

# Herman Cain makes splash at first 2012 GOP debate

Posted by Brian Montopoli



Herman Cain at the first debate for potential 2012 GOP presidential candidates.

(Credit: Fox News)

To get an idea of the strangeness of the first debate of the 2012 presidential cycle - the unofficial kickoff to the 2012 GOP race - consider this: Based on the Fox News focus group conducted immediately following the event, Herman Cain is about to run away with the GOP nomination.

If you're wondering who that is, you're not alone: The former Godfather's Pizza CEO, who barely registers in national polls, has never held elected office. And he is seen as having virtually no chance to win the GOP nomination.

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But the vast majority of the people sitting in with Republican pollster Frank Luntz [said Cain had won the debate with his directness and straightforward delivery](#). (This despite the fact that when asked about what he would do in Afghanistan, he replied that he would rely on "the experts and their advice and their input." The Fox News debate moderators seemed incredulous that he did not offer a position.) Luntz appeared blown away by the response to Cain, which he cast as unprecedented. "Something very special happened this evening," he said.

Perhaps. But the debate was seen as such a non-event inside the beltway that House Speaker John Boehner spent his evening not watching it, opting instead to have a few drinks at a Washington steakhouse. "I'll read about it tomorrow," he [told Hotsheet](#).

The absence of the biggest-name potential candidates - Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, even Donald Trump - meant the event it generated little attention despite its status as the first debate of the cycle. Among the five men onstage - Cain, former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, Texas Rep. Ron Paul, former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson and former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum - only Pawlenty is seen by Washington insiders as having a legitimate shot at the GOP nomination.



Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty at the first debate for potential 2012 GOP presidential candidates

(Credit: Fox News)

Pawlenty's goal was to look presidential - despite his relatively unheralded company - and he largely pulled it off. The toughest moment for the former governor was when he was asked to defend his past support for a cap-and-trade energy policy, which got a smattering of boos. Pawlenty explained himself in part by saying, literally, "nobody's perfect."

In perhaps his most interesting response of the night, he notably declined to take a shot at likely rival Mitt Romney over Romney's Massachusetts health care law.

"Governor Romney's not here to defend himself so I'm not going to pick on him or the position he took in Massachusetts," Pawlenty said. The intraparty sparring, it appears, will have to wait.

Pawlenty did find a way to go after President Obama on foreign policy -- despite the boost Mr. Obama got from the killing of Osama bin Laden. He said that while the president "did a good job and I tip my cap to him in that moment," the raid on bin Laden is "not the sum total" of Mr. Obama's foreign policy record. In other areas, Pawlenty insisted, the president has been "weak."

"The issues that have come up while he's been president, he's gotten them wrong strategically every single time," Pawlenty said. At one point, he referred to the United Nations as "pathetic."

Santorum, who was relatively combative much of the evening, complained that Mr. Obama "sided with the mullahs" during the protests in Iran.

"If you look at what President Obama has done right in foreign policy, it has always been a continuation of the Bush policies," said Santorum, who said Mr. Obama has "gotten it wrong" every other time.

The 90-minute debate took place at the Peace Center in Greenville, South Carolina, a key early voting state. The candidates were not asked to engage with one another, limiting the fireworks.



Tim Pawlenty, Ron Paul, Herman Cain, Gary Johnson and Rick Santorum

(Credit: CBS/AP)

The first applause of the evening came for Paul, who said the killing of bin Laden was a good opportunity to end the war in Afghanistan. Johnson, a fellow Libertarian, echoed that sentiment, saying the troops should come home "tomorrow."

Asked if they would support waterboarding terror suspects under certain circumstances - an issue rekindled by the killing of bin Laden, Paul, Pawlenty and Santorum raised their hands. Paul and Johnson did not. Both Paul and Johnson also discussed their support for barring the federal government from making drugs illegal. (Moderators pressed Paul on heroin specifically.) Paul drew another distinction with most of the men onstage when he said all foreign aid to the Middle East should be cut and that America should not be running secret CIA prisons.

Johnson, who supports abortion rights, became frustrated with debate moderators at one point, complaining he was not being asked enough questions. He also received the most frivolous question of the night, asked what his reality show would be about if he were offered one.

Santorum was pressed all night on being an extremist - he denied being "anti-Islam" or too socially conservative to win a general election - and pointed to his past electoral successes to cast himself as electable when debate moderators asked if Mr. Obama is unbeatable. (Unsurprisingly, he left out the 18 percentage point drubbing he took in losing his Senate seat in 2006.)

The also-ran nature of the debate was reflected in the fact that moderators asked a cluster of questions

focused on the potential candidates who were not present. Paul was asked if Rep. Michele Bachmann had taken his mantle of Tea Party leader; Pawlenty was asked his thoughts on Huckabee. ("I love the Huck," he replied, awkwardly.)

The economy is the most important issue for a plurality of Americans, and the candidates certainly seized on it. Pawlenty, for one, called the National Labor Relations Board's bid to keep Boeing from building Dreamliner 787s at a nonunion plant in South Carolina "preposterous."

It was a good issue for Pawlenty (and Cain, too, who also cited it), because it allowed them to rail against big government, cast themselves as job creators, and spotlight an issue important to South Carolina voters. That's an opportunity they weren't going to pass up. (Indeed, Pawlenty focused on the same issue in a [CBS News interview before the debate](#).)

Polls show a wide-open Republican race led by Romney, Huckabee and Trump, and Thursday night's likely-little-watched festivities were unlikely to move the numbers all that much. For the unknown candidates it was a chance to make a splash - and from that perspective, Cain certainly seems to have acquitted himself nicely. But with most eyes focused elsewhere, Thursday night is likely to be remembered -- if it's remembered at all -- as a footnote in the march to the nomination.

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