

WHEN YOU'VE SPENT 3 YEARS DISDAINING CRITICISM

In my opinion, the story of the debate last night was how well each man channeled the almost palpable disdain he harbored for his opponent. Mitt Romney had the demeanor of someone who couldn't stand that an unaccomplished black man failed to accord his business and governmental success due respect (John McCain struggled with something similar). He channeled that disdain into amped Howdy Doody smiles that, while just as fake as everything else from Mitt, were at least more accessible.

Obama had the same demeanor we've seen for years from him when he gets exasperated that critics don't pay due attention to the catastrophe he inherited from Bush. Rather than listening to legitimate criticisms—at times, even from the right—Obama just purses his lips to hide his anger about the criticism and sends out an aide to make accusations about the Professional Left. Last night, Obama's anger at Mitt's criticisms and lies was channeled into looking down, occasionally forcing a smile out of those pursed lips, though only on a few occasions with enough mockery to successfully undercut what Mitt was saying.

I'm not suggesting that, last night, Obama should have affected listening to Mitt's lies as effective criticism (though I think he could have very effectively asked Mitt a number of pointed questions as a way to undercut the lies without appearing defensive). But I do think Obama's demeanor last night is something he has practiced often over the last 3 years.

I will say this for Obama: Some portion of his time in the 4 hours before the debate must have been spent not on debate prep, but in briefings on the escalating tensions between Turkey and Syria, which (particularly given that Turkey is

a NATO member) could spiral out of control quickly. I wouldn't blame him if he was distracted by what could be a really dangerous incident, even putting the election aside.

All that said, Obama needs to find a way to engage enough with Mitt's criticisms and lies to debunk them with grace. Disdain alone won't do it.