guns. Why don't you emphasize that now, Sen. Clinton?



ABC's George Stephanopoulos and Charles Gibson grill Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama during the April 16, 2008, debate in Philadelphia.

During that same debate, Goler pressed Gov. Tommy Thompson (R-Wis.) on how he would cut back government:

“Brian from Fort Wayne asks this question via the Internet, a question about controlling government spending. Some of your critics say you lack fiscal discipline. Tell me three federal programs you consider wasteful and would eliminate.”

Candidates know that any specific answers automatically create enemies out of entire departments of bureaucrats, their dependents, their clients and their suppliers.

On Oct. 21, 2007, again on Fox News, Brit Hume posed a similar courage question to Rudy Giuliani:

“What Sen. Thompson said, Mayor Giuliani, will open him to accusations that he’s trying to cut Social Security benefits. He will be accused of being willing to diminish or take away the prescription drug benefit that many now have come to depend on. He has suggested that Medicare beneficiaries might have to suffer loss of benefits (inaudible) high income. He’s out on a limb on that. Are you prepared to be as bold?”

On Jan. 5, 2008, Charles Gibson pressed the entire GOP lineup about specific ways to cut health care costs:

“Sen. McCain has talked a lot about controlling costs, and you bring up the issue in controlling costs. And all the experts say to me, ‘Look, if you’re going to control costs, you got to do three things. You’re going to limit access to technology, you’re going to limit, in some way, change the reimbursement system for doctors and hospitals, or you’re going to have to limit the amount of treatments. That’s the only way we can bring costs down.’ And that’s the third rail of health care. Which of you is going to touch any of that?”

Courage conclusion: The courage questions overall put the Republicans on the defensive while giving the Democrats more opportunities to appear courageous.

Summary and Recommendations

Character played a major role in the primary debates. CMI commends the media for recognizing that good character is a fundamental qualification for the presidency.

As the two presidential candidates face a final series of debates, CMI challenges the media to continue to focus on character, but also to approach the topic with greater

balance and fairness. The media should ask questions based on conservative premises as well as liberal premises, and throw each candidate roughly the same number of hardballs and softballs. If questions about scandals are raised, they should be put to both parties.

Finally, given the Fox News Channel's track record for tough but fair questioning on character, the panels of media questioners should include someone from Fox.

Special thanks to MRC Director of Media Analysis Tim Graham and MRC Research Director Rich Noyes for their advice and guidance.

Endnotes

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About the Culture and Media Institute

The Culture and Media Institute's mission is to advance, preserve, and help restore America's culture, character, traditional values, and morals against the assault of the liberal media elite. Founded in October 2006 with a challenge grant from the Templeton Foundation, CMI has already attracted attention from the Rush Limbaugh Show, Fox News Channel, CNN and many other news outlets.

Using the unique resources at Media Research Center, CMI is exposing media campaigns against the traditional values of faith, self-reliance, patriotism, marriage, decency, civic pride, gratitude, industriousness and good manners. CMI staffers regularly appear on TV, radio and in print, and publish periodic reports as well as articles for outside publications.

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About the MRC

Founded in 1987, the Media Research Center (MRC) is America's largest and most respected media watchdog group. Its mission is to create a media culture where truth and liberty flourish in America.

The Alexandria, Virginia-based organization brings balance and responsibility to the news media through its News Analysis Division, which documents, exposes and neutralizes liberal media bias; the Business & Media Institute, which audits the media's coverage of economic issues; TimesWatch.org, which monitors the New York Times; and Newsbusters.org, the MRC blog, which exposes liberal media bias 24 hours a day.

The MRC is also home to the Cybercast News Service (CNSNews.com), an Internet news outlet that is dedicated to providing unbiased coverage of the news of the day.

In 2006, the MRC launched the Culture and Media Institute with a mission to advance and help restore America's culture, character, traditional values and morals against the assault of the liberal media elite.

Former CBS reporter and now best-selling author Bernard Goldberg says of the MRC, "The Media Research Center folks don't give the media hell; they just tell the truth and the media thinks it's hell."

The MRC is organized under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, and contributions to the MRC are tax-deductible for income tax purposes. The MRC does not accept government grants or contracts. We raise our funds each year solely from private sources including individuals, foundations, and corporations.