

Republican Debate Transcript, Tampa, Florida, January 2012

Speakers: Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, [Mitt Romney](#) and Rick Santorum

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This debate between Republican candidates was held in Tampa, Florida on January 23, 2012. It was sponsored by NBC News, the National Journal, and the Tampa Bay Times, and was moderated by NBC's Brian Williams. Participants were Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum. This transcript was provided by the Chicago Tribune.



MODERATOR BRIAN WILLIAMS:

As for topics, it's a wide-open evening, so let's begin.

First of all, since we last gathered, three of you on stage have enjoyed victories, an unprecedented moment in the modern era, three separate candidates, three separate victories. Congratulations to you. In all three contests, the voters made it clear to pollsters and elsewhere that electability was a crucial element to them, a crucial argument this year.



And so, speaker Gingrich, on electability to begin with, your rival, your opponent on this stage, Governor Romney, was out today calling you erratic, a failed leader, and warning that your nomination for this party could perhaps result in what he called an "October surprise a day." So given the fact that he went after you today on this topic of electability, your response tonight, Mr. Speaker?



GINGRICH: Well, in 1980, when Ronald Reagan started the year about 30 points behind Jimmy Carter and when the Republican establishment described his economic ideas as "voodoo economics," Reagan just cheerfully went out and won the debate, won the nomination, and won the general election carrying more states than Herbert Hoover carried -- than Roosevelt carried against Herbert Hoover. I would suggest that a solid conservative who believes in economic growth through lower taxes and less regulation, who believes in an American energy program, who believes in a strong national defense, and who has the courage to stand up to the Washington establishment, may make the Washington establishment uncomfortable, but is also exactly the kind of bold, tough leader the American people want, they're not sending somebody to Washington to manage the decay. They're sending somebody to Washington to change it, and that requires somebody who's prepared to be controversial when necessary.

WILLIAMS: And about your problems, your departure from the speakership in the '90s, what's the case you make to the American people and voters in Republican primary contests about how you've changed, Mr. Speaker?

GINGRICH: Well, first of all, the case I make is that, when I was speaker, we had four consecutive balanced budgets, the only time in your lifetime, Brian, that we've had four consecutive balanced budgets. Most people think that's good.

We were down to 4.2 percent unemployment; 11 million new jobs were created. Most people think that's good. We reformed welfare. And two out of three people went to work or went to school. People think that's good.

I left the speakership after the 1998 election because I took responsibility for the fact that our results weren't as good as they should be. I think that's what a leader should do. I took responsibility, and I didn't want to stay around, as Nancy Pelosi has. I wanted to get out and do other things. I founded four small businesses. And I'm very comfortable that my four years as speaker, working with a Democratic president, achieved the kind of conservative values that most Republicans want to have in a president.

WILLIAMS: Governor Romney, for his part, the speaker said about you that were dancing on eggs during this campaign, a good salesman with a weak product. And even Chris Christie, one of the most popular politicians in this country, speaking on your behalf, said this weekend your challenge is "going to be how to connect with people."

Same question to you about electability.

ROMNEY: Well, I think this is going to come down to a question of leadership. I think as you choose the president of the United States, you're looking for a person who can lead this country in a very critical time, lead the free world, and the free world has to lead the entire world.

I think it's about leadership, and the Speaker was given an opportunity to be the leader of our party in 1994. And at the end of four years, he had to resign in disgrace.

Now, in the 1970s, he came to Washington. I went to work in my first job in the 1970s at the bottom level of a consulting firm. In the 1990s, he had to resign in disgrace from this job as Speaker.

I had the opportunity to go off and run the Olympic winter games. In the 15 years after he left the speakership, the Speaker has been working as an influence peddler in Washington. And during those 15 years, I helped turn around the Olympics, helped begin a very successful turnaround in the state of Massachusetts.

The Speaker -- when I was fighting against cap and trade, the Speaker was sitting down with Nancy Pelosi on a sofa encouraging it. When I was fighting to say that the Paul Ryan plan to solve Medicare was bold and right, he was saying that it was right wing social engineering.

So we have very different perspectives on leadership, and the kind of leadership that our conservative movement needs not just to get elected, but to get the country right.

WILLIAMS: Mr. Speaker?

GINGRICH: Well, look, I'm not going to spend the evening trying to chase Governor Romney's

misinformation. We'll have a site at Newt.org by tomorrow morning. We'll list everything -- he just said at least four things that are false. I don't want to waste the time on them. I think the American public deserve a discussion about how to beat Barack Obama, the American public deserves a discussion of what we would do about the economy. And I just think this is the worst kind of trivial politics.

I mean, he said at least four things that were false. We have an ad in which both John McCain and Mike Huckabee in 2007 and 2008 explain how much they think Governor Romney can't tell the truth.

I just suggest people look at them. Don't listen to me, don't believe me. Just look at the ad with Mike Huckabee and Senator McCain and you will understand exactly what you just saw.

WILLIAMS: Governor Romney, to your electability, let's talk about the southern base of the GOP. Among those who describe themselves as very conservative, only one in five have gone your way. How is that going to bode well for the longer campaign?

ROMNEY: Had a great record, as you know, in New Hampshire. The New Hampshire voters overwhelmingly supported me. Actually, among Republicans in New Hampshire, I got the biggest support that we have seen among Republicans, even including Ronald Reagan, that far back. So I'm pleased I will be able to connect well with our Republican base.

But let's go back to what the Speaker mentioned with regards to leadership, and that is -- I mean, we don't have to take my word for the facts. They're accurate. I will point out that they are accurate. But the truth is that the members of his own team, his congressional team, after his four years of leadership, they moved to replace him. They also took a vote, and 88 percent of Republicans voted to reprimand the Speaker, and he did resign in disgrace after that.

This was the first time in American history that a Speaker of the House has resigned from the House. And so that was the judgment rendered by his own people as to his leadership.

Look, don't forget at the end of the Speaker's term as Speaker, his approval rating was down to 18 percent. We suffered historic losses after his four years in office.

And I'll make this other point, which is we just learned today that his contract with Freddie Mac was provided by the lobbyists at Freddie Mac. I don't think we can possibly retake the White House if the person who's leading our party is the person who was working for the chief lobbyist of Freddie Mac. Freddie Mac was paying Speaker Gingrich \$1,600,000 at the same time Freddie Mac was costing the people of Florida millions upon millions of dollars.

WILLIAMS: Do you realize last week, Governor, you said that -- you complained that too much of your time on stage lately has been spent on negativity vis-a-vis the other candidates? You pledged to spend your time going after the incumbent president, yet here we are again.

ROMNEY: I'll tell you why, which is I learned something from that last contest in South Carolina, and that was I had incoming from all directions, was overwhelmed with a lot of attacks. And I'm not going to sit back and get attacked day in and day out without returning fire.

I would like not to have the kind of attacks that came against me. There were two ads run by Speaker Gingrich. Outside fact-checking groups said these ads were false, and yet they continue to run them, and one by his campaign, and one by a PAC, in his benefit. And I know he can't control that, but those ads were pretty heavy on me. So I'm going to point out things I think people need to know.

It was Republicans who replaced him in the House, voted to reprimand him. And it was the head lobbyist of Freddie Mac with whom he had a contract at a time when Floridians were suffering as a result in part of Freddie Mac.

WILLIAMS: Mr. Speaker, 30 seconds before I move on.

GINGRICH: Now, wait a second. I mean, he just went on and on and on, making a whole series of allegations. First of all, he may have been a good financier; he`s a terrible historian.

The fact is, the vote on the Ethics Committee was in January of 1997. I asked the Republicans to vote yes because we had to get it behind us. The Democrats had filed 84 ethics charges for a simple reason: We had taken control of the House after 40 years, and they were very bitter.

And the fact is, on every single ethics charge of substance that was dismissed in the end, the only thing we did wrong is we had one lawyer written by letters -- I mean, written one letter, and the one letter was in error. I didn`t pay a fine. I paid the cost of going through the process of determining it was wrong. I left two years later, and, frankly, we were right to get it behind us because the tax cut that led to economic growth, the four balanced budgets all came after that vote. So you have all this stuff just jumbled up. Apparently your consultants aren`t very good historians. What you ought to do is stop and look at the facts.

And the fact is, we won the House for the third time in 1998, but the margin wasn`t big enough. So I am the only speaker up to that point since the 1920s who had led the Republican Party to three consecutive victories. By the way, in 2006 when you chaired the Governors Association, we lost governorships. And in the four years that you were governor, we lost seats in the Massachusetts legislature. So I think as a party builder, the 20 years I spent building the House Republican Party stands pretty good as an example of leadership.

WILLIAMS: Senator Santorum, you have labeled this choice as being between an erratic and a moderate. You come in here tonight with one victory in Iowa. Where is your path to the top here?

SANTORUM: Well, I think if you`ve learned anything about this election, that any type of prediction is going to be wrong. The idea that this was a two-person race has been an idea that has been in fashion now for eight months, and it`s been wrong about eight times.

And so we`re looking at this race trying to paint a positive vision for our country. You ask my path to victory. My path to victory is to tell the people of Florida and tell the people of this country of someone who`s here that presents a very clear contrast with the president of the United States, someone that will make him the issue in this race, not the Republican candidate, someone who has a track record of being a strong conservative, someone who has a vision, a bold vision to reach out to the voters that I reached out and was successful in getting when I ran for the Senate in Pennsylvania twice, a state we haven`t won for the presidency since 1988. I won it twice, once in a year where George Bush lost the state by five and I won it by six.

How did I do it? I had plans out there that included everybody, plans like I have today, talking about manufacturing, talking about things that - - that are touchstones with the Reagan Democrats that provided that 49- state win.

We talked about faith. We talked about family. We talked about jobs. We talked about limited government. And that message was one that connected in a state -- well, just like Florida, that's one of those key states that we're going to win. And that sets me apart, really, from anybody else on this stage as someone who's been victorious with a strong, principled conservative message.

WILLIAMS: And yet, Senator, you are former Senator Santorum, having lost your home state by 18 points.

SANTORUM: Yeah, well, if I was the only guy that lost an election that year in Pennsylvania, that would be maybe a big statement, but our gubernatorial candidate lost by more than I did. We lost five congressional seats. And it was an historic loss in our statehouse. It was a meltdown year. We lost 23 out of 33 senators. And probably unlike a lot of other candidates, when you're running in an election year that you know you're running against a headwind, a lot of folks crouch down, they get out of the way of the wind and try to sneak in. I stood tall, stood for what I believed in, talked about issues like the threat of Iran on the horizon, talked about the need to reform Social Security and Medicare, talked about the issues that, well, now we're all talking about today, as I did at a time when nobody wanted to hear that message. I also was running with a president who was sitting at about 35 percent favorable, and I was standing by him and trying to reform Social Security, and trying to fight the war and win the war in Iraq, and I stand by that.

And one of the things I figured out when I was running in that tough election year, there's one thing worse than losing an election, and that's not standing for the principles that you hold.

WILLIAMS: Congressman Paul, there is no denying you have an enthusiastic base support -- base of support. We could hear them outside tonight. Yet there was that recent interview, you were asked if while campaigning you envision yourself in the Oval Office, and you said, "Not really, but I think it's a possibility."

So that begs the question about your path and when you will give an honest answer about perhaps your third-party plans going forward. Are you in this regardless of the outcome to your right (ph) here on this stage?

PAUL: Well, unlike others, maybe they sit around and daydream about being in the White House. I just don't sit around daydreaming about it, but I'm in a race, I'm in a good race.

You talk about electability. Why don't we take on the first three states and take everybody 30 years and under? I'm doing pretty darned well. I'm winning that vote.

But what about if you compare my name to Obama? I do quite well, if not better, than the rest.

So, to say that there has only been three races, and talk about not being electable, I think is a bit of a stretch. As a matter of fact, the delegates haven't even been appointed in Iowa yet. I mean, quite frankly, we have a pretty good chance of getting a good sum of those because of the organization.

We only had a straw vote. I mean, this argument on who won, it was a straw vote. I mean, the delegates is what counts.

But I do want to address the earlier discussion that you had about 1997. I had been out of Congress for 12 years, and I went back in '96 and arrived there in '97. It was chaotic, let me tell you.

It was a mess, and it was a mess for 12 years. And Newt had a big job on his hands, but he really had to

attack the conservatives. He did it boldly.

And quite frankly, I think the reason -- he didn't not run for Speaker, you know, two years later. He didn't have the votes. That was what the problem was. So this idea that he voluntarily reneged and he was going to punish himself because we didn't do well in the election, that's just not the way it was.

WILLIAMS: Let me come at it this way. If Newt Gingrich emerges from the GOP primary process as the nominee of the party, do you go your own way?

PAUL: Well, I have done a lot of that in my lifetime.

WILLIAMS: I should be more specific. Will you run as a third-party candidate?

PAUL: I have no plans to do that, no intention. And when I have been pressed on it, and they asked me why, and I said, I don't want to. But I haven't been an absolutist. When I left Congress, I didn't have plans on going back, but I did after 12 years. I went back to medicine. So, no, I don't have any plans to do that. No.

WILLIAMS: Would you support a Newt Gingrich as nominee of the GOP?

PAUL: Well, he keeps hinting about attacking the Fed, and he talks about gold. Now if I could just change him on foreign policy, we might be able to talk business.

(LAUGHTER)

WILLIAMS: Speaker Gingrich, are you willing to adjust to pick up an endorsement from Texas?

GINGRICH: Well, I got one on Friday from Governor Perry, which I liked a lot as a starting point. So I like endorsements from Texas.

And Congressman Paul is right. There's an area -- I think what he has said about the Federal Reserve and what he has said about the importance of monetary policy, the proposal I've issued for a gold commission, which harkens back to something that he and Jesse Helms helped develop, on which he served on in 1981, and the fact that we have people of the caliber of Lew Lehrman and Jim Grant, who have agreed they would chair such a commission, I think they're areas we can work on.

There are places we disagree very deeply. Iran is a good example. But there are places -- you know, you build a coalition by trying to find ways you can work together, and frankly we could work together a lot more than either one of us could work with Barack Obama.

WILLIAMS: Governor Romney, a question you know is coming because of what you have set in motion for tomorrow when you release one year's tax returns and your estimates for 2011. We know it's not a matter of producing them. You said during the McCain vetting process you turned over 23 years which you had at the ready because, to quote you, you're something of a packrat.

So, prior to tomorrow, can you tell us tonight what's in there that's going to get people talking? What's in there that's going to be controversial? What's in there that you may find yourself defending?

ROMNEY: No surprises, Brian. The most extensive disclosure that I made was the financial disclosure

requirements under the law. We each had to do that, and I laid out what my assets are and where they are, and people have been looking at that. It's very similar to what it was four years ago. And so my income tax will show that that's where the profits and rewards came.

The real question is not so much my taxes, but the taxes of the American people. The real question people are going to ask is, who's going to help the American people at a time when folks are having real tough times?

And that's why I put forward a plan to eliminate the tax on savings for middle income Americans. Anyone making under \$200,000 a year, I would eliminate the tax on interest, dividends and capital gains. People need help to be able to save their money.

I'll also bring the corporate tax rate down to 25 percent as quickly as possible and then begin a process of reshaping the entire tax code. It's far too complex, it's far too intrusive, it's far too great.

ROMNEY: I would like to lower the rates, broaden the base, akin to what we saw in the Bowles-Simpson plan, which, by the way, the president commissioned and then simply brushed aside. We need to go back to that, get our rates down, and get a pro-growth tax policy in this country.

WILLIAMS: So, across this country tomorrow, when people learn the details of the tax return you release - and, of course, you'll be under pressure to release more years after that -- nothing will stick out, nothing will emerge that will be talked about by this time tomorrow night?

ROMNEY: Oh, I'm sure people will talk about it. I mean, you'll see my income, how much taxes I've paid, how much I've paid to charity. You'll see how complicated taxes can be. But -- but I pay all the taxes that are legally required and not a dollar more.

I don't think you want someone as the candidate for president who pays more taxes than he owes. So I'll -- I'll point out that that's the case.

And will there will discussion? Sure. Will it be an article? Yeah. But is it entirely legal and fair? Absolutely. I'm proud of the fact that I pay a lot of taxes.

And the fact is, there are a lot of people in this country that pay a lot of taxes. I'd like to see our tax rate come down and focus on growing the country, getting people back to work. That's our problem in this country right now. We've got a lot of people out of work. Let's let them start paying taxes because they got jobs again.

WILLIAMS: Speaker Gingrich, what will satisfy you?

GINGRICH: Well, first of all, he said the other day when he indicated he was going to release it, that was the right thing to do. It's actually a tradition his father started in 1967. I think it's the right thing to do. The biggest thing I think will be -- and I think you indicated the other day that you pay something like a 15 percent marginal rate. My position is not to attack him for paying a 15 percent marginal rate. I have in my tax proposal an alternative flat tax on the Hong Kong model, where you get to choose what you want, and our rate's 15 percent. So I'm prepared to describe my 15 percent flat tax as the Mitt Romney flat tax. I'd like to bring everybody else down to Mitt's rate, not try to bring him up to some other rate.

WILLIAMS: And -- yes, Governor?

(CROSSTALK)

ROMNEY: Mr. Speaker, is the tax on capital gains also 15 percent or is it zero?

GINGRICH: Zero.


ROMNEY: Well, under that -- under that plan, I'd have paid no taxes in the last two years.

GINGRICH: Well, if that -- and if you created enough jobs doing that -- it was Alan Greenspan who first said the best rate, if you want to create jobs for capital gains, is zero. My number-one goal is to create a maximum number of jobs to put the American people back to work. It's a straightforward argument.


WILLIAMS: And, Governor, how about your father's model of 12 years' worth of returns?

ROMNEY: You know, I agree with my dad on a lot of things, but we also disagree. And -- and going out with 12 years of returns is not something I'm going to do. I'm putting out two years, which is more than anyone else on this stage. I think it'll satisfy the interests of the American people to see that I pay my taxes, where I give my charitable contributions to, and I think that's the right number.

WILLIAMS: More broadly, Governor, just an aside, have you been surprised at the degree to which your wealth has become an issue? You spoke rather forcefully in South Carolina over the weekend on Saturday night about this, about the degree to which you've had to defend, as you put it, your success in business.

ROMNEY: Yeah, I knew that was going to come from the Obama team. I understood that. We see that on the left. I was surprised to see people in the Republican Party pick up the weapons of the left and start using them to attack free enterprise. I think those weapons will be used against us. I think it's very unfortunate. 

I will not apologize for having been successful. I did not inherit what my wife and I have, nor did she. What we have -- what -- what I was able to build, I built the old-fashioned way, by earning it, by working hard. And I was proud of the fact that we helped create businesses that grew, that employed people. And these are not just high-end financial jobs. We helped start Staples, for instance. It employs 90,000 people. These are middle-income people. There are entry-level jobs, too. I'm proud of the fact that we helped people around the country, Bright Horizons children centers, the Sports Authority, Steel Dynamics, a new steel company. These employ people, middle-income people.

And the nature of America is individuals pursuing their dreams don't make everyone else poorer; they help make us all better off. And so I'm not going to apologize for success or apologize for free enterprise. I believe free enterprise is one of the things that -- that we have to reinvigorate in this country if we want to get people working again. 

WILLIAMS: Senator Santorum, Governor Romney has said -- and he said again tonight -- he expected these attacks from the other side. He's been taking fire as he would from the Democrats from the group on this stage. That means you. That includes you.

ROMNEY: I didn't mean to include...

SANTORUM: No, I have -- I have not. I have not fired at Governor Romney on -- on -- on his -- his work at Bain Capital. In fact, I've been maybe unique in that regard that I haven't.

I believe in capitalism. I believe in free markets. I believe Governor Romney can go out and -- and earn whatever he can. And hopefully he creates jobs by earning that money and investing in companies.

My only question with Governor Romney is that, you know, to be a great defender of capitalism and talk about the importance of -- of capitalism and free markets, and in the case of Bain, constructive capitalism and destructive capitalism.

SANTORUM: My question to Governor Romney and to Speaker Gingrich, if you believe in capitalism that much, then why did you support the bailout of Wall Street, where you had an opportunity to allow destructive capitalism to work, to allow a failure of a -- of a system that needed to fail because people did things that in capitalism pay -- you pay a price?

And we should have allowed those financial institutions to go through the bankruptcy process, and we would have had resulted not what we are seeing here in Florida with this lengthy recession/depression of the housing market. You would have seen the effects of what Governor Romney advocated for and advocates today at Bain Capital, which is allowing companies that do not do their job, cannot be competitive, make mistakes, to fail and pay the price, instead of having government come in and prop them up.

WILLIAMS: And Speaker Gingrich, just tonight, two hours ago, in fact, you released your '06 contract with Freddie Mac. We alluded to this earlier.

Your company was paid \$25,000 a month, \$300,000 for the year. But it didn't provide a further explanation of services for Freddie Mac.

Why one year's worth? Governor Romney today used the expression "work product." He wants to see your work product, and the word "lobbying" has been thrown around, and you strongly disagree with that.

GINGRICH: Well, first of all, if you read the contract -- and we can go back and check the other years. We had to work through the process of getting an approval because it was a confidentiality agreement.

But if you read the contract which we have posted, and the Center for Health Transformation had to get permission to post, it says very clearly supposed to do consulting work. The governor did consulting work for years. I have never suggested his consulting work was lobbying.

So let me start right there. There is no place in the contract that provides for lobbying. I have never done any lobbying.

Congressman J.C. Watts, who for seven years was the head of the Freddie Mac Watch Committee, said flatly he has never been approached by me. The fact is that Congressman Rick Lazio, who is chairman of the Housing Subcommittee, said he has never been approached by me. And the only report in the newspaper was "The New York Times" in July of 2008, which said I told the House Republicans they should vote no, not give Freddie Mac any money, because it needed to be reformed. So there's no --
(CROSSTALK)

WILLIAMS: So you never peddled influence, as he described tonight?

GINGRICH: What?

WILLIAMS: You never peddled influence, as Governor Romney accused you of tonight?

GINGRICH: You know, there is a point in the process where it gets unnecessarily personal and nasty. And that's sad.

The fact is I have had a very long career of trying to represent the people of Georgia and, as Speaker, the people of the United States. I think it's pretty clear to say that I have never, ever gone and done any lobbying.

In fact, we brought in an expert on lobbying law and trained all of our staff. And that expert is prepared to testify that he was brought in to say here is the bright line between what you can do as a citizen and what you do as a lobbyist. And we consistently, for 12 years, running four small businesses, stayed away from lobbying, precisely because I thought this kind of defamatory and factually false charge would be made.

ROMNEY: Well, Mr. Speaker, you were -- on this stage, at a prior debate, you said you were paid \$300,000 by Freddie Mac for an historian -- as an historian. They don't pay people \$25,000 a month for six years as historians. That adds up to about \$1.6 million.

They weren't hiring you as an historian. And this contract proves that you were not an historian. You were

a consultant.

GINGRICH: I was a consultant.

ROMNEY: It doesn't say that you provided historical experience, it said that you were as a consultant. And you were hired by the chief lobbyist of Freddie Mac, not the CEO, not the head of public affairs. By the chief lobbyist at Freddie Mac.

You also spoke publicly in favor of these GSEs, these government-sponsored entities, at a very time when Freddie Mac was getting America in a position where we would have had a massive housing collapse. You could have spoken out aggressively. You could have spoken out in a way to say these guys are wrong, this needs to end. But instead, you were being paid by them. You were making over \$1 million at the same time people in Florida were being hurt by millions of dollars.

GINGRICH: Well, this is a good example. As a businessman, you know that the gross revenue of Bain wasn't your personal income.

We had a company. The company had three offices. The company was being paid. My share annually was about \$35,000 a year. And the fact is I offered strategic advice, largely based on my knowledge of history, including the history of Washington.

Government-sponsored enterprises include, for example, telephone cooperatives, rural electric cooperatives, federal credit unions. There are many different kinds of government-sponsored enterprises, and many of them have done very good things. And in the early years, before some people, particularly Jim Johnson and other Democrats, began to change the model you could make a pretty good argument that in the early years, those housing institutions were responsible for a lot of people getting a lot of good housing.

ROMNEY: There's no question about that, but we're talking about one. We're talking about Freddie Mac.

GINGRICH: Right.

ROMNEY: And that one did a lot of bad for a lot of people. And you were working there making over \$1 million for your entities --

(CROSSTALK)

GINGRICH: For the entities. As long as we agree, for the entities.

ROMNEY: Owned by you. I don't know whether 100 percent owned by you, but I presume. Owned by you, over \$1.6 million. And you said it was \$300,000. It was \$1.6 million. That's a difference.

GINGRICH: So, Mitt, what -- Mitt, what's the gross revenue of Bain in the years you were associated with it? What's the gross revenue?

ROMNEY: Very -- very substantial. But I think it's irrelevant compared to the fact...

GINGRICH: No.

ROMNEY: ... that you were working for Freddie Mac.

GINGRICH: Wait a second. Wait a second. Very substantial.

ROMNEY: You were working for Freddie...

(CROSSTALK)

GINGRICH: Did Bain ever do any work with any company which did any work with the government, like Medicare...

ROMNEY: We didn't -- we didn't do -- we didn't...



GINGRICH: ... Medicaid?

ROMNEY: We didn't do any work with the government. I didn't have an office on K Street. I wasn't a lobbyist. I didn't -- had never worked -- I've never worked in Washington. You were working...

GINGRICH: So -- so...

ROMNEY: We have congressmen who also say that you came and lobbied them in favor...

GINGRICH: I didn't lobby them.

ROMNEY: You have congressmen who say...

(CROSSTALK)

ROMNEY: ... that you came and lobbied them with regards to Medicare Part D, at the same time...

GINGRICH: Now, wait. Whoa, whoa.

ROMNEY: ... your center was taking in contributions...

GINGRICH: You just jumped a long way over here, friend.

ROMNEY: Well, another -- another area of influence-peddling.

GINGRICH: No, not -- now, let me be very clear, because I understand your technique, which you used on McCain, you used on Huckabee, you've used consistently, OK? It's unfortunate, and it's not going to work very well, because the American people see through it.

I have always publicly favored a stronger Medicare program. I wrote a book in 2002 called "Saving Lives and Saving Money." I publicly favored Medicare Part D for a practical reason, and that reason is simple. The U.S. government was not prepared to give people anything -- insulin, for example -- but they would pay for kidney dialysis. They weren't prepared to give people Lipitor, but they'd pay for open-heart surgery. That is a terrible way to run Medicare.

I am proud of the fact -- and I'll say this in Florida -- I'm proud of the fact that I publicly, openly advocated Medicare Part D. It has saved lives. It's run on a free enterprise model. It also included health savings accounts and it include Medicare alternatives, which gave people choices.

And I did it publicly, and it is not correct, Mitt -- I'm just saying this flatly, because you've been walking around this state saying things that are untrue -- it is not correct to describe public citizenship, having public advocacy as lobbying. Every citizen has the right to do that.

ROMNEY: They sure do.

GINGRICH: And what I did on behalf of Medicare...

ROMNEY: They sure do.

GINGRICH: ... I did out in the open, publicly, and that is my right as a citizen.

WILLIAMS: Gentlemen...

ROMNEY: Here's why it's a problem, Mr. Speaker. Here's why it's a problem. And that is, if you're getting paid by health companies, if your entities are getting paid by health companies that could benefit from a piece of legislation, and you then meet with Republican congressmen and encourage them to support that legislation, you can call it whatever you'd like. I call it influence-peddling.

It is not right. It is not right. You have a conflict. You are -- you are being paid by companies at the same time you're encouraging people to pass legislation which is in their favor.

WILLIAMS: Governor... ROMNEY: This is -- you spent now 15 years in Washington on K Street. And -- and this is a real problem, if we're going to nominate someone who not only had a record of -- of great distress as the speaker, but that has worked for 15 years lobbying.



WILLIAMS: Gentlemen, we've let this go because of the state of the race, and a certain amount of this conversation, I guess, had to happen. We -- this also has to happen. We have to go to a break. We'll come back. We'll talk about foreclosure. We'll talk about foreign policy. We'll welcome in the other two gentlemen to this conversation when we continue from Tampa.

(APPLAUSE)

WILLIAMS: Welcome back to what has already become an interesting night in Tampa, Florida. Gentlemen, welcome back to you.

And, Senator Santorum, let's begin this segment with you. Since we've been nibbling around the edges of the foreclosure crisis, since, what, 40 percent of homeowners in this state are underwater, 53 percent of the homes in Tampa, Florida, are worth less today than before this crisis. Was it too easy? Did vehicles of the U.S. government make it too easy to own a home in America?

SANTORUM: Well, the answer, unfortunately, is yes to that. And there were several of us in the United States Senate back in 2005 and 2006 who saw this on the horizon, who saw the problem with Freddie and Fannie, and tried to move forth with a bill -- I was on the Banking Committee. We voted a bill out of committee to try to solve this problem, to constrain Fannie and Freddie, and there were a lot of people out there fighting that, including Harry Reid and his minions on the other side of the aisle.

I sent -- I signed a letter, along with 24 other senators, that said, we either do something now, stop the filibuster of this bill, Harry Reid, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, all of whom were in the Senate at the time. They were filibustering this bill to allow reform of Fannie and Freddie. And we said, if this doesn't happen, if we don't constrain these two behemoths from continuing to underwrite this subprime mortgage problem, then we're going to have a collapse. Unfortunately, that proved -- proved to be true. The problem now is, what are you going to do about it? And what I've said is that, as you heard me say before, let capitalism work. Allow these -- allow these banks to -- to realize their losses. And create an opportunity for folks who have houses to realize their losses and at least help them out.

That's why I proposed in my tax plan -- and I talk about five areas where I allow deductions -- well, one of them would be, be able to deduct losses from the sale of your home. Right now, you can't do that. You have to pay gains, depending on the amount, but you can't deduct the losses.

This is something I think is important temporarily to put in place to allow people the freedom to be able to go out and get out from underneath these houses that they're holding onto and at least get some relief from the federal government for doing so.


WILLIAMS: Congressman Paul, should that be any role for the government? Are those folks owed anything for being under?

PAUL: Well, the government owes them a free market and a sound monetary system, but they didn't give it to them. They gave them a mess. They gave them a financial system that literally created this problem. And it was compounded -- first, the line of credit to the -- to the Federal Reserve, it was excessive. Everybody now admits in Washington interest rates were kept too low, too long.

But not only that, in addition to that, it was an insult to injury, because they kept interest rates especially low with Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, and there was a line of credit there, and it was a guarantee. As a matter of fact, I had introduced legislation 10 years before the bubble burst to eliminate that line of credit. But then the Community Reinvestment Act added more fuel to it, you know, forcing banks to make loans that are risky loans.


So the whole bubble was easily seen. The consequences were anticipated. It was all government manufactured. But the question is, is what do you do after you come upon a mess that the government and the politicians created?

The best thing you can do is get out of the way, because you want the prices to come down so that people will start buying them again, but politicians can't allow that to happen. Our policies in Washington still has been to try to stimulate houses and keep -- keep prices up.

PAUL: But this whole thing about how we get involved in this low interest rate to stimulate the economy, almost everybody in Washington now in almost all spectrums of the economic sphere do not believe in wage and price controls, but they believe in controlling interest rates. That's one-half of the whole economy, and here we have a bunch of guys getting in a room in secret, deciding what interest rates should be, and they create this mess. So, yes, we need to get out of the way, but instead the debt has to be liquidated. 

The mortgage derivatives was a monster. A lot of people made a lot of money on that. But guess what? The Federal Reserve, to the tune of trillions and trillions of dollars, as well as TARP funds, were used to bail out the people that made all this money.

Guess what happened to the bad debt? It should have been wiped off the book. They should have gone bankrupt. It was dumped on the taxpayers, and the taxpayers still have it. And as long as you maintain that debt on the books, you're not going to have growth.

This is why Japan hasn't recovered. We're in four years now, and it's going to continue until we understand who creates the business cycle, how it happens, and what you have to do to get out of it. 

WILLIAMS: Gentlemen, 30 seconds, please, on this, starting with Governor Romney.

To help these homeowners or not?

ROMNEY: To help them? Of course we help them.

Pam Mati (ph) here in Florida is cracking down on people who are committing fraud, number one.

Number two, you have to get government out of the mess. Government has created the mess.

Number three, you're going to have to help people see if they can't get more flexibility from their banks. Right now, with Dodd- Frank, we made it harder for banks to renegotiate mortgages to help people get out.

And finally, you've got to get the economy going again with people having jobs. With Florida with 9.9 percent unemployment, and with 18 percent real unemployment in this state, and underemployment, you're not going to get housing recovered unless you get jobs created again.

WILLIAMS: Speaker? GINGRICH: Well, I think, first of all, if you could repeal Dodd- Frank tomorrow morning, you would see the economy start to improve overnight. I mean, people don't realize this bill is -- a little bit of what Congressman Paul said.

The fact is Dodd-Frank has led the biggest banks to get bigger. It is crushing independent banks. It has an anti-housing bias. Federal regulators are slowing down and making it harder to make loans for housing, and it is crippling small business borrowing.

All those things are a function of a bill passed by the Democrats called Dodd-Frank. If they would repeal it tomorrow morning, you would have a better housing market the next day.

WILLIAMS: Do you really think the financial system is overregulated? That's the second mention of Dodd-Frank tonight.

GINGRICH: I really think that when -- yes, of course it's overregulated. When you put that much power in the Treasury under Geithner, you know, it's an invitation to corruption.

When you have a bias in the bill which makes the big banks get bigger, exactly the opposite of what a rational policy would be, it's a bad bill. When you have regulators walk in small local banks and say, do not loan money on housing, it's a bad idea.

WILLIAMS: Governor Romney, was it overregulated prior to the collapse?

ROMNEY: It was poorly regulated. Markets have to have regulation to work. You can't have everybody open a bank in their garage. You have to have regulation, but it's got to be up to date. And they didn't have capital requirements put in place for the different classes of assets banks had. They also didn't have regulation properly put in place for mortgage lenders. Derivatives weren't being regulated.

You need to have regulation that's up to date. They had old regulation, burdensome. Then they passed Dodd-Frank, which the Speaker is absolutely right. It has made it almost impossible for community banks. I was with the head of one of the big banks in New York. He said they have hundreds of lawyers working on Dodd-Frank to implement it.

Community banks don't have hundreds of lawyers. It's just killing the residential home market and it's got to be replaced.

WILLIAMS: Governor Romney, let me ask you this. There was a lot of talk in the last presidential campaign about that 3:00 a.m. phone call. Let's say President Romney gets that phone call, and it is to say that Fidel Castro has died. And there are credible people in the Pentagon who predict upwards of half a million Cubans may take that as a cue to come to the United States.

What do you do?

ROMNEY: Well, first of all, you thank heavens that Fidel Castro has returned to his maker and will be sent to another land.

(APPLAUSE)

ROMNEY: Now, number two, you work very aggressively with the new leadership in Cuba to try and move them towards a more open degree than they have had in the past.

We just had, with Wilman Villar, his life was just lost in a hunger strike fighting for democracy. This president has taken a very dangerous course with regards to Cuba saying we're going to relax relations, we're going to open up travel to Cuba.

This is the wrong time for that, with this kind of heroics going on. We want to stand with the people of Cuba that want freedom. We want to move that effort forward not by giving in and saying we lost, but by saying we will fight for democracy.

WILLIAMS: Mr. Speaker, as a practical matter, along the Florida coast, though, you know the policy, so called wet foot/dry foot. What do you do if folks start arriving in the United States?

GINGRICH: Well, Brian, first of all, I guess the only thing I would suggest is I don't think that Fidel is going to meet his maker. I think he's going to go to the other place.

Second, I would suggest to you the policy of the United States should be aggressively to overthrow the regime and to do everything we can to support those Cubans who want freedom. You know, Obama is very infatuated with an Arab Spring. He doesn't seem to be able to look 90 miles south of the United States to have a Cuban Spring.



So I would try to put in place a very aggressive policy of reaching out to every single Cuban who would like to be free, helping network them together, reaching out to the younger generation inside the dictatorship, and indicating they don't have a future as a dictatorship because a Gingrich presidency will not tolerate four more years of this dictatorship.

WILLIAMS: Overt and covert, are you talking about engaging the U.S. military?

GINGRICH: No, I'm talking about using every asset available to the United States, including appropriate covert operations, to maximize the distance, what Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, and Margaret Thatcher did to the Soviet empire, bring together every asset we have to minimize the survival of the dictatorship and to maximize the chance for freedom in Cuba.

WILLIAMS: Congressman?

PAUL: I -- I have a little bit of work to do yet on him on foreign policy.

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

No, I would do pretty much the opposite. I don't like the isolationism of not talking to people. I was drafted in 1962 at the height of the Cold War when the missiles were in Cuba. And the Cold War's over. And I think we propped up Castro for 40-some years because we put on these sanctions, and this -- only used us as a scapegoat. He could always say, anything wrong, it's the United States' fault.

But I think it's time -- time to quit this isolation business of not talking to people. We talked to the Soviets. We talk to the Chinese. And we opened up trade, and we're not killing each other now. We fought with the Vietnamese for a long time. We finally gave up, started talking to them, now we trade with them. I don't know why -- why the Cuban people should be so intimidating.

I -- I don't know where you get this assumption that all of a sudden all the Cubans would come up here. I would probably think they were going to celebrate and they're going to have a lot more freedom if we would only open up our doors and say, we want to talk to you, and trade with you, and come visit.

Sometimes they can't even send packages down there.

I -- I think we're living in the dark ages when we can't even talk to the Cuban people. I think it's not 1962 anymore. And we don't have to use force and intimidation and overthrow of a -- in governments. I just don't think that's going to work.


WILLIAMS: Senator Santorum, an admittedly...

(APPLAUSE)

WILLIAMS: ... cynical question. If there was a strong lobby of Chinese dissidents living in a state as politically important of -- as Florida, do you think we'd have a trade policy with China that looks more like the trade policy with Cuba?

SANTORUM: Not if they were not 90 miles off our shore. This is an important doctrine of the United States to make sure that our hemisphere and those who are close to us are -- are folks that we can and should deal with.


And right now, we have and have had for 50 years a dictatorship in Cuba. We've had sanctions on them. They should continue. They should continue until the Castros are dead, and then we should make it very clear that if you want mountains of aid, if you want normal relationships, if you want to improve your economy, if you want to have the opportunity for freedom, that the United States stands ready now to embrace you now that you've gotten rid of these tyrants who -- who have controlled you for these 50-plus

years. That's why the sanctions have to stay in place, because we need to have a -- a very solid offer to come forward and help the Cuban people. 

And you're right, Ron. It's not 1962. They're now with the Cubans and the Venezuelans, the Nicaraguans. There is a growing network of folks now working with the jihadists, the Iranians, who are very, very excited about the opportunity to having platforms 90 miles off our coast, just like the Soviets were, very anxious to have platforms 90 miles off our coast, or in Venezuela, or in Nicaragua, and other places they could come across the southern border.

This is a serious threat. It's a threat that I've been talking about for about six or seven years. And it's one that's not going to go away until we -- we confront the threat and hopefully are able to convince the Cuban people that, through what Newt and others have suggested, to -- to change their government at the appropriate time. WILLIAMS: Governor -- Governor Romney, last night, the Abe Lincoln, U.S. aircraft carrier and a couple other attendant U.S. Navy vessels passed through the Strait of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf. If Iran was able to fulfill, carry out that threat to shut down the strait, would you consider that an act of war? What would you do about it as president?

ROMNEY: Of -- of course it's an act of war. It is appropriate and -- and essential for our military, for our Navy to -- to maintain open seas. We have control of the commons, of space, air, and the seas. Our Navy has the capacity to do that -- or did in the past.

Under this president and under prior presidents, we keep on shrinking our Navy. Our Navy is now smaller than any time since 1917. And -- and -- and the president is building roughly nine ships a year. We ought to raise that to 15 ships a year, not because we want to go to war with anyone, but because we don't want anyone to take the -- the -- the hazard of going against us. We want them to see that we're so strong they couldn't possibly defeat us. 


So we ought to have an aircraft carrier in the gulf, an aircraft carrier, and, of course, the task force with it in the Mediterranean. We want to show Iran, any action of that nature will be considered an act of war, an act of terror and -- and America is going to be keep those sea lanes open.

WILLIAMS: So, Speaker Gingrich if you accept that bedrock definition that it is an act of war, how do you gauge the appetite on the part of the American people after the better part of a decade of warfare, fighting dual wars overseas for something like that?

GINGRICH: The American people have no interest in going to war anywhere. We had no interest in going to war with the Japanese when they bombed Pearl Harbor. We had no interest in going to Afghanistan when Jihadist's destroyed the World Trade Center. The fact is, we've historically been a country that would like peace, we'd like stability. But we also have a historic commitment to -- to freedom of the sea. And I would say that the most dangerous thing, which by the way, Barack Obama just did, the -- the Iranians are practicing closing the Straits of Hormuz, actively taunting us, so he cancels a military exercise with the Israelis so as not to be provocative?

Now, dictatorships respond to strength, they don't respond to weakness and I think there's a very grave danger that the Iranians think that in fact this president is so weak, they could close the Straits of Hormuz and not suffer substantial consequences.

WILLIAMS: Governor Romney, how do you end a war in Afghanistan without talking to the Taliban?

ROMNEY: By beating them. By standing behind our troops and making sure that -- that we have transitioned to the Afghan military, a capacity for them to be successful in holding off the Taliban. Our -- 

our mission there, is to be able to turn Afghanistan and its sovereignty over to a military of Afghan descent -- Afghan people that can defend their sovereignty. And that is something which we can accomplish in the next couple of years.

This president, however, has done -- made -- made it very difficult for our troops to be able to be successful in that mission by, number one, announcing a withdrawal date for our troops, number two drawing down our surge troops faster than the time the commanders on the ground was necessary. You don't draw them down during the middle of the fighting season. And finally, by not overseeing elections in Afghanistan to assure that the -- the selection of their president was seen by the people as being legitimate. And he has failed in -- in executing a policy in Afghanistan that would optimize our prospects of success.

(CROSSTALK)

WILLIAMS: Go ahead. I was just going to ask, any appetite on this stage to negotiate with the Taliban? Congressman?

PAUL: No, but I wanted to get involved in the discussion.

WILLIAMS: No, go ahead?

PAUL: Because the question was, you know, would you go to war? And Mitt said he would -- he would go to war. But you have to think about the preliminary act that might cause them to want to close the Straits of Hormuz, and that's the blockade. We're blockading them. Can you imagine what we would do if somebody blockaded the Gulf of Mexico? That would be an act of war. So the act of war has already been committed and this is a retaliation.

But besides, there's no interest whatsoever for Iran to close the Straits of Hormuz. I mean they need it as much as we do. I mean so you have to put that into perspective. But this whole idea that -- that it's -- we -- we have to go to war because we've already committed an act by blockading the country and I -- I don't see -- I -- I -- and -- and I think Newt is right. I think he's wrong about World War II, I think the people were ready because we did it properly. We declared it and we won it quickly.

But, not the people are not ready. We don't have any money. We have too many wars. We -- the people want to come home and they certainly don't want a hot war in Iran right now and I -- I think that would be the most foolish thing in the world to do right now is take on Iran.

WILLIAMS: Right now for us another break. I'll welcome two colleagues out here to the stage when we continue from Tampa right after this.

WILLIAMS: And welcome back to Tampa.

I am happy to welcome two fellow journalists to this stage. Happy to be joined now by our partners in this debate. In fact, "The Tampa Bay Times" and "National Journal."

Adam Smith is the longtime political editor at "The Tampa Bay Times," covering national, state and local politics for more than a decade, one of the very best in the trade. And besides, a lot of people just thought a GOP debate should have Adam Smith present.

Beth Reinhard is a political correspondent for "National Journal." She is a Florida native, was a veteran political reporter at "The Miami Herald" for 11 years.

But one piece of business, Senator Santorum, I had to go to a break. I didn't get you in on what we'll call the Iran round, because you've talked about this a lot. Specifically, as a last resort, as you said, taking out Iran's nuclear program.



The problem with that, so many in the military tell you, is the target list. Where do you limit it -- the air strikes that some estimate would begin at 30 to 60 days sustained, taking out air defenses, all of that familiar language the American people have just been through for a decade?

SANTORUM: Well, the contrast for that is, what happens if Iran gets a nuclear weapon and the entire world changes? Iran is not just another country, or a little, small country, as President Obama said classically during the campaign. Obama's Iran policy has been a colossal failure.

It's been a failure because he's not been true to the American public about the threat that Iran poses to the world. Not just to Israel, but to the world and to the United States.

The bottom line is the theocracy that runs Iran is the equivalent of having al Qaeda in charge of a country with huge oil reserves, gas reserves, and a nuclear weapon. That is something that no president could possibly allow to have happen under any circumstances.

And when you asked the question, Brian, are we at -- is this is an act of war? Well, let's look at the acts of war that Iran -- they are -- they are holding hostages, they are attacking our troops, their IEDs, the improvised explosive devices, that are killing our troops in Afghanistan, and killed them in Iraq, and maimed so many were produced, and people were trained and funded in Iran specifically to kill American troops.

You look at the ships that have been attacked by Iran, embassies were attacked by Iran. A -- Iran has plotted to kill the Saudi ambassador here in this country. It is a long list of attacks of -- of warlike behavior on the part of this regime. And to believe that if they have a nuclear weapon they're somehow going to become into the community of nations is a reckless act on the part of a president. It would be reckless not to do something to stop them from getting this nuclear weapon.

WILLIAMS: Senator, thank you. And to interests of local state politics, Beth Reinhard will take over the questioning.

REINHARD: Senator Santorum, here in Florida, BP is still airing apologetic appeals on television, but there are proposals to expand offshore oil drilling. The state's most optimistic estimates say more drilling would create 5,000 jobs, but an oil spill would threaten Florida's tourism industry, which employs nearly 1 million people. Is that worth the risk?

SANTORUM: What threatens the tourist industry in Florida, as we've seen, is a very bad economy, and a very bad economy that became a bad economy why? Because of a huge spike in oil prices in the summer of 2008. So energy is absolutely key to keep all of our country healthy, specifically Florida, which is a destination place. This is a -- this is a place that relies upon people being able to travel and afford to be able to travel to come down here, relies upon an economy being strong.

I was at a manufacturer in Sarasota County today and was talking about them as a manufacturer and that, you know, the -- the importance of manufacturing jobs, yes, even here in the state of Florida, and the price of energy for them to be able to be competitive.

It is absolutely essential that we have as much domestic supply of oil, that we build the Keystone pipeline, that we create the jobs that -- that that would create, and provide oil from domestic sources. Pipelines that run on the floor of the sea or pipelines that come through America are the safest way to transport oil. It is tankers that are causing -- that cause much more problems. Pipelines are the safe way. Building those rigs, piping that oil into -- into -- into our shore is the best way to create a good economy for the state of Florida.

REINHARD: All of you favor making English the official language of the United States, which could mean that ballots and other government documents would not be available in Spanish. But, Speaker Gingrich, you`re sending out press releases in Spanish; Governor Romney, you`re advertising in Spanish. Why is it OK for you to court voters in Spanish, but not OK for the government to serve them in Spanish? Speaker Gingrich?

GINGRICH: Well, first of all, you immediately jump down to a very important language, but not the only language. The challenge of the United States is simple. There are 86 languages in Miami Dade College, 86. There are over 200 languages spoken in Chicago.

Now, how do you unify the country? What -- what is the common bond that enables people to be both citizens and to rise commercially and have a better life and a greater opportunity?

I think campaigning, historically, you`ve always been willing to go to people on their terms in their culture, whether it`s Greek Independence Day or something you did for the Irish on St. Patrick`s Day. And I`m perfectly happy to be on Radio Mambi, and I`m perfectly happy to have a lot of support in the Hispanic community.

But as a country to unify ourselves in a future in which there may well be 300 or 400 languages spoken in the United States, I think it is essential to have a central language that we expect people to learn and to be able to communicate with each other in.

REINHARD: So to be clear, you would only have ballots in English?

GINGRICH: I would have ballots in English. And I think you could have programs where virtually everybody would be able to read the ballots.

REINHARD: Governor Romney, can you take that question?

ROMNEY: I think Speaker Gingrich is right with regards to what he`s described. I`d note that in my state we had a tradition of teaching people in the language of their birth, and so we had in our school systems people being taught in a whole range of languages. And we had to have teachers that could teach in Cambodian, in Vietnamese, and other languages. And our kids were being taught in foreign languages in our own schools. And we found at the end of their education experience they couldn`t all speak English well. It made absolutely no sense.

And so we campaigned for English immersion in our schools and said kids coming in will have a transition period. Then we`re going to teach them in English.

ROMNEY: Look, English is the language of this nation. People need to learn English to be able to be successful, to get great jobs. We don`t want to have people limited in their capacity to achieve the American dream because they don`t speak English. And so encouraging people through every means possible to learn the language of America is a good idea.

Recognize at the same time we want people coming here from other cultures that speak other languages. That strengthens America. It`s a great thing. But having them learn English is also a great thing for them and for their kids.

REINHARD: Congressman Paul?

PAUL: Yes, my answer is similar, but a little bit different, because at the national level, obviously we have to have one language. I mean, we can`t have multiple languages. So, for legal reasons, we would have one language.

But our system really gives us a way to be more generous, because if Florida wanted to have some ballots

in Spanish, I certainly wouldn't support a federal law that would prohibit Florida from accommodating a city election or a local election or a state election. I think that's the magnificence of our system, where you can solve some of these problems without dictating one answer for all states. But nationally, we should have one language.


REINHARD: Speaker Gingrich, I want to move on to a slightly different topic, the Dream Act, which, as you know, would provide a pathway to citizenship for children who have been brought to the U.S. illegally if they attend college or enroll in the military.

Now, Governor Romney and Senator Santorum have both said they would veto this legislation. Would you do the same?

GINGRICH: No. I would work to get a signable version which would be the military component. I think any young person living in the United States who happened to have been brought here by their parents when they were young should have the same opportunity to join the American military and earn citizenship which they would have had from back home.

We have a clear provision that if you live in a foreign country, and you are prepared to join the American military, you can, in fact, earn the right to citizenship by serving the United States and taking real risk on behalf of the United States. That part of the Dream Act I would support. I would not support the part that simply says everybody who goes to college is automatically waived for having broken the law.


WILLIAMS: The questioning continues.

ROMNEY: I just doubt (ph) that's the same position that I have, and that is that I would not sign the Dream Act as it currently exists, but I would sign the Dream Act if it were focused on military service. 

WILLIAMS: Thank you, Governor.

Questioning continues with Adam Smith.

SMITH: Let's stay on immigration for a second.

Governor Romney, there is one thing I'm confused about. You say you don't want to go and round up people and deport them, but you also say that they would have to go back to their home countries and then apply for citizenship. So, if you don't deport them, how do you send them home? 

ROMNEY: Well, the answer is self-deportation, which is people decide they can do better by going home because they can't find work here because they don't have legal documentation to allow them to work here. And so we're not going to round people up.

The way that we have in this society is to say, look, people who have come here legally would, under my plan, be given a transition period and the opportunity during that transition period to work here, but when that transition period was over, they would no longer have the documentation to allow them to work in this country. At that point, they can decide whether to remain or whether to return home and to apply for legal residency in the United States, get in line with everybody else. And I know people think but that's not fair to those that have come here illegally.

SMITH: Isn't that what we have now? If somebody doesn't feel they have the opportunity in America, they can go back any time they want to.

ROMNEY: Yes, we'd have a card that indicates who's here illegally. And if people are not able to have a card, and have through an E-Verify system determine that they are here illegally, then they're going to find they can't get work here. And if people don't get work here, they're going to self-deport to a place where they can get work.

Ultimately, with this transition period in place, we would then allow people to get in line at home and to come back to this country after they have reached the front of the line. But I just don't think it's fair to the people who have loved ones waiting in line legally to come to America and say, guess what? We're going to encourage a wave of illegal immigration by giving amnesty of some kind to those who have come here illegally.

SMITH: Senator Santorum, is self-deportation. Is that a valid concept?

SANTORUM: Well, it's happening now. I mean, people are going back now because they can't find jobs because of the lack of employment opportunities.

The bottom line is, is that if you do enforce the law and say that people who are here illegally, who are doing illegal acts -- and that is working, which you're not allowed to do -- and if you're working, probably you've stolen someone's Social Security number, which you are not allowed to do -- and that's another law that is broken -- that we should enforce the law. It's not someone who has come here illegally in the first place and they've only broken the law once. They continually break the law in this country, and I don't think that's not something that should be rewarded.

My father came to this country, my grandfather came to this country. He left my dad behind for five years. My dad was without a dad for almost the first five years of his life.

And there are millions of stories across America of people making sacrifices because America was worth it to do it the right way. You come to this country and the first thing you do is to respect our laws. If you want to be an American, you respect the laws of America, and you do so continually while you're here. We reward that kind of behavior. We don't reward behavior where you don't respect our laws in your initial act and then you continually break the laws in order to stay here.

SMITH: Speaker Gingrich, in Iowa you were a big supporter of ethanol subsidies. Here in Florida, sugar is a very important industry, and it's subsidized, as well, with import restrictions, quotas. There's a conservative movement to do away with these programs. In the case of sugar, critics say it -- it adds billions of dollars to -- to consumers' grocery bills every year. What would you do about that?

GINGRICH: Well, I pretty enthusiastically early in my career kept trying to figure out how to get away from the sugar subsidy. And I found out one of -- one of the fascinating things about America, which was that cane sugar hides behind beet sugar. And there are just too many beet sugar districts in the United States. It's an amazing side story about how interest groups operate.

In an ideal world, you would have an open market. And that's -- I think that would be a better future and, frankly, one where cane sugar would still make a lot of money. But it's very hard to imagine how you're going to get there. I spent a lot of time trying to reform agriculture when I was speaker. And I would say it was one of the two or three hardest things to try to do because the -- the capacity of the agricultural groups to defend themselves is pretty amazing.

SMITH: Governor Romney, you're going some campaign support from sugar growers. It's a very influential group in this state. What's your view on the sugar subsidies?

ROMNEY: Yeah, my view is, we ought to get rid of subsidies and let markets work properly. But let's step back for a second, talk about what's really going on in Florida right now. And you know, you both know what's going on here.

I spent time this morning with -- with eight different individuals, listening to them talk about their circumstances. There are a lot of people in Florida that are hurting. You got a lot of homes underwater.

This president came into office saying he`d turn this economy around, and everything he has done has made it harder for the people of Florida.

We have 25 million Americans out of work. We have, in Florida, 9.9 percent unemployed. We have 18 percent of our people in this state that are underemployed. Home values, 40 percent are underwater. This president has failed miserably the people of Florida. His plans for NASA, he has no plans for NASA. The space coast is -- is struggling. This president has failed the people of Florida. We have to have a president who understands how to get an economy going again. He does not. He plays 90 rounds of golf when you have 25 million people out of work. He says gasoline prices doubled during his presidency. He says don`t build a Keystone pipeline.

We have \$15 trillion of debt. We`re headed to a -- to a Greece- type collapse, and he adds another trillion on top for Obamacare and for his stimulus plan that didn`t create private-sector jobs. This president has failed. And this economy needs a president who understands this economy.

SMITH: Congressman Paul, Florida`s Everglades provide one in three Floridians with their drinking water. It affects thousands of jobs. Right now, there`s a -- there`s a joint federal-state program to save what`s left of the Everglades. Would you commit to continuing that federal financing of the Everglades preservation?

PAUL: Sure. I -- I don`t see any reason to go after that. I would still look into the details on whether that could be a state issue or not.

But with all the wars going on, and the economy is in shambles, as it is, and the unemployment, to -- to worry about dealing with that program, we could do it in a theoretical sense. But I would see no reason to, you know, complicate things. But I wouldn`t have any desire to interfere with that.

WILLIAMS: At this point, we`ll take another break. We`ll return from Tampa with this line of questioning right after this.

(APPLAUSE)

WILLIAMS: We are back from Tampa tonight. As the conversation continues, once again the questioning continues.

Adam Smith of "The Tampa Bay Times."

SMITH: Thank you.

Senator Santorum, in 2005, Florida was in the middle of a huge national debate over Terri Schiavo, whether her feeding tube should be removed after the courts had ruled that she had been in a vegetative state for years. You were at the center, at the front of advocating congressional intervention to keep her alive. You even came down here, came to her bedside after a fund-raiser.

Why should the government have more say in medical decisions like that than a spouse?

SANTORUM: Well, number one, I didn`t come to her bedside, but I did come down to Tampa. I was scheduled to come down anyway for that event, and it so happened that this situation was going on. I did not call for congressional intervention. I called for a judicial hearing by an impartial judge at the federal level to review a case in which you had parents and a spouse on different sides of the issue. And these were constituents of mine. The parents happen to live in Pennsylvania, and they came to me and made a very strong case that they would like to see some other pair of eyes, judicial eyes, look at it. And I agreed to advocate for those constituents because I believe that we should give respect and dignity for all human life, irrespective of their condition.



And if there was someone there that wanted to provide and take care of them, and they were willing to do so, I wanted to make sure that the judicial proceedings worked properly. And that`s what I did, and I would do it again.

(APPLAUSE) SMITH: Do not resuscitate directives, do you think they`re immoral?

SANTORUM: No, I don`t believe they`re immoral. I mean, I think that`s a decision that people should be able to make, and I have supported legislation in the past for them to make it.

SMITH: Speaker Gingrich, in that case the courts had ruled repeatedly. How does that square, the Terri Schiavo, action with your understanding of the Constitution and separation of powers?

GINGRICH: Well, look, I think that we go to extraordinary lengths, for example, for people who are on murderers row. They have extraordinary rights of appeal.

And you have here somebody who was in a coma, who had, on the one hand, her husband saying let her die and her parents saying let her live. Now, it strikes me that having a bias in favor of life, and at least going to a federal hearing, which would be automatic if it was a criminal on death row, that it`s not too much to say in some circumstances your rights as an American citizen ought to be respected. And there ought to be at least a judicial review of whether or not in that circumstance you should be allowed to die, which has nothing to do with whether or not you as a citizen have a right to have your own end-of-life prescription which is totally appropriate for you to do as a matter of your values in consultation with your doctor.

SMITH: Congressman Paul, you`re a doctor. What was your view of the Terri Schiavo case?

PAUL: I find it so unfortunate, so unusual, too. That situation doesn`t come up very often. It should teach us all a lesson to have living wills or a good conversation with a spouse. I would want my spouse to make the decision. And -- but it`s better to have a living will.

But I don`t like going up the ladder. You know, we go to the federal courts, and the Congress, and on up. Yes, difficult decisions. Will it be perfect for everybody? No. But I would have preferred to see the decision made at the state level.

But I`ve been involved in medicine with things similar, but not quite as difficult as this. But usually, we deferred to the family. And it wasn`t made a big issue like this was. This was way out of proportion to what happens more routinely.

But I think it should urge us all to try to plan for this and make sure either that one individual that`s closest to you makes the decision or you sign a living will. And this would have solved the whole problem.

WILLIAMS: Beth?

REINHARD: Governor Romney, this is the state that put the first men on the moon. America right now has no way to put people into space except to hitch a ride with the Russians. Meanwhile, the Chinese are ramping up their space program. At a time when you all want to shrink federal spending, should space exploration be a priority?

Governor Romney?

ROMNEY: It should certainly be a priority. What we have right now is a president who does not have a vision or a mission for NASA. And as a result of that, there are people on the space coast that are suffering. And Florida itself is -- is suffering as a result.

So what`s the right way forward? Well, I happen to believe our space program is important not only for science, but also for commercial development and for military development. And I believe the right

mission for -- for NASA should be determined by a president together with a collection of people from those different areas, from NASA, from the Air Force space program, from our leading universities, and from commercial enterprises, bring them together, discuss a wide range of options for NASA, and then -- and then have NASA not just funded by the federal government, but also by commercial enterprises. Have some of the research done in our universities.

Let`s have a collaborative effort with business, with -- with government, with a military, as well as with our educational institutions. Have a mission, once again excite our young people about the potential of space and the commercial potential will pay for itself down the road.

This is a great opportunity. Florida has technology. The people here on the space coast have technology and vision and passion that America needs. And with a president that is actually willing to create a mission and a vision for -- for NASA and for space, we can continue to lead the world.



REINHARD: Speaker Gingrich, would you put more tax dollars into the space race and commit to putting an American on Mars, instead of relying on the private sector?

GINGRICH: Well, the two are not incompatible. For example, most of the great breakthroughs in aviation in the `20s and `30s were as a result of prizes. Lindbergh flew to Paris for a \$25,000 prize. I would like to see vastly more of the money spent encouraging the private sector into very aggressive experimentation. And I`d like a leaner NASA.

I don`t think building a bigger bureaucracy and having a greater number of people sit in rooms and talk gets you there. But if we had a series of goals that we were prepared to offer prizes for, there`s every reason to believe you have a lot of folks in this country and around the world who would put up an amazing amount of money and would make the space coast literally hum with activity because they`d be drawn to achieve these prizes.

Going back to the moon permanently, getting to Mars as rapidly as possible, building a series of space stations and developing commercial space, there are a whole series of things you can do that could be dynamic that are more than just better government bureaucracy. They`re fundamentally leapfrogging into a world where you`re incentivizing people who are visionaries and people in the private sector to invest very large amounts of money in finding very romantic and exciting futures.

REINHARD: Speaker Gingrich, I have another question for you on another topic. You`ve talked about the millions of jobs created by the Reagan tax cuts. If tax cuts create jobs, why didn`t the Bush tax cuts work?

GINGRICH: Well, the Bush tax cuts, I think in a period of great difficulty, with the attack of 9/11, actually stopped us from going into a much deeper slump. I think we would have been in much, much worse shape, and I think most economists agree, that in 2002 and `03 and `04 we`d have been in much worse shape without the Bush tax cuts.

But -- but you have to also look at the regulatory burden. The reason I called for repealing Dodd-Frank and for repealing Obamacare and for repealing Sarbanes-Oxley is you now have these huge layers of paperwork and government intervention and bureaucratic micromanagement that are crippling the American system and are making it much harder for us to create the kind of jobs we`d want.

In North Dakota today, we have a boom in oil development, unemployment is down to 3.2 percent. They have had seven straight tax cuts at the state level because the oil was on private land.

If that oil had been on public land, the environmentalists and Barack Obama would have stopped its development, and North Dakota would be mired in 8 percent or 9 percent unemployment. So, get the

regulations out of the way, get the tax incentives right, and you can get back to creating an amazing number of jobs very fast.

WILLIAMS: To my fellow questioners, our panelists tonight, my thanks.

So ends this section of our conversation. The final bit of our debate from Tampa tonight coming up after this last break.

WILLIAMS: Welcome back to Tampa for this final section of our conversation tonight. We're back down to the five of us here on stage. I thought we'd talk a little bit more big picture.

This has been called, in addition to this unprecedented primary contest the GOP is in the midst of, a battle for the soul of the Republican Party. Governor Romney, the question is, about that soul, what have you done to further the cause of conservatism as a Republican leader?

ROMNEY: Well, number one, I've raised a family. And I've -- I've -- with my wife, we've raised five wonderful sons, and we have 16 wonderful grandkids.

Number two, I've worked in the private sector. The idea that somehow everything important for conservatism or for America happens in government is simply wrong. I've been in the private sector. I worked in one business that was in trouble and helped turn it around. Another I started. And as part of that, we were able to create thousands and thousands of jobs.

And then I took an opportunity to become governor of a state that was slightly Democrat. About 85 percent of my legislature was Democrat. And I worked very hard to promote a conservative agenda. We cut taxes 19 times. We balanced the budget every year, put in place a rainy day fund of over \$2 billion by the time I left. We were also successful in having English immersion in our schools, driving our schools to be number one in the nation.

That kind of conservative model in a state like Massachusetts was a model in many respects that other states could look at and say, "OK, conservative principles work." We were able to reach across the aisle to fight for conservative principles, and now I'm taking that to a presidential campaign, wrote a book about those principles that lay out why I believe they're right for America.

WILLIAMS: Mr. Speaker, you've been talking a lot about conservative principles in this campaign so far. Is that enough for you? Is that good enough?

GINGRICH: Look, I don't want to spend my time commenting on Mitt. I'd like to just tell you that I started -- I went to a Goldwater organizing session in 1964. I met with Ronald Reagan for the first time in 1974. I worked with Jack Kemp and Art Laffer and others to develop supply-side economics in the late '70s. I helped Governor Reagan become President Reagan. I helped pass the Reagan economic program when I worked with the National Security Council on issues involving the collapse of the Soviet empire. I then came back, organized a group called GOPAC, spent 16 years building a majority in the House for the first time since 1954, the first re-elected majority since 1928, developed the Conservative Opportunity Society, talked about big ideas, big solutions.

So I think it's fair to say I've spent most of my lifetime trying to develop a conservative movement across this country that relates directly to what we have to do. And I think only a genuine conservative who's in a position to debate Obama and to show how wide the gap is between Obama's policies and conservatism can, in fact, win, because he's going to spend a billion dollars trying to smear whoever the nominee is. And we'd better be prepared to beat him in the debate and prove exactly how wrong his values are and how wrong his practices are.

WILLIAMS: Which, Senator Santorum, gets us back to electability, the gap between the Republican Party and the president. Some of the newspaper headlines about this gathering we were going to have tonight, in Florida, Romney seeks to link Gingrich to foreclosure crisis. And here's a second one: The verdict is in, Mitt Romney's Bain Capital problem is real.

What's the net effect of all this, of the tax release tomorrow, of Freddie -- the Freddie Mac release tonight on your party, say your candidacy, as you try to go forward?

SANTORUM: Well, I would say that there are more fundamental issues than that, where there's a gap and a problem with two of the gentlemen who are up here with me. And one is on the biggest issue that they -- we have to deal with in this election, that's -- that's crushing the economy, will crush it even further and crush freedom, and that's Obamacare.

Governor Romney's plan in Massachusetts was the basis for Obamacare. Speaker Gingrich for 20 years supported a federal individual mandate, something that Pam Bondi is now going to the Supreme Court saying is unconstitutional. Speaker Gingrich, for 20 years, up until last year supported an individual mandate, which is at the core of Obamacare.

If you look at cap-and-trade, Governor Romney was very proud to say that he was the first state in the country as governor to sign a cap on CO-2 emissions, the first state in the country to put a cap believing in -- in global warming and criticized Republicans for not believing in it, as did, by the way, Speaker Gingrich, who was for a cap-and-trade program with incentives, business incentives, but was for the rubric of cap-and-trade, not specifically the cap-and-trade bill that was out there.

Again, huge, huge differences between my position and where President Obama is, but not so on two major issues. You go down and you look at the Wall Street bailouts, I said before, here's one where you had folks who preach conservatism, private sector, and when push came to shove, they got pushed. They didn't stand tall for the conservative principles that they argued that they were for. And as a result, we ended up with this bailout that has injected government into business like it had never been done before.

SANTORUM: They rejected conservatism when it was hard to stand. It's going to be hard to stand whoever this president is going to be elected. It's going to be tough. There is going to be a mountain of problems. It's going to be easy to be able to bail out and compromise your principles.

We have gentlemen here on the three issues that got the Tea Party started, that are the base of the conservative movement now in the Republican Party. And there is no difference between President Obama and these two gentlemen. And that's why this election in Florida is so critical, that we have someone that actually can create a contrast between the president and the conservative point of view.

WILLIAMS: Congressmen Paul, are the two men in the middle insufficiently conservative for you?

PAUL: Well, I think the problem is, is nobody has defined what being conservative means.

WILLIAMS: Go ahead.

PAUL: And I think that is our problem.

Conservative means we have a smaller government and more liberty. And yet, if you ask, what have we done? I think we have lost our way.

Our rhetoric is still pretty good, but when we get in charge, we expand the government. You talk about Dodd-Frank, but we gave Sarbanes-Oxley. We gave debts as well, you know, when we're in charge.

So, if it means limited government, you have to ask the basic question, what should the role of government be? The founders asked that question, had a revolution and wrote a Constitution. And they said the role of

government ought to be to protect liberty.

It's not to run a welfare state and not to be the policemen of the world. And so if you're a conservative, how can you be conservative and cut food stamps, but you won't cut spending overseas? There is not a nickel or a penny that anybody will cut on the conservative side, overseas spending. And we don't have the money.

They are willing to start more wars. So, I say, if you're conservative, you want small government across the board, especially in personal liberty. What's wrong with having the government out of our personal lives? So, this is what -- we have to decide what conservative means, what limited government means. And I have a simple suggestion. We have a pretty good guide, and if we follow the Constitution, government would be very small and we would all be devoted conservatives.

WILLIAMS: Governor Romney, again tonight, so called Romneycare and so-called Obamacare have been positioned very closely side by side by your opponent, the senator. And again, you have been called insufficiently conservative.

ROMNEY: You know, I have a record. You can look at my record. I just described what I had accomplished in Massachusetts. It's a conservative record.

Also, the fun of running against Ted Kennedy. What a great thrill that was. I didn't beat him, but he had to take a mortgage out on his house to make sure that he could defeat me. I believe that the policies he put in place had hurt America and helped create a permanent underclass in this country.

My health care plan, by the way, is one that under our Constitution we're allowed to have. The people in our state chose a plan which I think is working for our state.

At the time we crafted it, I was asked time and again, "Is this something that you would have the federal government do?" I said absolutely not.

I do not support a federal mandate. I do not support a federal one-size-fits-all plan. I believe in the Constitution. That's why the attorney general here is saying absolutely not.

You can't impose Obamacare on the states. What I will do if I'm president, I will repeal Obamacare and return to the states the authority and the rights the states have to craft their own programs to care for their own poor.

WILLIAMS: Speaker Gingrich, I know none of you believe in polls, but as we came in here tonight, of the numbers in the known world, your numbers were on the rise. What scares you about the presidency if you made it to the job you want?

GINGRICH: I actually agree with what Rick Santorum said. I believe that whoever the next president is, if we're going to get America back on the right track, is going to face enormous, difficult problems, some of which have been accurately diagnosed by Dr. Paul.

And the fact is that we have tremendous institutional biases against doing the right thing and against getting things done. And we have huge interest groups who would rather preside over the wreckage than lose their favored position by helping the country.

So I always tell audiences I never ask anyone to be for me. Because if they are for me, they vote yes and go home and say, I sure hope Newt does it. I ask people to be with me, because I think this will be a very hard, very difficult journey. And I find it a very humbling and a very sobering thought that one would have to try to get America back on the right track despite all of our elites and all of our entrenched bureaucracies.

WILLIAMS: Governor Romney, you talk about restoring America`s greatness. Given that, in your view when was America last great?



ROMNEY: America still is great, but we have a lot of people suffering. We have people that are underemployed that shouldn`t be, unemployed that shouldn`t be. Home values continue to go down. We have the median income in this country has declined 10 percent in the last four years.

We`re still a great nation, but a great nation doesn`t have so many people suffering. And I`m running in part because I have experience in how the economy works. And I want to use that experience to get people working again, to get our economy working again.

And the idea to get our economy working is not to have the government play a more intrusive role in how our economy works, but instead to do the seven things that always get an economy going: get taxes competitive, regulation as modest as possible and modernized, get ourselves energy independent, open up trade with other nations and crack down on cheaters, make sure we don`t have crony capitalism -- that`s what we have going on right now -- build human capital through education, and also finally balance the budget.

People will not invest in an economy and create new jobs if they think we`re going to hit a Greece-like wall. I will do those seven things and get America working again.

WILLIAMS: I want to thank all of our candidates and our hosts, of course, here at the University of South Florida. We are obligated at this point to say, "Go Bulls."

(APPLAUSE)

For our hosts here, for our viewers here on your NBC station, our coverage will continue. I`ll be back with you shortly. But for now, let`s go over to David Gregory to take a look at part of what transpired here on stage tonight with our thanks to you all. Thank you very much.



(APPLAUSE)

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