

## **ROMNEY TAKES OFF THE GLOVES**

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### **Body**

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Newt Gingrich and Mitt **Romney** **took** their brawl to a debate stage here Thursday night, clashing over illegal immigration, whether they profited **off** the housing crisis - even whether putting a colony on the moon is a valid idea.

"The idea that I'm anti-immigrant is repulsive," **Romney** said, referring to a radio ad Gingrich had been running in Florida before withdrawing it.

"Sen. Marco Rubio came to my defense and said that ad was inexcusable and inflammatory and inappropriate. Mr. Speaker, I'm not anti-immigrant," **Romney** said, calling on Gingrich to apologize.

But Gingrich doubled down on the claim during the CNN/Republican Party of Florida debate and said **Romney's** suggestion of "self-deportation" was unrealistic.

"You tell me what language you would use to describe somebody who thinks that deporting a grandmother or a grandfather from their family - just tell me the language," he challenged **Romney**.

"I'm not going to go find grandmothers and **take** them out of their homes and deport them," **Romney** said.

The exchange came minutes into the debate on the campus of the University of North Florida and five days before Florida's Republican presidential primary, for which **Romney** is slightly ahead in the polls.

Gingrich's strong debate performances helped catapult him to a big win in South Carolina, but for the second Florida debate in four days the former House speaker often found himself on the defensive against **Romney's** sharp barbs.

Former Sen. Rick Santorum seemed the more forceful candidate - not bogged down in arguing like **Romney** and Gingrich. "Can we set aside that Newt was a member of Congress ... and that Mitt **Romney** is a wealthy guy?" he said, casting himself as a bolder conservative than **Romney** or Gingrich.

## ROMNEY TAKES OFF THE GLOVES

"Gov. Romney was the author of Romneycare," he said, listing off the similarities between the Massachusetts health care plan and the national plan Congress passed under President Barack Obama. "We cannot give the issue of health care away in this election. It is too foundational for us to win this election," Santorum said.

"First of all, it's not worth getting angry about," Romney told Santorum, contending he could make a case why the state approach was valid but not the federal.

"What Gov. Romney said is just factually incorrect," Santorum said. "Your mandate is no different than Barack Obama's mandate. It is the same mandate."

The sniping continued when Gingrich twisted a question about what to do with government-backed mortgage giants into one of Romney's wealth, saying he had invested in Freddie Mac.

"We began digging in after Monday night because frankly I'd had about enough of this," Gingrich said, referring to Romney's persistent questions about Gingrich's consulting role with the mortgage giant.

"We discovered to our shock, Gov. Romney owns shares of both Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Gov. Romney made a million dollars off of selling some of that. Gov. Romney owns shares - has an investment in Goldman Sachs, which is today foreclosing on Floridians. So maybe Gov. Romney in the spirit of openness should tell us how much money he's made off of how many households that have been foreclosed by his investments?"

Again, Romney was ready: "Mr. Speaker, I know that sounds like an enormous revelation, but have you checked your own investments? You also have investments through mutual funds that also invest in Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac."

Gingrich needed a big moment like he had in South Carolina, but most of them went to Romney, who benefited from a friendly audience.

"We should have had a whistle blower and not a horn tooter," Romney said of Gingrich's work at Freddie Mac.

Gingrich tried to employ a crowd favorite by scoffing at a question from CNN moderator Wolf Blitzer. But unlike past debates, even that fell short when Blitzer challenged him to defend criticism over a Swiss bank account Romney held.

Blitzer tried to pull Rep. Ron Paul into the Freddie Mac investments, asking, "Should they return that money?"

Paul said he was not interested in that: "The question is, what are we going to do about Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. It should have been auctioned off right after the crash came. It would have been cleansed by now."

One of the more strange volleys came over Gingrich's suggestion about putting colonies on the moon. Gingrich on Wednesday said that by the end of his second term as president, the United States would have a permanent lunar base.

"I do not want to be the country that having gotten to the moon first, turned around and said, it doesn't really matter, let the Chinese dominate space," Gingrich said.

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

One tough moment for Romney came when he was asked about a Spanish language ad attacking Gingrich for once calling Spanish "the language of the ghetto."

"I haven't seen the ad, so I'm sorry. I don't get to see all the TV ads," Romney responded, though Blitzer later noted the ad concludes with Romney's voice saying he approved the spot.

## Graphic

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PHOTO - Getty Images: Republican candidates Newt Gingrich, left, and Mitt **Romney** spar during a debate sponsored by CNN, the Republican Party of Florida and the Hispanic Leadership Network at the University North Florida. PHOTO (2): Ron Paul; Rick Santorum

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