Noonan: 2012 Debates: This Is It, Mitt

How Romney can make the most of his face-off with Obama.

By PEGGY NOONAN

'Governor, the success or failure of your entire presidential campaign will come down to what happens between the hours of 9 and 10:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 3. We're at a hinge point in history. It's not too much to say the future of the American republic depends on how you do in that hour and a half."

"Um, specifically, what do you want me to do?"

"Be relaxed!"

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That's what's coming from some of Mitt Romney's supporters right now—Wednesday night is critical, the last chance, so don't forget it's nothing, a walk in the park. He doesn't strike me as easily given to freak-outs, but if he is, this would be the moment.

Let's take a different approach.

It is true that the debate has the potential to alter the dynamic of the election. A good or great one, followed up by an improved, more serious campaign, could make everything new again. A bad one would do damage indeed.

But there will be three debates, and it's possible the truly high-stakes one will be the last, on Oct. 22.

And there are some institutional and personal elements surrounding the Wednesday debate that may well work in Mr. Romney's favor.

From a canny journalist with a counterintuitive head: "The media will be rooting for Romney." Two reasons. First, they don't want the story to end. They're in show biz: A boring end means lower ratings. Careers are involved! Second, the mainstream media is suddenly realizing that more than half the country (and some of their colleagues) think they are at least operationally in the tank for the president, or the Democrats in general. It is hurting the media's standing. A midcourse correction is in order, and Wednesday will offer an opportunity: I think it's fair to say Gov. Romney more than held his own this evening, and a consensus seems to be forming that the president underperformed.

Mr. Romney walks in as the underdog, behind in the polls. He's not the president, the other guy is. He's not world-famous, the other guy is. The president is known for smooth presentation and verbal fluidity, Mr. Romney more recently for awkwardisms and gaffes.

It's good to be the underdog. "Politics is exceeding expectations."

As the Republican candidate, Mr. Romney is used to being battered about. He can take a shot. But once you're president, you're never battered about. The mystique of the Oval Office is too great. People tell you what you want to hear. Everyone's too easy on you.

President Obama hasn't been challenged in public in a long time. He hasn't been challenged in private in a long time. So if Mr. Romney treats him with respect but not deference, if he really engages, challenges, questions and pushes, he just might knock the president off his stride.

There was something Mr. Romney did in the primary debates. When his competitors were answering questions, he didn't stand at the podium looking distracted. He'd turn and smile at them sweetly and encouragingly, as if he were thinking, "You're the cutest little shrimp." No one has looked at Mr. Obama like that since 2003. It's possible he wouldn't like it.

Everyone is waiting for the "Are you better off now ..." question, but that's a little complicated. No one knew Reagan was going to uncork it in 1980, and so it had a
chance to be devastating. This year, everyone knows it's coming. So maybe it won't come. Mr. Obama surely will have memorized a response. Or maybe he will bring it up first. "I'd actually like to talk about whether some people are better off now. It's a complicated question, but teachers and firefighters who've kept their jobs because of what we did might say they're better off . . ."

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Mr. Romney should be wondering Which Obama he'll meet.

More-in-Sorrow-Than-in-Anger Obama? He patiently explains, until your eyes cross, the real facts of the economy and the beginning of recovery, the competing and even contradictory forces that determine outcomes. He speaks in soft, rounded phrases.

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Faux-Humble Obama? I've made some mistakes, I'll admit it. I didn't always do so well explaining exactly what I was doing, in terms of policy, and all the reasons why. I haven't been perfect, but I wasn't wrong to help people get through the height of the crisis. I've learned a lot, but I didn't need to be told to save the U.S. auto industry.

Perturbable Obama? This is a proud man. He doesn't like to be questioned too closely, as he showed when he was pressed on Univision last week.

Rope-a-Dope Obama? As he showed on "60 Minutes," he can make it up as he goes along when he feels he needs to. If you endlessly correct his numbers, it could leave you sputtering digits, slinging factoids, losing the larger point.

Cool McCool? This Obama is tall, friendly, shows up on "The View" and has a smile so big it wrinkles his nose. But he can refer to himself as "eye candy," and reminds you of the old McCain commercial: "He's the biggest celebrity in the world."

Maybe Mr. Romney will meet all five.

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Mitt Romney still sounds, at this late date in the campaign, as if he's talking to Republicans. But they don't have to be persuaded, they think Mr. Obama is a disaster and want him out. He should be talking to independents, centrists, suburban women, those who might be won over. A lot of them would be grateful to be impressed.

In that area, an idea. In 1980, a lot of people thought incumbent Jimmy Carter wasn't cutting it. It wasn't personal, he just didn't have the right answers for the problems at hand. But people had real doubts about Ronald Reagan—he was too shoot-from-the-hip, he'd start World War III. These were understandable reservations! He had to prove he was a pair of safe hands.
People think Mr. Romney's rich, doesn't understand regular people's lives. They're not sure he can turn things around. He has to prove he's a pair of safe hands.

One way to get at that: People hate it that Washington doesn't work anymore, that it's incapable of solving problems, that it can't even pass a budget. There is widespread knowledge that Mr. Obama, whatever his virtues, doesn't work well with others—he can't negotiate, can't bend them to his will, doesn't really listen, can't work it out, can't win them over. It's all stasis now. And will be if he is re-elected. The complaint that he is at once convinced, detached and uninterested is heard not only in Washington and among Republicans, but among foreign leaders.

Maybe Mr. Romney can note that he once ran a great state, that he faced a legislature dominated by the other party, that he worked with them, heard them, negotiated with them, and that together they produced a great deal. Even a health-care bill that didn't tear the state apart, didn't cause widespread bitterness, didn't inspire broad public resentment. It was, in these respects, the opposite of ObamaCare. Mr. Romney learned much from the experience about what works locally and can work nationally. It's actually not a story to avoid, it is a story worth telling.

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