

Did 'tough guy' tactics against Bachmann hurt Pawlenty more than they helped him?



REUTERS/Charlie Neibergall/Heated exchanges between Michele Bachmann and Tim Pawlenty dominated the debate's first hour.

Analysis by Doug Grow | Friday, Aug. 12, 2011

AMES, Iowa — Tim Pawlenty didn't back off Thursday night, and he didn't pull punches. Instead, he blasted fellow Minnesotan Michele Bachmann and took some swings at Mitt Romney.

But did Tim Pawlenty, tough guy, end up doing even more damage to his already faltering campaign for the presidency in last night's Republican Party debate?

National pundits seem to think so.

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Mark Shields, a public television commentator and nationally syndicated columnist, was among those who thought Pawlenty hurt himself more than Bachmann.

"When you have a multiple candidate debate," said Shields, "and candidate A goes after candidate B, then, usually candidate C is helped. But who was candidate C?"

Early on, Minnesotans stole the show

For the first portion of the two-hour debate aired by Fox News, Pawlenty and Bachmann stole the show from Romney, Rick Santorum, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman and Ron Paul.

But at times, the two sounded more like the Bickersons than presidential candidates.

It wasn't all their fault. They were goaded by Fox's Chris Wallace, just 11 minutes into the debate.

Wallace noted that Pawlenty has said that Bachmann has no record of accomplishment in Congress and gave a vague comment about whether Bachmann's migraines should be an issue in the campaign.

Pawlenty denied that he'd hinted Bachmann's headaches should be an issue but he jumped on her record in Congress.

"She's done wonderful things in her life," but she's accomplished nothing in Congress, Pawlenty said.

He then went on to list his accomplishments as a governor.

Bachmann blasted back.

"Governor, when you were governor, you supported cap and trade, you said the era of small government was over," she said. She added that he also had supported mandatory health care programs.

Those were just the jabs. Then she got tough.

"That sounds more like Barack Obama if you ask me," she said. "I have a record of fighting Barack Obama in Congress."

Among other things, she proudly pointed to the "light bulb freedom of choice act" she had introduced.

Pawlenty wasn't going to let this pass.

"She has a record of misstatements and false statements and she's done it again," Pawlenty said. "She says she has a titanium spine. But it's results we need."

Half laughing, half snarling, he added that whatever Bachmann is doing in Congress is backfiring.

"Please stop — you're killing us," he said.

Bachmann, of course, had to counter.

"I was the tip of the spear fighting Obamacare." She rattled off more issues, saying, "I fought when others ran."

Debate messages mostly aimed at straw poll participants

The debate was televised nationally, but most of the candidates were aiming their messages at a very small audience, the estimated 10,000 people participating in Saturday's straw poll. (Huntsman was the one debater who seemed to be aiming his message to a national audience.

Good thing, too, because he came across as a moderate in this crowd, and it's not moderates who will be showing up for the straw poll.)

But the Bachmann-Pawlenty insults seemed to be aimed at the smallest of audiences — each other.

For the other candidates, for people in the audience, the exchanges seemed almost uncomfortable.

That dispute was only the first of two spats between the two. There was another long, personal dispute over Bachmann's support of Pawlenty's cigarette fee/tax increase when he was governor and she was a state senator.

Pawlenty now says the cigarette fee was a mistake but that he was one of just four governors who received an "A" grade from the Cato Institute for his great management of the state. (He also said that "my last budget ended June 30 of this year and it ended with a surplus." This is one of those things that is technically correct but overlooks the estimated \$5 billion deficit for the biennium ahead.)

Bachmann said she supported the cigarette tax fee only because it was tied to pro-life provisions she wanted enacted.

Pawlenty called her "illogical."

Bachmann responded, "The governor put us in a box, and I chose to preserve life."

As this spat was unfolding, Santorum was almost jumping up and down. "I haven't had a chance to say a whole lot," he said.

There was truth to that.

So, were the Pawlenty-Bachmann exchanges self-inflicted damage to both?

Pawlenty approach planned

After the debate, Pawlenty's spinners indicated that the confrontational approach was planned.

"You saw a little of the hockey player in him," said Matt Whitaker.

Another T-Paw spinner, Nick Ayers, was more direct.

"Look, after what happened before, he had to do this," said Ayers. "If he wouldn't have, it would have looked like he was backing down again."

Ayers was referring to the mumbling Pawlenty had done in a New Hampshire debate when standing next to Romney. Pawlenty — who had been highly critical of Romney's Massachusetts health care plan in television appearances — refused to criticize Romney face to face.

The political consensus after that encounter: He'd come across as weak.

It should be noted, he did take a couple of shots at Romney in last night's debate.

The first came when Pawlenty was attacking Obama for not having an economic plan.

"If you can find his plan," he told the audience, "I'll come to your house and cook your dinner, or if you'd rather, I'll mow your lawn. In Mitt's case, I'll just mow an acre."

This was an apparent slap at Romney's wealth.

One of the moderators asked Romney if he wanted to respond.

"Fine, just fine," said Romney, waving off Pawlenty's barb.

Later, Pawlenty took more substantive shots at Romney's record as governor. But those attacks drew no response from Romney — or the audience.

Again, remember, this debate likely will be little remembered, but Saturday's straw poll may have a longer shelf life.

So who was most impressive?

Based on applause lines, Ron Paul had the most enthusiastic supporters in the crowd. But Bachmann and Santorum also were drawing some fairly passionate responses.

The candidates mostly were attempting to downplay straw poll expectations.

Bachmann has been the leader in public polls.

But her spinners were talking about how "we're the new kids on the block. We've only been in the game five weeks."

Pawlenty's spinners were trying to say that a low showing in the straw poll would not be fatal to his chances of winning the nomination a year from now.

"Remember," said Ayars, "John McCain's campaign was declared dead in 2007. Staff imploded, poll numbers were low."

But, of course, he ended up as the nominee.

If starting low is good, then maybe Pawlenty's in great shape. But it's hard to imagine that this debate will be the start of any miracle turnaround.

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