

# Opinion: When will the campaign get serious?

By Thomas Sowell

The Republican candidates' circular firing squad now seems to be using machine guns. Whoever the eventual "last man standing" turns out to be, he may not be standing very tall or very steadily on his feet – and he may be a pushover for Barack Obama in the general election, thanks to fellow Republicans.

Whether you are a Democrat, a Republican or an independent, this is a very serious and historically crucial time for the United States of America. What Mitt Romney did or did not do when he was with Bain Capital, or what Newt Gingrich did or did not say to his ex-wife, are things that should be left for the tabloids.

With the economy still faltering and Iran on its way to getting nuclear bombs, surely we can get serious about the issues facing this nation. Or can we?



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Mitt Romney's boasts about what he did at Bain Capital are as irrelevant as Newt Gingrich's demagogic attacks on Romney's role there. Romney is not running to become head of Bain Capital.

While Gingrich backed away from his demagoguery about Bain Capital, Romney is continuing to press ahead with his charges that Gingrich was a lobbyist for Freddie Mac. As someone who has been a consultant, but never a lobbyist, I know the difference.

As a consultant, I have offered advice to people in government and in private organizations, both businesses and non-profit organizations. But I have never gone to a government official to urge that official to make a decision favorable to those who were paying me, or to those for whom I did free consulting.

It takes two to tango, and lobbying requires not only a lobbyist but also someone who is being lobbied. With more than 500 people in Congress alone who could have been lobbied, and additional officials in the bureaucracies, if Romney cannot find even a single person to say that Gingrich lobbied him or her, then it is long past time for him to either put up or shut up.

On the other hand, if Romney just wants to sling a lot of mud in Newt's direction and hope that some of it sticks, then that should tell the voters a lot about Romney's character.

So much of what has been said by various Republican candidates, as well as by the media, has been in the nature of unsubstantiated, peripheral or irrelevant talking points for or against particular candidates, rather than serious statements about serious issues confronting the nation.

So common has this approach become that even some conservative writers have come to the defense of John King, the CNN reporter who opened the South Carolina debate with a question about Newt Gingrich's former wife. These writers have declared that question "legitimate," in some undefined sense.

If all that "legitimate" means is that John King was not doing anything that many other reporters would have done in the same

circumstances, that is making common practice a substitute for our own judgments about what is and is not relevant in a given context. Neither the audience in that room nor the millions watching on television were there to find out about Newt Gingrich's marital problems. If it is a common practice for the media to focus on such things, so much the worse for the media – and for the country.

“The politics of personal destruction” – as Bill Clinton called it, and as he himself practiced it – is not the way to solve the nation's problems. It has already poisoned the well of political discourse this season and claimed Herman Cain as its first victim, on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations by women with checkered pasts of their own.

Whether Herman Cain was good, bad or indifferent as a candidate, and whether his chances of winning the Republican nomination were substantial or non-existent is not the issue. Nor is this the issue as regards Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney or any other candidate.

Poisoning the well of political discourse may be one of the reasons why we see such unsatisfactory sets of candidates for political office in both parties, not only this year but in previous election years as well.

Many able and decent people are understandably reluctant to subject themselves and their families to a mud-slinging contest or to media “gotcha” questions. The creeping acceptance of such practices is hardly a justification, but is itself part of the degeneration of our times.

The time is long overdue to get serious.

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