



John Woolley and Gerhard Peters

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PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

1960 and 1976 - 2012

Republican Candidates Debate in Jacksonville, Florida

January 26, 2012

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PARTICIPANTS:

Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (GA); Representative Ron Paul (TX); Former Governor Mitt Romney (MA); and Former Senator Rick Santorum (PA)

MODERATOR:

Wolf Blitzer (CNN)

BLITZER: Candidates, please take your podiums while I tell you more about how this debate will work tonight.

I'll be the moderator. And as I mentioned, our partners from the Republican Party of Florida and the Hispanic Leadership Network will also ask questions. I'll follow up and try to guide the discussion.

Candidates, I'll try to make sure each of you gets your fair share of questions. You'll have one minute to answer, 30 seconds for follow ups and rebuttals. And I'll certainly make sure you get time to respond if you're singled out for criticism.

Now let's have the candidates introduce themselves to Florida voters.

Please keep it short. Here is an example: I'm Wolf Blitzer and I'm thrilled to be here on the campus of the University of North Florida in Jacksonville.

Senator Santorum, let's begin with you.

SANTORUM: I'm Rick Santorum, and I'm thrilled to be here on the campus of North Florida. *[laughter]* *[applause]*

And I'm especially thrilled because I'm here with a North Florida resident who lives right down the beach from Jacksonville, my mom, who is 93 years old, who is with me here tonight. *[applause]*

I better just stop right there.

GINGRICH: I'm Newt Gingrich, from the neighboring state of Georgia. I'm delighted to be in Jacksonville, which will be the site of the next nuclear aircraft carrier battle group. *[applause]*

ROMNEY: I'm Mitt Romney, and I'm pleased to be here with my wife and my oldest son Tagg Romney. We're the parents of five sons, five daughters-in-law, 16 grandkids. And it's great to be back in Jacksonville.

Thank you. *[applause]*

PAUL: I'm Ron Paul. I'm a congressman from Texas, 12 terms.

I am the champion of a sound monetary system, a gold standard, as it is under the Constitution, and a foreign policy based on strength which rejects the notion that we should be the policemen of the world and that we should be a nation builder. *[applause]*

BLITZER: All right. Let's start with a question from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hello.

Can you tell me what specific actions you'll take to address the costly consequences of illegal immigration while preserving the rights of those who seek to immigrate legally?

BLITZER: All right.

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Senator Santorum, let's take that question. But also, in the course of that question, express your opinion on what we heard from Governor Romney, that self-deportation, or illegal immigrants leaving the country voluntarily, is a possible solution.

SANTORUM: Well, the possible solution is -- I actually agree with Governor Romney. The bottom line is that we need to enforce the laws in this country.

We are a country of laws. People come to this country. My grandfather came to this country because he wanted to come to a country that respected him. And a country that respects you is a country that lives by the laws that they have. And the first act when they come to this country, is to disobey a law, it's not a particularly welcome way to enter this country. What I've said is from the very beginning, that we -- we have to have a country that not only do you respect the law when you come here, but you respect the law when you stay here.

And people who have come to this country illegally have broken the law repeatedly. If you're here, unless you're here on a trust fund, you've been working illegally. You've probably stolen someone's Social Security number, illegally. And so it's not just one thing that you've done wrong, you've done a lot of things wrong. And as a result of that, I believe that people should no -- should not be able to stay here.

And so I think we need to enforce the law at the border, secure the border. Secondly, we need to have employer enforcement, which means E-verify and then we need to have not only employers sanctioned, but we have to have people who are found who are working here illegally, they need to be deported. That is again the principle of having a rule of law and living by it. I am very much in favor of immigration. I'm not someone -- my dad came to this country and I'm someone who believes that -- that we need immigration. We are not replacing ourselves.

We have -- we need not only immigration for -- to keep our population going, but we need immigration because immigrants bring a vitality and a love of this country that is -- infuses this country with -- with great energy. And so, I support legal immigration, but we need to enforce the law and in fact, if you don't create an opportunity for people to work, they will leave because they can't afford to stay here.

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich, you've suggested that self-deportation as advocated by Governor Romney is in your words, "An Obama level fantasy." Why?

GINGRICH: Well look, I think that first of all, you should control the border, which I have pledged to do by January 1, 2014. You should fix legal immigration in terms of visas so people can come and go easily -- more easily than doing it illegally. You should also make deportation easier so when you deport people who shouldn't be here. The 13 gang members, for example. It should be very quick and very clear.

You should have a guest worker program, probably run by American Express, Visa or MasterCard so they minimize fraud, which the federal government won't do. And you should have much stronger employer penalties at that point because you can validate it. I actually agree that self-deportation will occur if you're single. If you've only been here a short time. And there are millions of people who faced with that, would go back home, file for a guest worker program and might or might not come back.

The one group I singled out, were people who have been here a very long time who are married, who may well have children and grandchildren. And I would just suggest that grandmothers or grandfathers aren't likely to self-deport. And then you've got a question. I -- I offered a proposal, a citizen panel to review whether or not somebody who had been here a very long time, who had family and who had an American family willing to sponsor them, should be allowed to get residency, but not citizenship so that they would be able to stay within the law, but would not have any chance of becoming a citizen, unless they went back home. I don't think grandmothers and grandfathers will self-deport.

BLITZER: Governor Romney, the few times and I think it was only once, that they experimented with self-deportation, only a handful of individuals voluntarily left. What makes you think that -- that program could work?

ROMNEY: Well, you've just heard the last two speakers also indicate that they support the concept of self-deportation. It's very simply this, which is for those who come into the country legally, they would be given an identification card that points out they're able to work here and then you have an E-verify system that's effective and efficient so that employers can determine who is legal here and if employers hire someone without a card, or without checking to see if it's been counterfeited, then those employers would be severely sanctioned.

If you do that, people who have come here illegally won't be able to find work. And over time, those people would tend to leave the country, or self-deport. I don't think anyone is interested in going around and rounding up people around the country and deporting 11 million Americans -- or, excuse me 11 million illegal immigrants into America. Now, let's look at -- and -- and I know people said, but isn't that unfair to those 11 million that are here and have lived their lives here and perhaps raised children here? But I think it's important to remember, that there are three groups of people that are of concern to us.

One are those that have come here illegally, 11 million. The second is the group of people who are brought over by coyotes and who are in many cases abused by virtue of coming into this country illegally. And the third, are the four to five million people who are waiting at home in their own nations trying to get here legally. They have family members here asking them to come here. Grandparents and uncles and aunts. Those are the people we have a responsibility for. And the second group as well, those that are abused. We -- we're concerned about them.

Let's focus our attention on how to make legal immigration work and stop illegal immigration.

BLITZER: All right. Governor Paul -- sorry, excuse me, Congressman Paul you're from Texas. The state with the longest border with Mexico. Is this a viable option, what we just heard?

PAUL: Well, I'd talk about it, but I don't see it as being very practical. I think it's a much bigger problem.

You can't deal with immigration without dealing with the economy. The weaker the economy, the more resentment there is when illegals come in. If you have a healthy, vibrant economy, it's not a problem; we're usually looking for workers.

Even under today's circumstances, a lot of businesses are looking for workers and they don't have them. They're not as well-trained here.

But also, the way we're handling our borders is actually hurting our economy because the businesspeople -- you know, visitors have a hard time coming in. I mean, we don't have a well-managed border. So I think we need more resources and I think most of the other candidates would agree we need more resources. But where are the resources going to come from?

I have a suggestion. I think we spend way too much time worrying about the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Use some of those resources on our own border. *[applause]*

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich, you had an ad, but you pulled it this week, in which you described Governor Romney as the most anti-immigrant candidate. Why did you do that?

GINGRICH: Why did we describe him that way?

Because, in the original conversations about deportation, the position I took, which he attacked pretty ferociously, was that grandmothers and grandfathers aren't going to be successfully deported. We're not -- we as a nation are not going to walk into some family -- and by the way, they're going to end up in a church, which will declare them a sanctuary. We're not going to walk in there and grab a grandmother out and then kick them out.

We're not going -- and I think you have to be realistic in your indignation. I want to control the border. I want English to be the official language of government. I want us to have a lot of changes. *[applause]*

I am prepared to be very tough and very bold, but I'm also prepared to be realistic, because I've actually had to pass legislation in Washington and I don't believe an unrealistic promise is going to get through, but I do believe, if there's some level of humanity for people who have been here a long time, we can pass legislation that will decisively reduce illegality, decisively control the border and will once again mean the people who are in America are here legally.

BLITZER: I just want to make sure I understand. Is he still the most anti-immigrant candidate?

GINGRICH: I think, of the four of us, yes.

BLITZER: Go ahead, Governor.

ROMNEY: That's simply unexcusable. That's inexcusable. And, actually, Senator Marco Rubio came to my defense and said that ad was inexcusable and inflammatory and inappropriate.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not anti-immigrant. My father was born in Mexico. My wife's father was born in Wales. They came to this country. The idea that I'm anti-immigrant is repulsive.

Don't use a term like that. You can say we disagree on certain policies, but to say that enforcing the U.S. law to protect our borders, to welcome people here legally, to expand legal immigration, as I have proved, that that's somehow anti-immigrant is simply the kind of over-the-top rhetoric that has characterized American politics too long.

And I'm glad that Marco Rubio called you out on it. I'm glad you withdrew it. I think you should apologize for it, and I think you should recognize that having differences of opinions on issues does not justify labeling people with highly charged epithets.

GINGRICH: I'll tell you what...*[applause]*

I'll give you an opportunity to self-describe. You tell me what language you would use to describe somebody who thinks that deporting a grandmother or a grandfather from their family -- just tell me the language. I'm perfectly happy for you to explain what language you'd use.

ROMNEY: Mr. Speaker, I think I described following the law as it exists in this country, which is to say, I'm not going around and rounding people up and deporting them.

What I said was, people who come here legally get a work permit. People who do not come here legally do not get a work permit. Those who don't get work will tend, over time, to self-deport.

I'm not going to go find grandmothers and take them out of their homes and deport them. Those are your words, not my words. And to use that rhetoric suggests to people that somehow, if you're not willing to keep people here who violated the law, that you're anti-immigrant. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I am pro-immigrant. I want people to come to America with skill and vitality and vibrance. I want them to come legally. There are grandmothers that live on the other side of the border that are waiting to come here legally. I want them to come here,

too, not just those that are already here. [applause]

GINGRICH: Well, so we have gone -- we've gone from your Washington attack when I first proposed this and you said it was outrageous; it would be a magnet to you're accepting the fact that, you know, a family is going to take care of their grandmother or their grandfather.

The idea that you are going to push them out in some form by simply saying they can't go get a job -- I think the grandmother is still going to be here. All I want to do is to allow the grandmother to be here legally with some rights to have residency but not citizenship, so that he or she can finish their life with dignity within the law. [applause]

ROMNEY: You know, our problem is not 11 million grandmothers. Our problem is -- all right. [applause]

Our problem is 11 million people getting jobs that many Americans, legal immigrants, would like to have. It's school kids in schools that districts are having a hard time paying for. It's people getting free health care because we are required under the law to provide that health care.

And the real concern is the people who want to come here legally. Let's let legal immigrants come here. Let's stop illegal immigration. [applause]

BLITZER: The rhetoric on immigration, Governor, has been intense, as you well know, as all four of you know, and anyone who watches television knows. You had an ad running saying that Speaker Gingrich called Spanish "the language of the ghetto."

What do you mean by that?

ROMNEY: I haven't seen the ad, so I'm sorry. I don't get to see all the TV ads. Did he say that?

BLITZER: Did you say that?

GINGRICH: No. What I said was, we want everybody to learn English because we don't -- and I didn't use the word "Spanish." We do not want anyone trapped in a situation where they cannot get a commercial job, they cannot rise, and virtually every parent of every ethnic group -- and by the way, they are 94 languages spoken at the Miami-Dade College -- 94 languages. And that's why I think English should be the official language of government, and that's why I think every young American should learn English.

And my point was, no one should be trapped in a linguistics situation where they can't go out and get a job and they can't go out and work. So I would say as much as Governor Romney doesn't particularly like my use of language, I found his use of language and his deliberate distortion equally offensive. [applause]

ROMNEY: I'd like -- I doubt that's my ad, but we'll take a look and find out. There are a bunch of ads out there that are being organized by other people.

But I think our position on English in our schools and in our nation is the same, which I believe English should be the official language of the United States, as it is. I also believe that in our schools, we should teach kids in English.

So, when I was governor, I fought for -- actually, before I was governor, I fought for, during my election and thereafter, a program to have English immersion in our schools so our kids could learn in English. I think we agree on this, which is, you know what? Kids in this country should learn English so they can have all the jobs and all the opportunity of people who are here.

BLITZER: I want to bring Congressman Paul and Senator Santorum into this. But let's take this question from Miami.

CNN en Espanol's Juan Carlos Lopez has a guest there.

LOPEZ: Hola, Wolf.

We're at the viewing party for the Hispanic Leadership Network, and it really is a party. They are holding their yearly conference, a meeting of Hispanic Republican leaders. And I'm joined by Raquel Rodriguez. She's an attorney in Miami. She practices business and international law, and she has a question for the candidates.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, good evening.

The U.S. has been largely away in its foreign and trade policy with Latin America. In the meantime, Iran and China have been increasing their influence over an involvement in Latin America through the leftist and left-leaning governments.

What would each of you do as president to more deeply engage in Latin America and, importantly, to support the governments and the political parties that support democracy and free markets?

BLITZER: Congressman Paul?

PAUL: Well, I think free trade is the answer. Free trade is an answer to a lot of conflicts around the world, so I'm always promoting free trade. And you might add Cuba, too. I think we would be a lot better off with Cuba, trading with Cuba.

[*applause*]

So, I think the more you can do to promote this free trade, the better off we'll be. But as far as us having an obligation, a military or a financial obligation to go down and dictate to them what government they should have, I don't like that idea.

I would work with the people and encourage free trade, and try to set a standard here where countries in Central America or South America or any place in the world would want to emulate us and set the standards that we have. Unfortunately, sometimes we slip up on our standards and we go around the world and we try to force ourselves on others.

I don't think the nations in South America and Central America necessarily want us to come down there and dictate which government they should have. And yet, I believe with friendship and trade, you can have a lot of influence, and I strongly believe that it's time we have friendship and trade with Cuba. [*applause*]

BLITZER: Senator Santorum, are you with Congressman Paul?

SANTORUM: No, I'm not with Congressman Paul and I'm not with Barack Obama on this issue.

Our policy in Central and South America under this administration has been abysmal. The way we have treated, in particular, countries like Honduras, Honduras, which stood up for the rule of law, which threw out a would-be dictator who was using the Chavez playbook from Venezuela in order to try to run for re-election in Honduras, and the United States government, instead of standing behind the -- the people in the parliament, the people in the Supreme Court, who tried to enforce the constitution of Honduras -- instead of siding with them, the Democrats, President Obama sided with two other people in South America -- excuse me -- Central America and South America. Chavez and Castro and Obama sided against the people of Honduras.

This is a consistent policy of siding with the leftists, siding with the Marxists, siding with those who don't support democracy, not standing up for our friends in Colombia, not standing up for our friends who want to engage and support America, who want to be great trading partners and great allies for our country, to be able to form that kind of bond that is so essential in our own hemisphere.

The European Union understood how important it was for diverse people to be able to come together in an economic unit. We only -- not only have to come together as an economic unit, but the threat of terrorism, the threat of Iran now in Venezuela and in other places, and Cuba and in Nicaragua, the threat of radical Islam growing in that region -- is it important for -- it's absolutely important for us to have a president who understands that threat and understands the solution is closer ties. I will visit that area of the world, repeatedly, to solidify those ties when I become president.

BLITZER: Let me let Congressman Paul...[*applause*]... quickly respond. [*applause*]

PAUL: The -- the senator mentioned standing up for some of these nations, but he doesn't define it, but standing up for nations like this usually means that we impose ourselves, go and pick the dictators, undermine certain governments, also sending them a lot of money.

It doesn't work. Most of the time, this backfires. They resent us. We can achieve what he wants in a much different way than us using the bully attitude that you will do it our way. This is the...[*applause*]

This is not a benefit to us. And besides, where do you get the troops and where are you going to get the money? Because you're talking about force. And I -- I know of a much better way than using force to get along with people.

SANTORUM: I don't know where...[*applause*]

I don't know what answer Congressman Paul was listening to. He obviously wasn't listening to my answer. [*applause*]

What I talked about is building strong economic relationships, strong national security relationships. No one's talking about force. Nobody's talking about going into Cuba or going into Venezuela. It's talking about the other countries in the region, which are being influenced greatly by those countries, that are tending and moving toward those militant socialists, instead of the United States.

Why? Because we've ignored them. You've got a president of the United States that held a Colombian free trade agreement - Colombia, who's out there on the front lines, working with us against the narco- terrorists, standing up to Chavez in South America. And what did we do?

For political -- domestic political purposes, the president of the United States sided with organized labor and the environmental groups and held Colombia hanging out to dry for three years. We cannot do that to our friends in South America. [*applause*]

BLITZER: All right, we're going to -- we're going to come back to this. [*applause*]

We're going to come back to Cuba, as well. But stand by for that.

We did double-check, just now, Governor, that ad that we talked about, where I quoted you as saying that Speaker Gingrich called Spanish "the language of the ghetto" -- we just double-checked. It was one of your ads. It's running here in Florida in - on the radio. And at the end you say, "I'm Mitt Romney and I approved this ad."

So it is -- it is here. [*booing*]

ROMNEY: Let me ask -- let me ask a question.

Let me ask the speaker a question. Did you say what the ad says or not? I don't know.

GINGRICH: It's taken totally out of context.

ROMNEY: Oh, OK, he said it.

GINGRICH: I did not -- no. I did not say it about Spanish. I said, in general, about all languages. We are better for children to learn English in general, period. [*applause*]

ROMNEY: Let's take a look at what he said. [*applause*]

BLITZER: All right. We have a very important subject, housing. Not only here in Florida, foreclosures really, really bad, but all over the country. And a lot of people are wondering if the federal government contributed to the housing collapse in recent years.

We got a question that came in to us and -- let me put it up there and I'll read it to you. "How would you phase out Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac? Does the private mortgage industry need additional regulation?" -- that from William Schmidt.

Let me start with Governor Romney.

ROMNEY: Well, I think you know that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were a big part of why we have the housing crisis in the nation that we have. And we've had this discussion before.

Speaker Gingrich was hired by Freddie Mac to promote them, to -- to influence other people throughout Washington, encouraging them to -- not to dismantle these two entities. I think that was an enormous mistake. I think, instead, we should have had a whistle-blower and not horn-tooter.

He should have stood up and said, look, these things are a disaster; this is a crisis. He should have been anxiously telling the American people that these entities were causing a housing bubble that would cause a collapse that we've seen here in Florida and around the country. And are they a problem today? Absolutely. They're offering mortgages, again to people who can't possibly repay them. We're creating another housing bubble, which will hurt the American people.

The right course for our -- for our housing industry is to get people back to work so they can buy homes again. We have 9.9 percent unemployment in Florida. It's unthinkable, 18 percent real unemployment here. Get people back to work. We'll get people into homes. Get the foreclosures out of the system. Let people get into homes, rent properties if necessary and get America's housing industry growing again.

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich?

GINGRICH: Let me start by saying, Florida is one of the two or three most hard hit states on foreclosures. How many of you know somebody who has had a house foreclosed? Just raise your hand. Raise your hand. [*applause*]

Okay. The governor has cheerfully -- the governor has cheerfully attacking me inaccurately and he knows it. The contracts we released from Freddie Mac said I would do no consulting, wrote in, no -- I mean no lobbying, none. But this is a more interesting story. We began digging in after Monday night because frankly I'd had about enough of this. We discovered to our shock, Governor Romney owns shares of both Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Governor Romney made a million dollars off of selling some of that. Governor Romney owns share -- has an investment in Goldman Sachs, which is today foreclosing on Floridians.

So maybe Governor Romney in the spirit of openness should tell us how much money he's made off of how many households that have been foreclosed by his investments? And let's be clear about that. [*applause*]

ROMNEY: First of all, my investments are not made by me. My investments for the last 10 years have been in a blind trust, managed by a trustee. Secondly, the investments that they've made, we've learned about this as we made our financial disclosure, have been in mutual funds and bonds. I don't own stock in either Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac. There are bonds that the investor has held through mutual funds. And Mr. Speaker, I know that sounds like an enormous revelation, but have you checked your own investments? You also have investments through mutual funds that also invest in Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. [*applause*]

Let me -- let me -- I've got more time. Let me -- let me -- let me just -- let me just continue. There's a big difference between buying like U.S. savings bonds and getting a return. That's a -- that's not taking money out of the United States, that's loaning money to the United States. And what my trustee did, is he loaned money to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and -- and they got paid interest of course, just like if you buy U.S. savings bonds. But what the speaker did, was to work as a spokesman to promote Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. To protect them from those people that wanted to take them down.

He got paid \$1.6 million to do that. He said his first contract indicated there would be no lobbying. But his second contract didn't have that prescription taken out of it. And so you have to ask yourself why is that? What he was doing was clearly promoting Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, in this case Freddie Mac to the tune of \$1.6 million. That is one of the reasons

we're in the trouble we're in.

BLITZER: Go ahead.

GINGRICH: Well, first of all, you'll notice that the governor wasn't aware of the ad he was running. He's not aware of the investments that were being made in his name.

ROMNEY: Of course, I can't it's a blind trust.

[*crosstalk*]

GINGRICH: ...compare my investments with his is like comparing a tiny mouse with a giant elephant. The fact -- the fact is...[*applause*]...that there is a very substantial question. You didn't give any instructions to -- to say, gee, let's not do this or let's not do that? You're very quick to draw the widest possible exaggeration. The fact is, the only time I ever spoke to the Congress about this issue was in July of 2008. The New York Times reported it. I told the Republicans in the House, vote no. Do not give them any money. They need to be reformed. And in answer to the question earlier, I would break each of them up into five or six separate units.

And over a five year period, I would wean them from all federal sponsorship because we need to get away from this gigantic systems.

BLITZER: Let me bring Congressman Paul, then Senator Santorum. [*applause*]

A follow up question to you both specifically. It seems they both acknowledge they both made money from Fannie and Freddie. Should they return that money?

PAUL: That -- that subject really doesn't interest me a whole lot. [*applause*]

But the question does. The -- the question is, what are we going to do about Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. It should have been auctioned off right after the crash came. It would have been cleansed by now. [*applause*]

It should have been sold. [*applause*]

But maybe it's my physician background, but I think an ounce of prevention is what we ought to talk about so we can quit doing this. But we know how the bubble came about. It was excessive credit, interest rates held too low, too long, the Federal Reserve responsible for that.

Community Reinvestment Act, which is Affirmative Action telling banks they have to make these risky loans. And at the same time, there was a line of credit which allowed Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to, you know, make more money. And it was -- it was assumed that they would always be protected.

Now, you can't argue. I've talked a long time about cutting off that credit from the Fed. I was trying to prevent this stuff. [*applause*]

Also, I opposed the Community Reinvestment Act, as well as I had legislation in 10 years before the bust came to remove that line of credit to the Treasury.

BLITZER: Senator Santorum?

SANTORUM: Well, I would just say, in answer to the question, that as I mentioned last debate, in 2006, I went out and authored a letter with 24 other senators asking for major reform of Freddie and Fannie, warning of a meltdown and a bubble in the housing market. I stood out, I stood tall, and tried to get a reform, and we couldn't do it. The reform we'd need is to gradually decrease the amount of mortgage that can be financed by Freddie -- or underwritten by Freddie and Fannie over time, keep reducing that until we get rid of Fannie and Freddie.

The bigger issue here is, these two gentlemen, who are out distracting from the most important issues we have been playing petty personal politics, can we set aside that Newt was a member of Congress and used the skills that he developed as a member of Congress to go out and advise companies -- and that's not the worst thing in the world -- and that Mitt Romney is a wealthy guy because worked hard and he's going out and working hard? And you guys should that alone and focus on the issues. [*applause*]

BLITZER: We're going to take a quick break, but we have a lot more to discuss. Coming up, the debate questions go to space, the final frontier.

Stay with us.

[*commercial break*]

BLITZER: We're continuing the debate here in Jacksonville, Florida.

Let's get to the issue of transparency, because voters out there, they want to know as much about you four gentlemen as possible before they vote.

Tax returns -- let me bring this to Speaker Gingrich.

Earlier this week, you said Governor Romney, after he released his taxes, you said that you were satisfied with the level of transparency of his personal finances when it comes to this. And I just want to reiterate and ask you, are you satisfied right now with the level of transparency as far as his personal finances?

GINGRICH: Wolf, you and I have a great relationship, it goes back a long way. I'm with him. This is a nonsense question. [applause]

Look, how about if the four of us agree for the rest of the evening, we'll actually talk about issues that relate to governing America?

BLITZER: But, Mr. Speaker, you made an issue of this, this week, when you said that, "He lives in a world of Swiss bank and Cayman Island bank accounts." I didn't say that. You did.

GINGRICH: I did. And I'm perfectly happy to say that on an interview on some TV show. But this is a national debate, where you have a chance to get the four of us to talk about a whole range of issues.

BLITZER: But if you make a serious accusation against Governor Romney like that, you need to explain that.

GINGRICH: I simply suggested -- [booing]

You want to try again? I mean --

ROMNEY: Wouldn't it be nice if people didn't make accusations somewhere else that they weren't willing to defend here? [applause]

GINGRICH: OK. All right.

Given that standard, Mitt, I did say I thought it was unusual. And I don't know of any American president who has had a Swiss bank account. I'd be glad for you to explain that sort of thing.

ROMNEY: OK. I will. I will. I'll say it again.

I have a trustee that manages my investments in a blind trust. That was so that I would avoid any conflicts of interest. That trustee indicated last week, when he was asked about this, he said that he wanted to diversify the investments that I had. And for awhile he had money in a Swiss account, reported in the U.S., full taxes paid on it, U.S. taxes.

There's nothing wrong with that. And I know that there may be some who try to make a deal of that, as you have publicly. But look, I think it's important for people to make sure that we don't castigate individuals who have been successful and try and, by innuendo, suggest there's something wrong with being successful and having investments and having a return on those investments.

Speaker, you've indicated that somehow I don't earn that money. I have earned the money that I have. I didn't inherit it.

I take risks. I make investments. Those investments lead to jobs being created in America.

I'm proud of being successful. I'm proud of being in the free enterprise system that creates jobs for other people. I'm not going to run from that.

I'm proud of the taxes I pay. My taxes, plus my charitable contributions, this year, 2011, will be about 40 percent.

So, look, let's put behind this idea of attacking me because of my investments or my money, and let's get Republicans to say, you know what? What you've accomplished in your life shouldn't be seen as a detriment, it should be seen as an asset to help America. [applause]

BLITZER: Mr. Speaker, I'm ready to move on, if you are.

GINGRICH: What?

BLITZER: I said I'm ready to move on to the next subject if you are.

GINGRICH: I'm happy to. I'm happy to simply say, you know, it would be nice if you had the same standard for other people that you would like applied to you and didn't enter into personal attacks about personal activities about which you are factually wrong. So I would be glad to have a truce with you, but it's a two-way truce. [booing] [applause]

ROMNEY: I'm happy on any occasion to describe the things that I believe with regards to the Speaker's background. We'll probably get a chance to do that as time goes on.

BLITZER: Mr. Speaker, explain why you think the money that he made over these many years, recent years, under your tax -- hold on. Mr. Speaker, under your tax plan -- we're talking about taxes right now. This is substance. Under your proposed tax plan, he would pay zero taxes. Explain that.

GINGRICH: Well, it would depend on whether the particular kind of payments he made were counted under that plan as capital gains or whether they were counted as regular income. But even as regular income, he would pay about the same. And I've said this.

This is where I'm the opposite of Obama. I believe we need to have somebody who fights for hardworking taxpayers.

My interest is in reducing everybody's tax here to 15 percent, not trying to raise his to the Obama level. So I proposed an alternative flat tax -- *[applause]*

You know, I have proposed an alternative flat tax that people could fill out where you could either keep the current system -- this is what they do in Hong Kong -- keep the current system with all of its deductions and all its paperwork, or you'd have a single page -- I earned this amount, I have this number of dependents, here is 15 percent. My goal is to shrink the government to fit the revenue, not to raise the revenue to catch up with the government.

And I'd be happy...*[applause]*

Let me just say, I'd -- I would be happy to have the Mitt Romney flat tax for every American to pay at that rate, and I haven't complained about the rate he pays.

BLITZER: Senator Santorum, most of the polls, almost all of the polls, want the wealthiest Americans to pay more in taxes in order to balance the budget. Why are they wrong, in your opinion?

SANTORUM: Because we need to have as much money funneling through this economy as possible. And the people who make those investments are people who have resources and wealth, and we want them to deploy that wealth in the most productive way possible.

And when you increase tax rates and you make things much more expensive to do -- in other words, the rate of return is not as profitable, then they tend to do things like investing in -- in nontaxable instruments and other things that don't employ people.

And so what I believe is we need to reduce taxes. I don't -- look, I'm honest. I don't reduce the higher -- top rate as much as these other folks do. I take the Reagan approach. Ronald Reagan had a 28 percent top rate. If it was good enough for Ronald Reagan, it's good enough for me. And that's what we put the top rate as. *[applause]*

And -- and we have a bottom rate of 10 percent. I believe in a differential. I don't believe in a flat tax. I believe in a simplified tax code with five deductions and -- and focus on simplify, creating two rates.

I disagree with Newt also on this. I don't believe in a zero capital gains tax rate. I don't think you need to get to zero to make sure that there's an efficient deployment of capital and investment.

I think, if you get to zero, then, in fact, guys like Mitt Romney, who, again, I give him -- I wish I made as much money as Mitt Romney, but...*[applause]*

But -- you know, but he wouldn't probably pay much at all in taxes. And I think that, as long as the tax is not one that deters a proper investment to be able to deploy capital and to get jobs created, then lower rates are better than zero when it comes to the issue of capital gains.

BLITZER: Are you with Ronald Reagan as far as the tax rates, as Senator Santorum has suggested, Congressman Paul?

PAUL: No, he taxed too much. My goal is to get rid of the 16th amendment. And the only way you can do that...*[applause]*

The only way you can do that is not run a welfare system and a warfare system in policing the world.

But I do want to address this subject about taxing the rich. That is not a solution. But I understand and really empathize with the people who talk about the 99 percent and the 1 percent.

Because there's a characteristic about what happens when you destroy a currency. There is a transfer of wealth from the middle class to the wealthy. And this has been going on for 40 years. So the middle class is shrinking. They are getting poorer and they're losing their jobs and they're losing their houses. But Wall Street isn't getting poorer. And they are the ones who are getting the bailout.

So we have to address the bailout and the system that favors a certain group over another group. If you don't have sound money and if you have a welfare state, no matter whether the welfare state is designed to help the poor, you know, the welfare system helps the wealthy.

And there has been this transfer of wealth. So, if we could stop all of these transfers to the wealthy class, but the solution isn't to tax the wealthy. If you give an honest product and customers buy that product, you deserve to keep that money and earn that money. But there's a big difference between those who earn money and those who rip us off through the government and the monetary system. *[applause]*

BLITZER: Congressman Paul, you're a physician. You're 76 years old. You would be the oldest president of the United States if you were elected. Are you prepared to release your medical records so voters out there know what your health is?

[laughter]

PAUL: Oh, obviously, because it's about one page, if even that long. But...[laughter]

But I'm willing to...[applause]

I'm willing to challenge any of these gentlemen up here to a 25-mile bike ride any time of the day in the heat of Texas.
[applause]

And, you know -- you know, that subject has come up and sometimes in fun but sometimes not in fun. But, you know, there are laws against age discrimination, so if you push this too much, you better be careful. [applause]

BLITZER: I raise the question because you remember, four years ago, the same question came up with John McCain and he released his records, finally. I remember our own Dr. Sanjay Gupta spent hours reviewing those records.

So let me go down and ask all of you. Are you ready to release your medical records?

ROMNEY: Happy to do so.

GINGRICH: I'm happy to. And I also want to attest I'm confident that Dr. Paul is quite ready to serve if he's elected. Watching him campaign, he's in great shape. [laughter] [applause]

BLITZER: All right, we have another question from the audience. I'll look forward to seeing your medical records.
[laughter]

Go ahead.

Let's take a question right now. Please introduce yourself, as well.

QUESTION: Good evening. My name is Matthew Bathel. My question is, what would your plan be for the future of manned space flight and the future of NASA?

BLITZER: All right, let me go to Governor Romney on this one. An important issue, especially here in Florida where a lot of people have lost their jobs as a result of the decline of the space program. Yesterday Speaker Gingrich outlined a -- a pretty long plan on what to do about it and he said that by the end of his second term, if he were elected president, there would be a permanent base on the moon. Good idea?

ROMNEY: That's an enormous expense. And right now I want to be spending money here. Of course the space coast has been badly hurt and I believe in a very vibrant and strong space program. To define the mission for our space program, I'd like to bring in the -- the top professors that relate to space areas and physics, the top people from industry. Because I want to make sure what we're doing in space translates into commercial products. I want to bring in our top military experts on space needs.

And -- and finally of course, the -- the people from -- the administration if I had an administration. I'd like to come together and talk about different options and the cost. I'd like to incorporate America as well as the defense network and others that could come together in a -- in a part -- in, if you will, a partnership basis to create a plan that will keep our space program thriving and growing. I -- I believe in a manned space program. I'd like to see whether they believe in the same thing.

I'm not -- I'm not looking for a -- a colony on the moon. I think the cost of that would be in the hundreds of billions, if not trillions. I'd rather be rebuilding housing here in the U.S.

BLITZER: We have a question. I want to speaker to weigh in as well. [applause]

This question is related from -- we got it from Twitter. Speaker Gingrich, how do you plan to create a base on the moon while keeping taxes down in eight years? [laughter]

GINGRICH: I think, look it's a great question. You start with the question, do you really believe NASA in its current form is the most effective way of leveraging investment in space? We now have a bureaucracy sitting there, which has managed to mismanage the program so well that in fact we have no lift vehicle. So you almost have to wonder, what does the Washington office of NASA do? Does it sit around and think space? [laughter]

Does it contemplate that some day we could have a rocket? My point in the speech I made yesterday, which is on CSPAN and I'd love to have all of you look at it. It's based on having looked at space issues since the late 1950's when missiles and rockets was a separate magazine. And working with NASA and others. I believe by the use of prizes, by the use of incentives, by opening up the space port so that it's available on a ready basis for commercial flight, by using commonsense for example the Atlas-V could easily be fixed into a man capable vehicle so you didn't have to rely on -- on a Russian launch or a Chinese launch.

There are many things you can do to leverage accelerating the development of space. Lindbergh flew to Paris for a \$25,000.00 prize. If we had a handful of serious prizes, you'd see an extraordinary number of people out there trying to get to the moon first in order to have billed (ph) that. And I'd like to have an American on the moon before the Chinese get there.

BLITZER: Senator Santorum? [applause]

SANTORUM: I -- I believe America's a frontier nation and obviously the frontier that -- that we're talking about is -- is the next one, which is space. And that we need to inspire. One of the big problems we have in our country today is that young people are not getting involved in math and science and not dreaming big dreams. So NASA or the space program where space is important, NASA is one component that -- our -- our space defense is another area. I think both of -- both of which are very, very important. I agree that we need to bring good minds in the private sector much more involved in NASA than the government bureaucracy that we have. But let's just be honest, we run a \$1.2 trillion deficit right now. We're -- we're borrowing 40-cents of every dollar. And to go out there and promise new programs and big ideas, that's a great thing to maybe get votes, but it's not a responsible thing when you have to go out and say that we have to start cutting programs, not talking about how to -- how to -- how to grow them.

We're going to cut programs. We're going to spend -- under my administration, we're going to spend less money every year -- every year. Year, to year, to year the federal government amount of spending will go down for four years until we get a balanced budget. And you can't do that by -- by -- by grand schemes. Whether it's the space program or frankly whether it's the Speaker's Social Security program, which will create a brand-new Social Security entitlement. Those are things that sound good and maybe make big promises to people, but we've got to be responsible in the way we allocate our resources.

BLITZER: We're going to get to that in a moment, but...[*applause*]

Congressman Paul, Texas, the space program very important there as well. Where do you stand on this?

PAUL: Well, I don't think we should go to the moon. I think we maybe should send some politicians up there. [*applause*]

But I went -- I went into the Air Force in 1962 and studied aerospace medicine. Actually had a daydream about maybe becoming the first physician to go into space. That -- that didn't occur, but I see space -- the amount of money we spend on space, the only part that I would vote for is for national defense purposes. Not to explore the moon and go to Mars. I think that's fantastic. That's -- I love those ideas. But I also don't like the idea of building government business partnerships. If we had a healthy economy and had more Bill Gateses and more Warren Buffetts, the money would be there. It should be privatized, and the people who work in the industry, if you had that, there would be jobs in aerospace.

And I just think that we don't need a bigger, a newer program, when you think of the people -- I mean, health care or something else deserves a lot more priority than going to the moon. So, I would be very reluctant, but space technology should be followed up to some degree for national defense purposes, but not just for the fun of it and, you know, for -- you know, for scientific --

BLITZER: We're going to leave this subject, but before we do, I want Speaker Gingrich to clarify what you said yesterday in that major speech you delivered on space. You said that you would support a lunar colony or a lunar base, and that if 13,000 Americans were living there, they would be able to apply for U.S. statehood from the moon.

GINGRICH: I was meeting Rick's desire for grandiose ideas. But --

BLITZER: That's a pretty grandiose idea.

GINGRICH: But let me make just two points about this.

It is really important to go back and look at what John F. Kennedy said in May of 1961 when he said, "We will go to the moon in this decade." No American had orbited the Earth. The technology didn't exist.

And a generation of young people went into science and engineering and technology, and they were tremendously excited. And they had a future.

I actually agree with Dr. Paul. The program I envision would probably end up being 90 percent private sector, but it would be based on a desire to change the government rules and change the government regulations, to get NASA out of the business of trying to run rockets, and to create a system where it's easy for private sector people to be engaged.

I want to see us move from one launch occasionally to six or seven launches a day because so many private enterprises walk up and say, we're prepared to go do it. But I'll tell you, I do not want to be the country that having gotten to the moon first, turned around and said, it doesn't really matter, let the Chinese dominate space, what do we care? I think that is a path of national decline, and I am for America being a great country, not a country in decline. [*applause*]

BLITZER: We're going to move on, but go ahead, Governor Romney.

ROMNEY: I spent 25 years in business. If I had a business executive come to me and say they wanted to spend a few hundred billion dollars to put a colony on the moon, I'd say, "You're fired."

The idea that corporate America wants to go off to the moon and build a colony there, it may be a big idea, but it's not a good idea. And we have seen in politics -- we've seen politicians -- and Newt, you've been part of this -- go from state to state and promise exactly what that state wants to hear. The Speaker comes here to Florida, wants to spend untold amount of money having a colony on the moon. I know it's very exciting on the Space Coast.

In South Carolina, it was a new interstate highway, and dredging the port in Charleston. In New Hampshire, it was burying a power line coming in from Canada and building a new VHA hospital in New Hampshire so that people don't have to go to

Boston.

Look, this idea of going state to state and promising what people want to hear, promising billions, hundreds of billions of dollars to make people happy, that's what got us into the trouble we're in now. We've got to say no to this kind of spending. [applause]

GINGRICH: I want to make two points.

First, I thought we were a country where one of the purposes of candidates going around was to actually learn about the states they campaigned in and actually be responsive to the needs of the states they campaign in. For example, the port of Jacksonville is going to have to be expanded because the Panama Canal is being widened, and I think that's useful thing for a president to know. I think it's important for presidents to know about local things.

Second -- and at the other end of the state, the Everglades Restoration Project has to be completed, and it's the federal government which has failed.

But, second, in response to what Rick said, when we balanced the budget with the 1997 Balanced Budget Act, and ultimately had four consecutive balanced budgets, we doubled the size of the National Institutes of Health because we set priorities. It is possible to do the right things in the right order to make this a bigger, richer, more exciting country.

You don't just have to be cheap everywhere. You can actually have priorities to get things done. [applause]

BLITZER: All right. We're going to move on.

But go ahead, Ron Paul.

PAUL: I want to make a quick comment, because Newt's mentioned this quite a few times about balancing the budget for four times. I went back and looked at the record.

The budget was -- the national debt during those four years actually went up about a trillion dollars. What he's talking about is, he doesn't count the money he takes out of Social Security.

So, Reagan nor you had a truly balanced budget because the national debt goes up, and that's what we pay the interest on. So I think you've stretched that a little bit more than you should have. [applause]

BLITZER: Go ahead and respond. And then Senator Santorum.

GINGRICH: No, I...

BLITZER: You want to respond to Congressman Paul?

GINGRICH: No, I would just say -- I would just say, under the system that was used, we were \$405 billion [inaudible]... [booing]

I agree with Ron -- but let me finish. I actually agree with you, and I propose that we take Social Security off budget so no president can ever again get threaten, as Obama did in August, that he would not send the check out, and you could set Social Security back up as a free-standing trust fund. It does have enough money and you could in fact pay the checks without regard to politics in Washington.

BLITZER: Go ahead, quickly. [applause]

SANTORUM: Well, look, we just listened to the president of the United States the other night completely ignore the biggest problem facing this country when it comes to our financial health. We've been downgraded as a -- as a -- as a country and the president of the United States completely ignored any of the heavy work, the hard work in being honest with the American public about what we have to do to get our fiscal house in order.

And I think that's the point I would make here. Going around and promising a whole bunch of new ideas and new projects and big ideas -- that was fine. And maybe we need it; we can do that. I supported the doubling of the National Institutes of Health. But we didn't have a \$1.2 trillion deficit. We didn't -- we weren't at over -- we are now going to reach \$16 trillion, which is more than our whole GDP. We were not in that situation 20, 15 years ago.

We are in a different world. We need leaders who are going to be honest with the people of this country, of the problems we have, and have bold solutions to make that happen. I'll do that.

BLITZER: Let's continue on this subject. [applause]

But let's take a question from the audience.

Go ahead. Stand up and please introduce yourself.

QUESTION: My name is Lynn Frazier and I live here in Jacksonville. And for the Republican presidential candidates, my question is, I'm currently unemployed and I found myself unemployed for the first time in 10 years and unable to afford health care benefits.

What type of hope can you promise me and others in my position? [applause]

BLITZER: Let's ask Congressman Paul.

PAUL: Well, it's a tragedy because this is a consequence of the government being involved in medicine since 1965.

When I was growing up, we didn't have a whole lot, but my dad had a small insurance, but medical care costs weren't that much. And you should have an opportunity -- medical care insurance should be given to you as an individual, so if you're employed or not employed, you have -- you just take care of that and you keep it up. When you lose a job, sometimes you lose your insurance.

But the cost is so high. When you pump money into something, like housing, cost -- prices go up. If you pump money into education, the cost of education goes up. When the government gets involved in medicine, you don't get better care; you get -- cost goes up and it distorts the economy and leads to a crisis.

But your medical care should go with you. You should get total deduction on it. It would be so much less expensive. It doesn't solve every single problem, but you're -- you're suffering from the consequence of way too much government and the cost going up because government has inflated the cost and we have a government-created recession, and that is a consequence of the business cycle.

BLITZER: Speaker -- Speaker Gingrich, what should Lynn do? [applause]

GINGRICH: Well, look, the first -- she actually put her finger on two different problems. The largest challenge of this country is to get the economy growing so she can have a job so it's easy for her to have insurance.

We -- we need -- and the president did nothing about this the other night. In fact, his proposal on taxes would make the economy worse.

We need to have a program which would start with, frankly, repealing Obamacare, repealing Dodd-Frank, repealing Sarbanes-Oxley. [applause]

And we need to give her a chance at a job.

Second, we need real health reform, not the Obama style, but we need health reform that allows her to buy in. And Dr. Paul is right. She ought to get the same tax break whether she buys personally or whether she buys through a company.

She should also be able to buy into an association so that she's buying with lots of other people so it's not single insurance, which is the most expensive kind.

But you combine those two, reforming the insurance system and getting the economy growing again so people are back at work, you cure an awful lot of America's problems with those two steps, and you put her back in a position where she's in charge of her life; she's not dependent on Barack Obama to take care of her. [applause]

BLITZER: That plan work for you, Governor?

ROMNEY: Actually, what both these gentlemen said is pretty much spot-on. And I'd -- and I'll add a couple of things.

One, I want to underscore something both of them said, and that is, right now in America, if you have insurance, you most likely got it through your employer. And the reason is, your employer gets a deduction for you when they buy the insurance for you.

That means that, if you change jobs, you've got to get a new insurance company, most likely. And if you become unemployed, you lose your insurance.

That doesn't make sense. And if an individual wants to own their own insurance, they're not part of a big group, and so as a result they get a very high rate.

What we should do is allow individuals to own their own insurance and have the same tax treatment as companies get. You do that and people like this young woman would be able to own her insurance. The rates would be substantial lower for her buying it individually than if she had to buy it individually today.

Secondly, getting people to work. This president has failed the American people.

He got up there and gave a speech last night. It was like Groundhog Day all over again. He said the same things and the same results we're seeing today. People are not working. [applause]

And we know what it takes to put people back to work. He said some of those things last night -- lowering corporate taxes, lowering regulations, opening up all of the above in energy, cracking down on China. He just doesn't do any of those things, and if I'm president, I will do those things and I'll get you back to work.

Thank you. [applause]

SANTORUM: All three of these folks sound great and I agree with them. I would just add that health savings account, which I introduced 20 years ago with John Kasich, is really the fundamental reform of getting consumers back involved in the health care system.

The problem with the answers from Congressman Gingrich and Governor Romney is that, well, they didn't always say what they're saying. Governor Romney was the author of Romneycare, which is a top-down government-run health care system which, read an article today, has 15 different items directly in common with Obamacare, everything from the increase in the Medicaid program, not just that government is going to mandate you buy something that's a condition of breathing, mandate that you buy an insurance policy, something that Governor Romney agreed to at the state level, something Congressman Gingrich for 20 years advocated, that the federal government can force each and every person to enter into a private contract. Something that everyone now, at least up on this stage, says is radically unconstitutional, Congressman Gingrich supported for 20 years.

Governor Romney supported it in the state, a state that is a -- pretty much a model for what Obamacare is going to look like -- the highest health care costs in the country, 27 percent above the average, average waiting time -- 94 percent of the people in Massachusetts are now insured, but there was just a survey that came out and said one in four don't get the care they need because of the high cost. So, you have a card, you're covered, but you can't get care.

This is the top-down model that both of these gentlemen say they're now against, but they've been for, and it does not provide the contrast we need with Barack Obama if we're going to take on that most important issue. We cannot give the issue of health care away in this election. It is too foundational for us to win this election.

BLITZER: A quick rebuttal from Speaker Gingrich and then Governor Romney. [applause]

GINGRICH: Well, in my case, I think Rick is lumping us together rather more than is accurate.

If you go to healthtransformation.net, I founded the Center for Health Transformation. I wrote a book in 2002 called "Saving Lives and Saving Money." It calls for you and your doctor and your pharmacist and your hospital have a relationship. I believe in something like patient power.

I didn't advocate federal mandates. I talked about it at a state level, finding a way -- which included an escape clause that people didn't have to buy it -- finding a way to try to have people have insurance, particularly for wealthy people who are simply free-riding on local hospitals. But the fact is, it was a personal system, dramatically different than either Romneycare or the version Rick just discussed.

BLITZER: Governor Romney?

ROMNEY: The system that we put in place in our state was something we worked out with the labor community, the health care community, business, and the citizens of the nation. We came together, it was voted by a 200-person legislature. Only two voted no.

Our system has a lot of flaws, a lot of things I'd do differently. It has a lot of benefits. The people of the state like it by about three to one.

We consider it very different than Obamacare. If I were president, day one I will take action to repeal Obamacare. It's bad medicine. It's bad economy. I'll repeal it. [applause]

And I believe the people -- I believe the people of each state should be able to craft programs that they feel are best for their people. I think ours is working pretty well. If I were governor, it would work a heck of a lot better.

BLITZER: All right.

And very quickly, go ahead.

SANTORUM: What Governor Romney just said is that government-run top-down medicine is working pretty well in Massachusetts and he supports it. Now, think about what that means --

ROMNEY: That's not what I said.

SANTORUM: -- going up against Barack Obama, who you are going to claim, well, top-down government-run medicine on the federal level doesn't work and we should repeal it. And he's going to say, wait a minute, Governor. You just said that top-down government-run medicine in Massachusetts works well.

Folks, we can't give this issue away in this election. It is about fundamental freedom. Whether the United States government or even a state government -- you have Amendment 1 here offered by Scott Pleitgen, who, by the way, endorsed me today, and it's going to be on your ballot as to whether there should be a government mandate here in Florida.

According to Governor Romney, that's OK. If the state does it, that's OK. If the state wants to enforce it, that's OK. Those are not the clear contrasts we need if we're going to defeat Barack Obama and a --

BLITZER: Let's go to Miami. [applause]

[*crossstalk*]

BLITZER: Very quickly.

ROMNEY: Rick, I make enough mistakes in what I say, not for you to add more mistakes to what I say. I didn't say I'm in favor of top-down government-run health care, 92 percent of the people in my state had insurance before our plan went in place. And nothing changes for them. They own the same private insurance they had before.

And for the 8 percent of people who didn't have insurance, we said to them, if you can afford insurance, buy it yourself, any one of the plans out there, you can choose any plan. There's no government plan.

And if you don't want to buy insurance, then you have to help pay for the cost of the state picking up your bill, because under federal law if someone doesn't have insurance, then we have to care for them in the hospitals, give them free care. So we said, no more, no more free riders. We are insisting on personal responsibility.

Either get the insurance or help pay for your care. And that was the conclusion that we reached.

SANTORUM: Does everybody in Massachusetts have a requirement to buy health care?

ROMNEY: Everyone has a requirement to either buy it or pay the state for the cost of providing them free care. Because the idea of people getting something for free when they could afford to care for themselves is something that we decided in our state was not a good idea.

SANTORUM: So, in Massachusetts...[*applause*]

Just so I understand this, in Massachusetts, everybody is mandated as a condition of breathing in Massachusetts, to buy health insurance, and if you don't, and if you don't, you have to pay a fine.

What has happened in Massachusetts is that people are now paying the fine because health insurance is so expensive. And you have a pre-existing condition clause in yours, just like Barack Obama.

So what is happening in Massachusetts, the people that Governor Romney said he wanted to go after, the people that were free-riding, free ridership has gone up five-fold in Massachusetts. Five times the rate it was before. Why? Because...

ROMNEY: That's total, complete...

SANTORUM: I'll be happy to give you the study. Five times the rate it has gone up. Why? Because people are ready to pay a cheaper fine and then be able to sign up to insurance, which are now guaranteed under "Romney-care," than pay high cost insurance, which is what has happened as a result of "Romney-care."

ROMNEY: First of all, it's not worth getting angry about. Secondly, the...[*applause*]

Secondly, 98 percent of the people have insurance. And so the idea that more people are free-riding the system is simply impossible. Half of those people got insurance on their own. Others got help in buying the insurance.

Look, I know you don't like the plan that we had. I don't like the Obama plan. His plan cuts Medicare by \$500 billion. We didn't, of course, touch anything like that. He raises taxes by \$500 billion. We didn't do that.

He wasn't interested in the 8 percent of the people that were uninsured. He was concerned about the 100 percent of the people of the country. "Obama-care" takes over health care for the American people.

If I'm president of the United States, I will stop it. And in debating Barack Obama, I will be able to show that I have passion and concern for the people in this country that need health care, like this young woman who asked the question.

But I will be able to point out that what he did was wrong. It was bad medicine, it's bad for the economy, and I will repeal it. [*applause*]

BLITZER: Let's move on, let's move on.

SANTORUM: Wolf, what Governor Romney said is just factually incorrect. Your mandate is no different than Barack Obama's mandate. It is the same mandate. He takes over... [*applause*]

BLITZER: All right. All right.

SANTORUM: You take over 100 percent, just like he takes over 100 percent, requires the mandate. The same fines that you put in place in Massachusetts are fines that he puts in place in the federal level. Same programs.

BLITZER: Congressman Paul, who is right?

PAUL: I think they're all wrong. [*laughter*] [*applause*]

I think this -- this is a typical result of when you get government involved, because all you are arguing about is which form of government you want. They have way too much confidence in government sorting this out.

So, I would say there's a much better way. And that is allow the people to make their decisions and not get the government involved. You know, it has only been...[*applause*]

When I started medicine, there was no Medicare or Medicaid. And nobody was out in the streets without it. Now, now people are suffering, all the complaints going on. So the government isn't our solution.

So, I'm not too happy with this type of debate, trying to blame one versus the other, so, but -- most likely we're going to continue to have this problem unless we straighten out the economy. And that means...

BLITZER: I'll give you 30 seconds, Mr. Speaker.

PAUL: ... cut the spending. And they talk about these new programs and all, but how many of the other candidates are willing to cut anything? I'm willing to cut \$1 trillion out of the first year. [*applause*]

BLITZER: All right.

GINGRICH: Well, I just want to say that I actually think if you look at what Ron Paul's background is as a doctor, and you look at medicine in the early '60s, and you look at how communities solved problems, it was a fundamentally more flexible and less expensive system.

And there's a lot to be said for rethinking from the ground up, the entire approach to health care.

BLITZER: Let's go to Miami. We have another question. [*applause*]

CNN Espanol's Juan Carlos Lopez is standing by. Go ahead?

LOPEZ: Yes, Wolf, our question now comes from Jennifer Coryn she is a -- the Executive Director of the Hispanic Leadership Network, our cosponsor and she is the spouse of a Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant and I believe, Jennifer, your question has to do with the future?

QUESTION: Yes. Thank you very much and good evening. We have many qualified, Hispanic leaders. Which of our Hispanic leaders would you consider to serve in your cabinet?

BLITZER: Senator Santorum?

SANTORUM: Well, I mean I hate to throw one to Florida, but obviously your Senator Marco Rubio is a pretty impressive guy. [*applause*]

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich?

GINGRICH: I think that there are a number, and I think for example of -- of when you think cabinet, I think for example of Susana Martinez, the governor of New Mexico. You know, at the cabinet level I think of somebody like Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. I actually thought about Marco Rubio on a slightly more dignified and central role, then being in the cabinet, but that's another conversation. [*applause*]

BLITZER: Governor?

ROMNEY: We -- we are blessed -- we're blessed to have an enormous number of highly qualified Hispanic-Americans in the Republican Party and leadership right now. Brian Sandoval, the governor of -- of Nevada. You mentioned Susana Martinez in New Mexico. I -- both of the Diaz-Belart brothers, one retired from Congress, the other currently there. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Mel Martinez is back in the private sector. Who knows, he could be pulled back. Of course, Senator Marco Rubio a -- a terrific Hispanic-American. I -- I'm sure I'm missing many, many others, but we have a -- a remarkable -- Carlos Gutierrez, formerly secretary of Commerce.

These individuals can for membership in our -- in our cabinet, I believe. And -- and potentially as the -- as the speaker indicates, other positions as well.

PAUL: I -- I -- I don't have one particular name that I'm going to bring up, but my litmus test would be to get individuals, Hispanic or otherwise to understand monetary policy and understand the system. But also the Hispanic community is especially attuned to the foreign policy of non-intervention. They -- they are more opposed to war than other communities, so I would think there's plenty in the Hispanic community that could give me good advice and an understanding of why a non-intervention foreign policy is very attractive to the Hispanic people.

BLITZER: All right, gentleman stand by. Much more to discuss. I want to take a short break. We have many more topics to include -- including this, we'll get into this a little bit, what would your wife -- why would your wife make the best first lady. I'll ask these four candidates. Stay with us. [*applause*]

[*commercial break*]

BLITZER: I'm WolfBlitzer.

We're here in Jacksonville for CNN's Florida Republican presidential debate. Many of you are watching online, commenting on Twitter, Facebook, at CNN.com. We have many more questions for the candidates, including one that hits close to home.

Stand by to find out why each man on this stage thinks his wife would be the best first lady.

[commercial break]

BLITZER: Want to get right back to the rest of the debate, but first, on a lighter subject, I want to ask each of these gentlemen why they think their wife would make a great first lady.

Congressman Paul?

PAUL: Well, she's been my wife for 54 years. And we're going to have an anniversary on February 1st.

BLITZER: Congratulations.

PAUL: So -- but she's the mother of five of our children, and she's a grandmother of 18 grandchildren, does an excellent job. And she's also the author of a very famous cookbook, "The Ron Paul Cookbook."

BLITZER: Governor?

ROMNEY: I've got to take a little bit more time, a little more seriousness.

My -- nothing wrong with what you said -- I'm sorry.

My wife is also a mom, as I pointed out early on, but in some respects, she is a real champion and a fighter. She was diagnosed in 1998 with Multiple Sclerosis, and more recently with breast cancer. She has battled both successfully. And as first lady, she will be able to reach out to people who are also struggling and suffering and will be someone who shows compassion and care.

And she's also had a passion all of her adult life on helping people in troubled situations, young women in particular, understand the importance of getting married before they have babies and encouraging people to create families to raise kids in. [applause]

GINGRICH: Let me say, first of all, having gotten to know them, I think all three of the wives represented here would be terrific first ladies. Callista and I have gotten to know all three of them, and we think they'd be fabulous people. So I would rather just to talk about why I like Callista, and why I'd like her to be first lady, but she's not necessarily in any way better. These are wonderful people, and they would be wonderful first ladies.

But Callista brings a couple of things. One is a tremendous artistic focus. She's done a video in music education, why it really matters. She's a pianist by background, plays the French horn in a community band, sings in the choir of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. She really cares about the arts and would bring a really strong feeling for music education and for art, and why it matters to people as part of their education.

She's also very patriotic about American exceptionalism. She's had a best-selling "New York Times" book, children's book, and has really reached out to young people to get them to understand America.

And she's helped produce and host seven movies now, so she would bring an entire, I think, artistic flavor.

But -- and I, obviously, would be thrilled to be able to hang out with her at the White House. So it would be good.

BLITZER: And I suspect you would be.

Unfortunately, Senator Santorum, your wife is not here tonight.

SANTORUM: Yeah, she's not. She's -- she's doing what she does incredibly well, which is to be a mother to our seven children. And she is -- she's my hero. She's someone who has been, you know, well- educated. She was a neo-natal intensive care nurse for nine years at one of the most advanced nurseries in the -- in the country.

She went on to, because she saw all these ethical challenges there, so she went on and got a law degree so she could -- she could deal with those in the -- in the legal world.

And then when she got married, she gave that up; she walked away and walked into something that she felt called to do, which was to be a mom and to be a wife.

And we've -- we've had eight children. We are blessed to be raising seven. We've been through a lot together, losing a child, having a child with a disability that we have now, our little Bella.

And the -- the amount of love for these special kids is just palpable in her.

She wrote a book about our son that we lost called "Letters to Gabriel," about that ordeal that we went through. That book, that little book has saved countless -- I don't -- we know of at least hundreds of lives that were saved because people read that book and realized that the child they're carrying had the dignity to be love and nurtured irrespective of what malady

may have -- may have befallen that baby in the womb. And so many children were born and are alive today because of that book.

She's also written a book on manners. That's something that I -- I -- we have seven children, so we know that kids are not born good. And...[laughter]... and so manners is very important in our house. And she wrote a storybook because there were all sorts of how-to books on manners but there was no storybook, teaching manners through, well, how Christ taught us, through stories. And -- and that's what she did. And that book has hopefully somewhat civilized some children around this country. [laughter]

BLITZER: Very nice.

All right, let's get back to the debate -- the debate now. [applause]

Governor Romney, you criticized Speaker Gingrich for not being as close to Ronald Reagan as he says he was. When you ran for the Senate, you said you were, quote, "You weren't trying to return to Reagan-Bush."

So the question is, do you think you can claim the Reagan mantle more than Speaker Gingrich?

ROMNEY: Oh, of course not. No, I -- I was -- at the time Ronald Reagan was -- was president, I was just getting started. I went through school, came out of school, got my first job, worked my way up in a consulting company, and then, after awhile, started a business of my own. I was looking at politics from afar and learning as time went on.

I didn't get involved in politics early in my life. I instead spent my time building a business. And then later, as my business had been successful and we'd been involved in some turnaround situations, some businesses in trouble that we were able to help -- not all worked out as we'd hoped, but a number did -- I got asked to go off and help get the Salt Lake City Olympics in 2002 on track and put aside my business and went -- went to Utah. And it was perhaps the greatest professional experience of my life, going there and spending three years helping getting those games on track.

I -- I happen to believe the Olympics is one of the great showcases of the -- of the human spirit that exists in the media world. And it was very successful. And then -- and then, after that, I was asked by some friends to come back and run for governor, did that. And that's when I became terribly politically involved.

And in that involvement, I learned a lot of lessons. Being governor taught me a lot of things. I became more conservative, by the way, as I was governor, and found the importance of lowering taxes, making it easier for businesses to grow, the importance of driving schools to be the best in the country. Those are the things I did.

And so I'm not suggesting -- the speaker was a congressman at the time Ronald Reagan was president, so he -- he, of course, was closer to the Ronald Reagan era than I.

BLITZER: Mr. Speaker, you've heard the criticism lately that you weren't necessarily as close to the president as you suggest?

GINGRICH: Well, it's increasingly interesting to watch the Romney attack machine coordinate things. And all of a sudden, today, there are like four different articles by four different people that randomly show up.

The fact is, I'm thrilled that Michael Reagan has endorsed me and will be campaigning with me here in Florida. I remember very fondly, in 1995, when we were at the Goldwater Institute and Nancy Reagan said, you know, "Barry gave Ronnie the torch, and now Ronny's passing the torch to Newt and his team in Congress. So I think it's reasonable to say, and I think the governor said it fairly, I am vastly closer to Reagan. In that period the governor was an independent business person. In '92 he was donating to the Democrats for Congress and voted for Paul Tsongas in the Democratic primary. In '94 running against Teddy Kennedy, he said flatly, I don't want to go back to the Reagan-Bush era, I was an independent.

So there's a pretty wide gap. Now, he's more mature. He's more conservative, I accept that. I think it's a good thing. But those of us who were in the trenches fighting in the '80's, it would be nice to be recognized for what we actually did and not to have orchestrated attacks to try to distort the history of that period.

BLITZER: Governor Romney, you can respond please. [applause]

ROMNEY: Just a -- just a short clarification. I -- I've never voted for a Democrat when there was a Republican on the ballot. And -- and in my state of Massachusetts, you could register as an independent and go vote in which -- either primary happens to be very interesting. And any chance I got to vote against Bill Clinton or Ted Kennedy, I took. And so I -- I'm... [applause]...I have voted -- I have always voted for a Republican any time there was a Republican on the ballot. With regards to the Speaker's involvement in the Reagan years, he can speak for himself. The Reagan Diaries and the other histories that were written at that time can lay that out as well. I -- I -- I think, I think what he said speaks for itself and I'm proud of the things I was able to accomplish.

BLITZER: Let's take another question from the audience. Go ahead. Please stand up and give us your name?

QUESTION: Hi, my name is George Miatius, I live here in Jacksonville and when I was 3-years-old I was very blessed that my parents brought me here from Cuba. They brought me here so that I could be raised in freedom and in liberty. President Obama has recently announced that he is liberalizing trade and travel policies. What would be your position as president toward the island of Cuba?

BLITZER: Senator Santorum?

SANTORUM: I would oppose it. I've been 100 percent in support of the Cuban people and their right to have a free Cuba and the United States should stand on the side of the Cuban people against these despots who are not just reigning terror, continuing reign of terror in Cuba. But now have their -- their -- their puppet, Chavez in -- in Venezuela and Noriega and Morales and it keeps -- it keeps like a cancer growing. So the idea that a president of the United States would take the heart of the cancer that is in Central and South America, and begin to reward behavior that has spread this cancer because of our dilly-dallying and our inattentiveness to the problems in Central and South America.

Now, we're going to reward the secret police. We're going to *[inaudible]* president of Venezuela as they are in Cuba. We're going to reward this type of thuggery, this type of Marxism in our region. We're going to reward a country that is now working with these other countries to harbor and bring in Iran and the terrorist -- the Jihadist's who want to set up missile sites and to set up training camps. And so we're going to reward this behavior by opening up and liberalizing. This is the exact wrong message at the exact wrong time.

BLITZER: Congressman Paul...*[applause]*...you said the U.S. should talk to everyone. Imagine you're in the Oval Office, you speak to Raul Castro. What would you say to him?

PAUL: Well, I'd ask him what he called about, you know? *[laughter]*

What was the purpose of his call? No, I would ask him what can -- what can we do to improve relations? Because I wouldn't see them as likely to attack us. When I was drafted in October of '62, that was a different world. I mean there were nuclear weapons in Cuba. That was a different story. But -- but today to -- not to talk to them and take the call and see what you can work out, helps -- helps Castro. It hurts the people, the dissidents, the people who want to overthrow him have always had to be, you know, nationalistic and unified behind the leader.

So as well intended as these sanctions are, they almost inevitably backfire and they help the dictators and hurt the people. *[applause]*

So it's time to change. The Cold -- the Cold War -- the Cold War is over. They're not going to invade us and I just think that a better relationship and trade relationship, so many people -- I think -- I've noticed already since I've been talking about this issue the last four or five years, I think the people have changed their mind. It's very -- the American people are getting much more open. Not nearly as frightened. And people -- I don't think they see a Jihadist under the bed every night... *[laughter]*...and we have to worry about that. I think there's -- I -- I worry about overreaction, over concern and lack of ability to talk to them when they call you.

BLITZER: I want both of you to weigh in, Governor Romney first?

ROMNEY: Two -- two major flaws with President Obama's foreign policy.

[crosstalk]

BLITZER: Well what about Ron Paul's policy?

ROMNEY: Well, I'm talking about President Obama right now. We can get back to Ron Paul in a moment. *[applause]*

First of all, I think the president has largely ignored Latin America, Cuba in particular, Venezuela, and other nations. I think we have to change that dramatically.

I think we have to have economic initiatives to build trade throughout Latin America, particularly with Colombia and Panama, now part of free trade agreements. I want more of that throughout Latin America. But that's the first flaw, ignoring Latin America.

And number two is reaching out with accommodations to some of the world's worst actors, whether it was Putin in Russia, giving him what he wanted, or Castro, saying we're going to let you have remittances coming from the U.S. to fund your future, or relaxed trade restrictions. Throughout the world, with Ahmadinejad opening an open hand, tyrants look for weakness to take advantage. That's the wrong course.

The right course for Cuba is to continue to honor Helms-Burton. And if I'm president of the United States, I will use every resource we have, short of invasion and military action, Congressman Paul. I'll use every resource we can to make sure that when Fidel Castro finally leaves this planet, that we are able to help the people of Cuba enjoy freedom.

They want it. It's a God-given right. And it is our responsibility to help share the gift of freedom with people throughout the world that are seeking it. *[applause]*

BLITZER: Are you open -- Mr. Speaker, are you open to improving relations with Cuba?

GINGRICH: Well, let me start with where the governor correctly pointed out. I was very proud as Speaker to be able to make sure that the Helms-Burton Act passed, and I'm delighted that Congressman Dan Burton is here tonight and is campaigning with me, because it was a very important step towards isolating the Castro regime.

I think it's amazing that Barack Obama is worried about an Arab Spring, he's worried about Tunisia, he's worried about

Libya, he's worried about Egypt, he's worried about Syria, and he cannot bring himself to look south and imagine a Cuban Spring. And I would argue that we should have, as a stated explicit policy, that we want to facilitate the transition from the dictatorship to freedom. We want to bring together every non-military asset we have, exactly as President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher and Pope John Paul II did in Poland and in Eastern Europe.

They broke up the Soviet empire without a general war by using a wide range of things, one of which is just psychological, saying to the next generation of people in Cuba, the dictatorship is not going to survive. You need to bet to moving to freedom in order to have prosperity in Cuba, and we will help you get to that freedom. [applause]

BLITZER: Let's take another question from the audience.

Please give us your name and tell us where you are from.

UNKNOWN: Abraham Hassel from Jacksonville, Florida.

How would a Republican administration help bring peace to Palestine and Israel when most candidates barely recognize the existence of Palestine or its people? As a Palestinian-American Republican, I'm here to tell you we do exist.

BLITZER: All right. Let's ask Governor Romney, first of all.

What would you say to Abraham?

ROMNEY: Well, the reason that there's not peace between the Palestinians and Israel is because there is -- in the leadership of the Palestinian people are Hamas and others who think like Hamas, who have as their intent the elimination of Israel. And whether it's in school books that teach how to kill Jews, or whether it's in the political discourse that is spoken either from Fatah or from Hamas, there is a belief that the Jewish people do not have a right to have a Jewish state.

There are some people who say, should we have a two-state solution? And the Israelis would be happy to have a two-state solution. It's the Palestinians who don't want a two-state solution. They want to eliminate the state of Israel.

And I believe America must say -- and the best way to have peace in the Middle East is not for us to vacillate and to appease, but is to say, we stand with our friend Israel. We are committed to a Jewish state in Israel. We will not have an inch of difference between ourselves and our ally, Israel.

This president went before the United Nations and castigated Israel for building settlements. He said nothing about thousands of rockets being rained in on Israel from the Gaza Strip. This president threw -- [applause]

I think he threw Israel under the bus with regards to defining the '67 borders as a starting point of negotiations. I think he disrespected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

I think he has time and time again shown distance from Israel, and that has created, in my view, a greater sense of aggression on the part of the Palestinians. I will stand with our friend, Israel.

BLITZER: Thank you, Governor. [applause]

Speaker Gingrich, you got into a little hot water when you said the Palestinians were an invented people.

GINGRICH: It was technically an invention of the late 1970s, and it was clearly so. Prior to that, they were Arabs. Many of them were either Syrian, Lebanese, or Egyptian, or Jordanian.

There are a couple of simple things here. There were 11 rockets fired into Israel in November. Now, imagine in Duvall County that 11 rockets hit from your neighbor. How many of you would be for a peace process and how many of you would say, you know, that looks like an act of war.

You have leadership unequivocally, and Governor Romney is exactly right, the leadership of Hamas says, not a single Jew will remain. We aren't having a peace negotiation then. This is war by another form.

My goal for the Palestinian people would be to live in peace, to live in prosperity, to have the dignity of a state, to have freedom. and they can achieve it any morning they are prepared to say Israel has a right to exist, we give up the right to return, and we recognize that we're going to live side-by-side, now let's work together to create mutual prosperity.

And you could in five years dramatically improve the quality of life of every Palestinian. But the political leadership would never tolerate that. And that's why we're in a continuous state of war where Obama undermines the Israelis.

On the first day that I'm president, if I do become president, I will sign an executive order directing the State Department to move the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem to send the signal we're with Israel. [applause]

BLITZER: Let's go to Miami. Let's take another question from Miami. Juan Carlos, go ahead?

LOPEZ: Thank you, Wolf. I'm joined now by Elizabeth Cuevas-Neunder. She is the CEO and founder of the Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce in Florida. She is based out of Tampa.

And I'm pretty sure, Elizabeth, your question has to do with the beautiful island of Puerto Rico.

CUEVAS-NEUNDER: [*speaking in Spanish*]. Good evening. [*speaking in Spanish*]. I am bilingual, proud of it. My question to the candidates, we have 4 million Puerto Ricans in the United States, voters, 3.8 in Puerto Rico.

We have been treated as second class citizen and just now our governor's name was not mentioned as a V.P. possibility, a great governor. My question to you is, where do you stand for Puerto Rico to become a state? And secondly, how do you -- where do you stand on domestic trade between Florida and Puerto Rico, between Tampa Bay and Ponce ports which have been neglected? Thank you.

BLITZER: All right. Senator Santorum, let's throw that question to you. The question about, do you support Puerto Rico potentially as the 51st state?

SANTORUM: Well, first, I will give a shout-out to Governor Luis Fortuno, who is a good friend of mine, and someone -- I know him and his family, we have known each other for many years, we actually used to go to church together.

And so I spoke to Luis this week. And I've been to Puerto Rico many times. And actually, when I was a United States senator, we did a lot of work with Puerto Rico. Because of my relationship with many friends down there, I was made aware of problems, for example, in the Medicaid program.

We went down and we actually passed things to help with reimbursement rates, which were deplorably low in Puerto Rico. We also worked on hurricane relief and a whole lot of other things as a result of my relationship with many Puerto Ricans in Pennsylvania, and developed those relationships on the island.

I believe that -- I believe in self-determination. That, you know, the Puerto Rican people should have the opportunity to be able to be able to speak on this. I have supported that. I don't take a position one way or the other on statehood, commonwealth, independence, that's for the people of Puerto Rico to decide.

But I also supported a lot of things to help the Puerto Rican economy. Puerto Ricans are United States citizens, and the poverty, the unemployment rates simply are -- are simply not something that we as Americans should allow to occur in our country.

And we need to make sure that there are pro-growth, supply side economics to make sure that Puerto Rico can be successful as an economy on that island, and I believe they can. And under my administration, that's something that I would work towards.

BLITZER: I'll take that as a maybe. Statehood, not statehood.

SANTORUM: No, I take no position on that. That's -- I would -- I've supported, you know, the opportunity for them to make that decision.

BLITZER: Let's take another question from the audience here. Go ahead, please. What is your name?

SUZANNE BASS: Suzanne Bass, I'm an attorney in Jacksonville. Welcome to the great city of Jacksonville.

My question, how would your religious beliefs, if you're elected, impact the decisions that you make in the office of the presidency?

BLITZER: Congressman Paul?

PAUL: Well, my religious beliefs wouldn't affect it. My religious beliefs affect my character in the way I treat people and the way I live. The only thing it would affect...[*applause*]

The only thing that would affect me in the way I operate as a president or a congressman is my oath of office and my promises that I've made to the people.

BLITZER: Governor?

ROMNEY: Ron Paul makes very good point. I concur with that. I would also seek the guidance of -- of providence in making critical decisions.

And of course, ours is a nation which is based upon Judeo-Christian values and ethics. Our law is based upon those values and ethics. And in some cases, our law doesn't encompass -- encompass all of the issues that we face around the world.

The conviction that the founders, when they wrote the Declaration of Independence, were writing a document that was not just temporary and not just for one small locale but really something which described the relationship between God and man -- that's something which I think a president would carry in his heart.

So when they said, for instance, that the creator had "endowed us with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," I would seek to assure that those principles and values remain in America and that we help share them with other people in the world, not by conquering them, but by helping them through our trade, through our various forms of soft power, to help bring people the joy and -- and -- and opportunity that exists in this great land.

BLITZER: Mr. Speaker? *[applause]*

GINGRICH: I would say that there are three ways in which religion would affect me.

The first is, I agree with Governor Romney. I think anyone who is president is faced with decisions so enormous that they should go to God. They should seek guidance. Because these are decisions beyond the ability of mere mortals to truly decide without some sense of what it is we should be doing.

I would say, second, that we have a real obligation to recognize that, if you're truly faithful, it's not just an hour on Sundays or Saturdays or Fridays. It's in fact something that should suffuse your life, to be a part of who you are. And in that sense, it is inextricably tied in with how you behave.

But I would say, third, one of the reasons I am running is there has been an increasingly aggressive war against religion and in particular against Christianity in this country, largely by...*[applause]*... largely by a secular elite and the academic news media and judicial areas. And I frankly believe it's important to have some leadership that stands up and says, enough; we are truly guaranteed the right of religious freedom, not religious suppression by the state. *[applause]*

BLITZER: Senator?

SANTORUM: Faith is a very, very important part of my life, but it's a very, very important part of this country. The foundational documents of our country -- everybody talks about the Constitution, very, very important. But the Constitution is the "how" of America. It's the operator's manual.

The "why" of America, who we are as a people, is in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights."

The Constitution is there to do one thing: protect God-given rights. That's what makes America different than every other country in the world. No other country in the world has its rights -- rights based in God-given rights, not government-given rights.

And so when you say, well, faith has nothing to do with it, faith has everything to do with it. If rights come...*[applause]*

If our president believes that rights come to us from the state, everything government gives you, it can take away. The role of the government is to protect rights that cannot be taken away.

And so the answer to that question is, I believe in faith and reason and approaching the problems of this country but understand where those rights come from, who we are as Americans and the foundational principles by which we have changed the world.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator. *[applause]*

We have one more break to take, but we have a lot more to discuss. Don't go too far away. Coming up, the final debate question before Florida votes. *[applause]*

[commercial break]

BLITZER: All right. We're in the last few minutes of the last question to these four presidential candidates before the Florida primary on Tuesday in this debate format. Here is the question, and it involves the president of the United States. I want you to tell voters who are watching or are here on this campus right now why you are the one person on this stage that is most likely to beat Barack Obama.

Congressman?

PAUL: Well, you know, so far, we have some pretty good evidence that I'll do quite well and have a better chance than the rest to beat him, because if you do a national poll, I do very, very well against Obama. But one of the reasons is, is that the freedom message in the Constitution is very appealing to everybody in all political beliefs because it includes free markets, which conservatives endorse, but it also protects civil liberties, the way people run their lives.

If it is a God-given life, and it's your life, you should have the right to run your life as you so choose as long as you don't harm other people. This means a lot more tolerance than some would like to give. So that brings people in who are concerned about civil liberties, and all of a sudden, my position undermines Obama completely and totally because the foreign policy is different.

He promises to end the wars, but the wars expand. A constitutional foreign policy will end the wars. And if you want somebody to talk about peace and prosperity, it has to be somebody who understands money and a foreign policy and free markets. *[applause]*

BLITZER: Governor Romney, why are you the one person on this stage most likely to beat President Obama?

ROMNEY: The people of America recognize that this is a critical time. This is not just an average election.

This is a time where we're going to decide whether America will remain the great hope of the 21st century, whether this will be an American century, or, instead, whether we'll continue to go down a path to become more and more like Europe, a

social welfare state. That's where we're headed.

Our economy is becoming weaker. The foundation of our future economy is being eroded. Government has become too large. We're headed in a very dangerous direction.

I believe to get America back on track, we're going to have to have dramatic, fundamental, extraordinary change in Washington to be able to allow our private sector to once again reemerge competitively, to scale back the size of government and to maintain our strength abroad in our military capacities.

I believe that, to change Washington in such a dramatic way, you cannot do it by people who have been there their entire careers.

I believe, if you just elect the same people to change chairs in Washington, not much happens. I think, if you want to change Washington, you're going to have to bring someone in who has been on the outside.

I have lived in the private sector. I know how it works. I've competed with businesses around the world. I know how to win.

I know what it takes to keep America strong. I know how to work in government. I've had experience for -- four years, rather, working as the governor of Massachusetts.

I will use the experience of my life to get America right. And I will be able to convince the American people that someone with my experience is very different than Barack Obama. And that experience is how I'll beat him. *[applause]*

BLITZER: Mr. Speaker...*[applause]*... why are you the one person on this stage most likely to beat President Obama?

GINGRICH: You know, I have participated in the two largest Republican sweeps in modern time, 1980, in the Reagan campaign, and 1994, with the Contract with America, which had the largest one-party increase in American history, 9 million extra votes.

I believe that what we need this fall is a big-choice election that goes to the heart of who we are. I'm running more than anything for my two grandchildren, Maggie and Robert. I'd like them to be able to look back 50 years from now and say that what we did, what we the American people did, the choice we made in 2012 to unleash the American people, to rebuild our country based on the core values, to pose for the American people a simple choice: Do you want freedom and independence and a paycheck and a job, or do you want dependence and big government and food stamps and a lack of future?

And I believe, if we have a big election with truly historic big choices, that we can defeat Barack Obama by a huge margin. But it won't be by running just as a Republican. It will be an American campaign open to every American who prefers a paycheck to food stamps, who prefers the Declaration of Independence to Saul Alinsky and who prefers a strong national security to trying to appease our enemies. *[applause]*

BLITZER: Senator? *[applause]*

I'll repeat the question for you. Why do you think you're the best, most qualified person on this stage to beat President Obama?

SANTORUM: I agree with the previous two speakers that this is a big election. This is an election about fundamental freedom. It's about who America is going to be. Are we a country that's going to be built great from the bottom up, as our founders intended, or from the top down?

I just think I'm a lot better than the previous two speakers to be able to make that case to the American people. I'm not for a top-down government-run health care system. I wasn't for the Wall Street bailouts like these two gentlemen were.

Governor Romney talks about the private sector and how he's going to bring private sector. When the private sector was in trouble, he voted for government to come in and take over the private sector and be able to -- and to bail them out.

Cap-and-trade -- both of them bought into the global warming hoax, bought into the cap-and-trade, top-down control of our energy and manufacturing sector.

If you look at President Obama's speech the other night, what did he lead with? He led with manufacturing. He led with manufacturing why? Because the base of his party, the ones that are always the ones -- not the base -- the swing vote in his party, the ones that Ronald Reagan was able to get -- we call them Reagan Democrats up in Pennsylvania. Those are the blue-collar working people of America who know that this president has left them behind. He has a plan for them, and it's more dependency, not work, not opportunity.

So he went out and tried to make a play for manufacturing. That's been the center point of my campaign. The center point of my campaign is to be able to win the industrial heartland, get those Reagan Democrats back, talking about manufacturing, talking about building that ladder of success all the way down so people can climb all the way up.

That's why I'm the best person to be able to go out and win the states that are necessary to win this presidency and govern with the mandate that Newt just talked about.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator. *[applause]*

And thank you to the four presidential candidates. [*applause*]

I also want to thank our partners in this debate, the Republican Party of Florida, the Hispanic Leadership Network. Thank you very much to them. [*applause*]

We'd also like to thank our hosts here on the campus of the University of North Florida in Jacksonville.

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