JONATHAN CHAIT IS WRONG ABOUT DEBATE FORMATS

[youtube]MiGZzNEZmHY[/youtube]

I'm not all that hung up on Obama's terrible performance in last Wednesday's debate or in the upcoming ones.

But I do think Jonathan Chait is wrong that the Jim Lehrer format was Obama's best chance because the upcoming debate formats are worse.

The VP Debate: the Angry Old Man

Chait argues, first of all, that Joe Biden will try to refute Paul Ryan's budget kabuki, which will end up making the Vice President look like an angry old man.

> But you can't expose your opponent's misleading budget numbers to win a presidential debate any more than you can expose your opponent's misleading budget numbers to win a swimsuit competition. The audience has no concept of the underlying facts. The audience will only be able to grasp the atmospherics of the debate. And Paul Ryan is a world-class bluffer. He will spout figures with winsome authority, and Biden will come off as an angry old man.

When DC Democrats talk about Biden's upcoming debate performance, they seem to forget how Biden did in his debate against Sarah Palin in 2008. That was one of the biggest challenges in 08, pitting a guy with over 30 years service as a successful policy wonk Senator against a blithering, but very attractive female, idiot. It is often difficult for men to get the dynamic of debating women—both respecting them but not bullying them—right, and this was all the more dangerous. But Biden nailed it.

Whatever Biden says to rebut Ryan, he is of all four candidates the most personable to people outside of the Beltway. What are called gaffes inside the Beltway are often regarded as authentic outside of it.

And when Biden delivers lines like the one from his DNC (after 9:00 in the video)…

> My dad never failed to remind us that a job is a about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about your place in the community. It's about being able to look your child in the eye and saying 'honey, it's going to be okay.'

… He credibly addresses men and women who otherwise aren't being spoken to in this election.

If Joe Biden is an angry old man, he's a lot like the angry old men who will swing this election.

The Town Hall where the questions voters want answered finally get asked

Then there's the Town Hall debate, where real people rather than a crusty old PBS host get to ask the questions. Chait thinks Obama will fail here because he'll spend time filleting Mitt rather than answering questions.

> Obama's campaign is talking up its planto roll out a new, tougher Obama who will challenge Romney's slick evasions. But a town-hall meeting is a whole different animal. In a one-on-one debate, you can fillet your opponent. A town-hall meeting consists of undecided voters pressing the candidates for answers. The focus of the event is on answering the questions of the voters. Using their questions to assail your opponent is bad form – indeed, the Regular Voters who ask the questions, and serve as proxies for the public, can

> be counted on to implore the candidates to stop attacking each other so much.

But one of the problems with the last debate was precisely in the stupid choice of questions Jim Lehrer asked. Lehrer's jobs question turned into a tax discussion. He didn't ask a single question about women's issues. And his ObamaCare question avoided questions about the substance of the policy as distinct from setting up contrast between identical programs.

I would expect that the questions from real people will be far more favorable to Obama because the things voters care about provide Obama to describe where he has been successful and where the guy who brags about creating $9/hour jobs he admits don't pay the bills tends to fail.

Plus, some of Mitt's biggest campaign gaffes have come when he responded to regular questions with douchbag answers—the "corporations are people" problem. Obama may be standoffish, but Mitt is standoffish and tone deaf when speaking with real people. And that, too, should serve Obama.

Debating RomneyShambles

Then there's the foreign policy debate, an area where even Republicans recognize Mitt's weaknesses. Chait thinks this will go badly because it won't provide Obama an opportunity to talk about domestic issues.

> And then the final debate centers on foreign policy. Obama can try to use some of the questions to turn to domestic policy, but that risks a scolding from host Bob Schieffer.

But unless Mitt pulls another total Etch-a-Sketch—even from the content of his speech today—he's going to say really stupid things, such as playing up Russia as our worst enemy.

More importantly, just about every foreign

policy—except torture—that Mitt aggressively embraces is unpopular with voters. Mitt almost certainly will call for starting a new war, while Obama will claim (not entirely credibly) to have ended two wars. Even on trade, where Obama's championing of three new trade deals, Mitt could tack left of Obama, he has chosen instead to accuse Obama of not supporting free trade.

The NYT suggested today that Obama let his disdain for Romney overwhelm his

> Mr. Obama made clear to advisers that he was not happy about debating Mr. Romney, whom he views with disdain. It was something to endure, rather than an opportunity, aides said.

If the sulky Obama that resulted shows up at the last two debates, he may well lose those, too, just as badly as the first.

But there's no reason to believe that's baked into the upcoming debate formats.