

Gail Collins: Mitt and Begonia-gate

San Jose Mercury News (California)

October 20, 2011 Thursday

Copyright 2011 San Jose Mercury News All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Opinion

Length: 563 words

Byline: By Gail Collins

Body

Oh, wow! Rick Perry hit Mitt Romney with the illegal immigrant landscapers!

It was the high point of this week's Republican debate, and somehow I have a feeling it was a preplanned attack. Perry was so eager to tell the world that his nemesis had once relied on undocumented workers for a healthy lawn and well-maintained tennis court that he responded to a question about uninsured children in Texas with the story of Mitt's yardwork.

"And the idea that you stand here before us and talk about -- that you're strong on immigration is, on its face, the height of hypocrisy," Perry declaimed.

I found this very exciting because it brings us closer to the moment when one of Romney's competitors will point out that he once drove to Canada with the family dog strapped on the roof of the car.

This week's debate was a triumph for Perry, who not only put Romney on the defensive, but did it in complete sentences. He did get lost in the weeds during a discussion of Romney's Mormonism. ("And this country is based on, as Newt talked about, these values that are so important as we go forward, and the idea that we should not have our freedom of religion, to be taken away by any means.")

The whole First Amendment thing might be a little complicated for a governor whose state constitution prohibits anyone who doesn't believe in God from holding public office. This is not a joke.

But about Romney and the landscapers. This is the story: In 2006, The Boston Globe reported that the yard of then-Gov. Romney's family home was being groomed by a landscaping firm with a history of using undocumented workers. The team of reporters, led by Jonathan Saltzman and Maria Cramer, tracked down people in Guatemala who recounted fond memories of their years of clipping the Romney grass without the requisite immigration papers.

"Aw, geez," Romney said back then, in his inimitable way, when he was asked about the matter. The whole situation was particularly embarrassing because the governor had just begun his first presidential race by beating up on Sen. John McCain for being soft on illegal immigrants.

Anyway, Romney then went home, discovered an undocumented worker somewhere among the foliage and sent him packing.

Also, he complained to the landscaping company. We're sure about that because Romney explained it during the debate Tuesday night.

Gail Collins: Mitt and Begonia-gate

This was after he had already responded to Perry with one of those terrible artificial chuckles, then got red in the face, had a heated exchange and violated the Texas governor's space by grabbing his shoulder. It was exactly like professional wrestling, except for part about the middle-aged guys in suits.

"So we went to the company and we said, 'Look, you can't have any illegals working on our property.' That's -- I'm running for office, for Pete's sake. I can't have illegals," Romney recounted.

If the debate had been less heated, perhaps he could have manufactured a dialogue in which he gave the landscapers a lecture on the rule of law. But "I'm running for office, for Pete's sake" really does ring true.

Interestingly, though, Romney kept using the same service until a year later when he fired them after The Globe did a follow-up. ("Lawn Work at Romney's Home Still Done by Illegal Immigrants.")

If a crate on the roof plays any part in this story, we are going to be really, really disturbed.

GAIL COLLINS is a New York Times columnist.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2012 (89%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (89%); FOREIGN LABOR (89%); GOVERNORS (86%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); POLITICAL DEBATES (78%); TENNIS (76%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (76%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (76%); DOGS (72%); PROFESSIONAL SPORTS (71%); RELIGION (71%); MORMONS & MORMONISM (66%); WRESTLING (50%)

Industry: LANDSCAPING SERVICES (89%)

Person: MITT ROMNEY (89%); RICK PERRY (79%); JOHN MCCAIN (58%)

Geographic: TEXAS, USA (92%); GUATEMALA (79%)

Load-Date: October 21, 2011