

Courtroom Drama of Truth and Lies

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In a democratic society, the struggle for power is not about force but ideals and aspirations, about the dream of justice and who has the courage to tell the truth.

The right-wing individualism of Republican free market policies has crippled that party's ability to talk about justice while speaking the truth. Until Labor Day, Mitt Romney attacked redistribution, defended the wealthy, and described half the society as whining bottom dwellers. After Labor Day, Romney pulled the sheet off his Etcha-A-Sketch and started over. New Romney is all about justice. Good jobs for all. Maintain taxes on the wealthy, middle class tax breaks, and popular parts of Obama Care. New Romney even supports abortion, didn't you know?

Last week, good old Joe called this New Republicanism a bunch of malarkey. He's right, but the problem is how to get voters in the middle to agree? The empirical arguments are complex, the numbers numbing. Shouting "it's all lies" doesn't convince anybody who isn't already.

The challenge for Democrats is to dramatize Republican deception, not to assert it factually. "He said, she said" isn't a winning strategy. Theater is about showing, not telling.

Last week, Biden showed Republican deception by grinning and snorting and laughing.

Last night, during the first two-thirds of debate, President Obama used numbers and, on four different occasions, tried simply telling his audience about New Romney's untruth: "What Governor Romney said just isn't true." "Not true, Governor Romney." "Not true." "It's just not true."

Then Obama got a chance to show, not tell.

Drastically miscalculating, Romney bitch-slapped the president: "When we have four Americans killed ... the president, the day after that happened, flies off to Las Vegas for a political fundraiser, then the next day to Colorado for another ... political event."

Obama was a shameless pol, not a patriot.

Tough stuff. Rather than apologizing, or even explaining, the president had the wit to call the lying Republican's bluff.

Obama: "The day after the attack, Governor, I stood in the Rose Garden and I told the American people and the world that this was an act of terror." Far from being weak-kneed, the president had been angry, and had told the unvarnished truth. Not only then but now. Playing the hard man, the president stared Romney's insinuating insult down.

Obama: The suggestion that anybody on my team ... would play politics or mislead when we've lost four of our own, Governor, is offensive. That's not what we do. That's not what I do as president, that's not what I do as commander-in-chief."

Romney maintained this was just what the president did do. Obama had backed down in the Rose Garden, and he was going to have to back down last night. The president was lying, not the New Republican side.

Romney: "I think [it's] interesting that the president just said ... that on the day after the attack he went into the Rose Garden and said this was an act of terror."

The president's reply was pure as ice, and just as cold.

Obama: "That's what I said."

The exchange had become a confrontation, the stakes starkly raised. It was no longer about who was right about facts, but who was a liar. A direct accusation had been made against the president of the United States, who then called his accuser out. The narrative struggle between good and evil tightened, and the drama ratcheted up.

Now this was not a debate but a courtroom drama. The theatre plays nightly on TV as the tense struggle between crime and justice, with prosecutors and defense lawyers fighting to discover who is the shadow faced liar and who the truth teller dressed in white.

Prosecutor Romney pressed his case: "You said in the Rose Garden [that] it was not a spontaneous demonstration, is that what you're saying?"

Obama's reply seemed scripted for a courtroom fight: "Please proceed, Governor."

Falling for the trap, Romney resorted to dramaturgical legalese: "I want to make sure we get that for the record because it took 14 days before he called the attack on Benghazi an act of terror."

The defending attorney now pulled the noose tight.

Obama: "Get the transcript."

Here comes the judge. CNN moderator Candy Crowley ruled for the defense. She didn't need to go to the Rose Garden transcript to confirm the truthfulness of the defendant's side.

At first, however, Judge Crowley hesitated. So much was on the line.

Crowley: "It - it - it --- he did, in fact, sir. So let me - let me call it an act of terror."

Obama seized this third party testimony of Romney's bad faith, but he wanted it more dramatically made.

Obama: "Can you say that a little louder, Cindy?"

She could: "He did call it an act of terror."

Objection sustained.

Dramatic plots turn on epiphanic moments of revelation. Republicans know how to lie with statistics, but they may find it difficult to resist last night's dramatic moment of moral truth. Their leader had called the president out, but the judge caught him in a stark and snarky bold-faced lie. Romney staked his integrity on humiliating Obama, but it was he who was humbled.

Last night, the Republic standard bearer didn't just stumble. In full view of 70 million Americans, he spectacularly fell from grace.