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Moral Leadership: What Obama Has to Show Tomorrow in the Debate Performance, and for Real

by George Lakoff

As Nate Silver, *NY Times* polling expert put it, "Instant polls conducted after the debate are suggestive of something between a tie and a modest win for Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr."

Biden held his own and maybe a bit more. That was important. But President Obama has to do a lot better than that. He has to go beyond the policy wonk to be a moral leader once more. Here's how Jennifer Granholm put it on her Current TV show video.

On the whole, the public and especially the undecided voters don't keep track of policy details and which numbers are right. The worst thing the president can do is to just compare details of policy. That just elevates Romney to the status of an equal, who can come back with lies that will sound just as good if not better to most of the undecideds.

The TV debates are not primarily about policy details and the numbers in themselves. As Ronald Reagan showed, the debates are about choosing a moral leader. And we do this through a performance. Reagan didn't debate policy details and numbers. Instead he did the following:

- Stated his values.
- Connected with the viewers by projecting empathy.
- Communicated clearly.
- Appeared authentic, appeared to be saying what he believed.
- Was positive and upbeat.

Those are the basic rules of the performances called presidential debates. The content that goes with the performance is to show that you will be a moral leader. Policy discussions and facts can flesh that out, but those are the ground rules.

Romney was prepped the Reagan way -- to project the necessary appearance for this performance. The president was not. President Obama needs to follow the ground rules, especially because he IS authentic, he DOES have the right values, he DOES have empathy.

Moreover, those moral values are really what this election is about. The president sees democracy as based on citizens caring about each other and using a government
as an instrument of that care, protecting and empowering us all, equally, through public provisions. America started out with building roads, bridges, public schools, a national bank, a patent office, public records, etc. We now have many more citizen provisions -- clean air, clean water, safe food and drugs, sewers, policing, disease control, a federal reserve, basic scientific research, college loans. Now we need, and have, more that is provided for all. Think of a cell phone. It couldn't exist without what citizens have provided via the government: the computer science research, the Internet, the satellite system, the PDF system. Once you have all these things, you have certain basic freedoms -- you can live well and maybe start a business, or work for one, on the basis of what your fellow citizens have given you. The issue here is freedom, the real material freedom that other Americans have provided us with. You can only build it starting from what other Americans have built for you.

When the president made his "You didn't built that" gaffe, he was intimidated out of talking about this truth. But this is the central truth of this campaign. Citizens built all the mechanisms for each of us to access. If you worked hard to build a business, you used all that to start with. The president needs to go back to that deep truth and say it right this time. You, our citizens, have provided all this not just to yourselves but to every American. That's what makes America America.

You, the citizens, use our common government to make this country what it is.

Consider the 96 percent study by Mettler and Sides at Cornell. It showed that 96 percent of Americans make use of the help provided by their fellow citizens through the government -- and most don't even know that government is involved and that their fellow citizens are helping them. An itemized deduction on your taxes means that your fellow citizens are paying to make up for the amount of the deduction; they are helping you. Most homeowners take a home interest deduction on their mortgages. Your fellow citizens are helping you out with your home. If you take a deduction on college investments for your children, your fellow citizens are helping out your children. If you are out of a job and living on unemployment insurance, or if you are a veteran depending on veterans' benefits, your fellow citizens are helping you. They are helping you, and you have been helping them. Your government is the intermediary, the one who helps you help or be helped. Most of the time, most people do not even see the government helping, or their fellow citizens helping. But 96 percent of you gladly accept that help -- and you deserve it. Who are the other 4 percent? Mostly those of you who are still too young to need it -- but you will, and soon. Almost all Americans do.

Conservative radicals -- not moderates -- have a different idea of democracy: They define democracy as providing the liberty to seek your own interests without any responsibility for the interests or well-being of others, and without others helping
you. They consider illegitimate all the things citizens do for the citizens of our country as a whole. And under Romney-Ryan, all of that would be eliminated.

The moral difference is clear: Do we have both personal and social responsibility, or just personal responsibility? Are we in this together, or are we on our own? The conservatives say we are, and should be, on our own. Are we the United States or the Separate States -- or millions of isolated individuals who don't care about anybody else?

The answer to these questions affects every issue. If Romney and Ryan win, our nation will never look the same. It should be made clear, in every discussion of every issue, that this is the moral value behind the issue: what is our national moral character? When Romney looked at Jim Lehrer, and said, smiling, that he liked him and loved Big Bird, but that he would fire them both, he revealed a deep meanness of spirit that is the very opposite of our national character.

The fate of the nation, and in many ways the world, hangs on this election.

Mr. President, this is a grand performance that means something; it is much more than a policy debate where most people won't understand or remember the fine details of the policies. We need you to show America what real moral leadership is.