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Obama and Romney give joint interview in Blue Grass

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The two presidential candidates sneaked into Blue Grass on Wednesday disguised as demolition-derby cars. It was their first joint interview. A local cub reporter got the scoop.

Cub: Governor Romney, are you better off today financially speaking than you were four years ago?

Romney: Is that a trick question from a media elitist?

Cub: Do you think I've finally made it? Governor, it's the question that you asked all Americans to ask themselves.

Romney: My wife and I are better off financially today than we were four years ago. Does that satisfy you?

Cub: How much better?

Romney: None of your beeswax.

Cub: Was your effective federal tax rate in 2011 higher, lower or the same as it was four years ago?

Romney: I'm not saying.

Cub: Did our tax system enable you to accumulate wealth at Bain Capital and protect it subsequently?

Romney: Duh!

Cub: President Obama, are you better off today than you were four years ago?

Obama: Michelle and I are earning less today. In 2008, we showed an adjusted gross income of \$2.66 million; in 2011, it was \$790,000. Still, we're doing just fine.

Cub: Who's to blame for your declining income?

Obama: Well, I guess it was George W. Bush. If he hadn't messed everything up so badly, I would not have run for the White House. Michelle would still be working, and I would be getting big speaker fees as a Senator.

I blame Bush for our personal decline, but John McCain played a role in it too...by losing to me.

Cub: Do you see better times ahead for you and your family?

Obama: Only if I lose in November. I'll make a ton of money when I leave office just like Bill Clinton.

But my circumstances are unique. You can't generalize from me and say things will get better in the by and by for everyone. They won't for a lot of Americans, because we can't bring back the manufacturing base of the 1950s and 1960s.

The division I see is between those whose circumstances allowed them to bounce up from the 2008-2009 bottom and those who have not...and probably never will. One in seven Americans now gets food stamps. They face a future of scraping by. Should we do what we can to carry them or should we let them starve?

Cub: OK. Let's look into the future. Persuade me that we, as a country, will be better off four years from now if you are elected.

Romney: I will create 12 million new jobs.

Cub: That's about two million more than most economists are predicting without your policies.

Romney: Are you related to Trotsky or what?

Cub: Just providing context.

Romney: You keep your context to yourself.

Obama: I can't promise anything about the future.

Economic growth and future employment depend on dozens of factors over which a President has only a measure of control—what happens with European debt; growth in other economies; energy prices; inflation; the Federal Reserve's interest rates; federal tax rates; decisions by millions of American businesses to invest or not, and so on.

You have to remember that the boom times of the early 2000s were bubble-based economics. Not sustainable, because they were based on bad loans and reckless gambling. You don't want to recreate that kind of phony prosperity.

Romney: See, the President has a can't-do attitude. That's the problem.

Obama: I know the job, you don't. Running a government of a country as large and as complex as ours is not the same as running a three-bit, cut-and-run financial chop shop.

Romney: You weren't reluctant to make plenty of promises in 2008.

Obama: It seemed the right thing to do at the time. You're doing what I did—promising change.

Romney: As a successful business person, I was responsible for meeting Bain Capital's goals and satisfying the financial expectations of my investors. I know how to make a financial promise and keep it. You have no training or experience in doing that.

What exactly are you anyway—a writer about yourself? What kind of qualification is that for anything?

Obama: The Governor's right. My résumé stinks. I taught constitutional law as an adjunct professor, but I never did any practical lawyering to speak of. I never had to meet a business payroll. I...was the only product I ever had to sell.

But I would make this point. No job is comparable to being President—not running the largest company in the world, not being the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, not being the richest individual in America and not being our country's nicest guy.

Success at other jobs does not guarantee success in the Presidency. Look at Jimmy Carter and Herbert Hoover, both successful in the private sector, both ineffective in the White House. And both, by the way, were constructive ex-Presidents.

Romney: The reason that you're unwilling to promise economic growth and full employment is that you know that your tax-the-rich, socialistic policies can only produce stagnation.

Obama: Governor, you should know your history better.

Romney: I don't need you to tell me what I don't know.

Obama: When Franklin Roosevelt ran against incumbent Herbert Hoover in 1932 with unemployment at 25 percent, he accused Hoover of "reckless and extravagant spending" and believing that "we ought to center control of everything in Washington as rapidly as possible." His running-mate, John Nance Garner, said Hoover was "...leading the country down the path of socialism."

That kind of name-calling should stay in the sandbox. A federal program that provides financial aid to build a school or plant a tree is not socialism. It's an allocation of taxpayer dollars to do something that's worthwhile.

I'm no more of a socialist than your own father who, as Michigan's governor, initiated the state's first income tax and expanded its government. And when your Dad was Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the first Nixon Administration, he pushed low-income housing production.

You don't have the heart that your father had.

Romney: You never knew him. What would you know?

Obama: At HUD, he pushed for the desegregation of the very suburbs where you've hidden out your entire life.

Romney: I have neighbors who are blacker than you are.

Obama: Name one.

Romney: George Jefferson.

Obama: ...there you go.

What I've learned since the 2008 election is that a president is not an autocratic king. Presidents can't order jobs to be created in the private sector. If demand for a company's product or service is not there, jobs will be cut, not increased, whether you're a capitalist or a socialist.

Presidents can influence economic conditions and, occasionally, wreck or save specific industries or companies. I'll take some credit for having avoided a system-wide, Lehman Brothers-type meltdown. The stimulus helped to put a floor under the free fall. Had we not done what we did, unemployment would be significantly higher than 8.3 percent.

I'd add that I would be more directly responsible today, either positively or negatively, if Congress had passed my jobs legislation and come to some compromise with me on taxes and deficit reduction.

I think our stimulus and the bank bailout saved our financial system from itself. Had we not done both, we would be in a protracted Depression.

Romney: More excuses and rationalizations from a failed President who is incapable of leading a one-man band behind a police escort down a one-way street.

When I'm elected, Americans will see prosperity in four years. No one who wants to work will be without a private-sector job.

Cub: How will you do that?

Romney: I have a P-L-A-N.

I will cut taxes on everyone. Those who pay no taxes today will pay no taxes tomorrow; those who pay a lot, will pay less; those who pay some will pay some more. Money will stay where it belongs—in the pockets of Americans.

I will end despair, despondency, delay, denunciation, denial, depletion, deceit and decrepitude. I am in favor of life. I am against death, pornography and beards. I will outlaw abortions and tattoos.

Under me, America will once again gallop big and tall across the world's stage.

Cub: You have to concede, Governor, that the President did order the raid that eliminated Osama bin Laden.

Romney: Have you seen the body? Has anyone? This whole thing could have been faked. Show me the body.

I'm a Deather.

Cub: Governor, President Obama was raked across the coals in 2008 for having no military or foreign policy experience. What's your experience in these two areas?

Romney: My military experience consists of receiving draft deferments in the 1960s and early 1970s for being a missionary or a student. I was busy with other things.

I was for the War early on, but in 1970 I told the Boston Globe that it was a “political blunder to move into Vietnam.”

As to my foreign policy experience—well, I was a Mormon missionary in France for more than two years. I lived among those we targeted. I tried to get them to stop drinking wine and take more showers, but they were poor listeners. I did not go native.

When I headed the Olympic Committee, I handled foreigners day and night. Many spoke no English. I got them fed and watered.

Cub: Would you agree that much of the success of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City had to do with your lobbying for about \$1.5 billion in direct federal aid and about \$1.1 billion for local transportation and highways? It came to about \$625,000 in federal money -- tax revenue and borrowed -- for each participating athlete.

Romney: Those federal dollars had nothing to do with the success I built myself.

Cub: Just checking.

Cub: Does your choice for vice president, Paul Ryan, have any experience in the military or foreign affairs?

Romney: He’s spent almost all of his adult life on Capitol Hill working on plans to cut the federal budget. That’s enough hand-to-hand combat for anyone. We Republican candidates have as much military service as Obama and Biden—none.

Cub: So why should the American people have confidence in your ability to be commander-in-chief and advance our international interests?

Romney: Because I was born in America, unlike those who weren’t. I wear a flag pin in my lapel, unlike those who don’t even own a lapel.

I believe in speaking loudly and swinging the biggest stick in the room.

I will not flinch from fighting Muslims, Iranians, Russians, Cubans, North Koreans what have you—anywhere, any time, any place.

Cub: You left out the Chinese.

Romney: Just a verbal oversight.

Cub: President Obama, what do you think about military and foreign policy during the next four years?

Obama: Military interventions are a last resort. They reflect a failure of our foreign policy.

Sometimes we can influence events in other countries; sometimes not. We are better served -- and get better long-term results -- by using encouragement rather than force. We should fight when we must. It's rarely the best first option.

Had I been draft age in the 1960s, I would have gotten out of it one way or another just like the Governor did.

Cub: Mr. President. Do you have a plan for reducing unemployment and getting the economy growing faster?

Obama: Hope and prayer.

Cub: Anything else?

Obama: I don't have a plan. I have...a direction. I can't plan this economy. Is my direction better than the Governor's plan? We'll see.

Cub: What is your most important step in that...direction.

Obama: If we increase taxes on rich Americans by just a little bit, I think it'll all work out.

Cub: How would that happen?

Obama: Simple. If you raise taxes on the rich, they will work harder and invest more in order to net out at least the same amount of after-tax, walking-around money as before. The rich don't want to grow poorer. So they will invest and create jobs. The economy will grow. If you want a horse to run faster, you hit him with a whip; you don't feed him more hay in the barn.

Cub: I've never heard that theory before. What if the rich hide their money in tax shelters and in the Cayman Islands?

Obama: I'm okay with it as long as it's legal. That's why we Democrats haven't made a peep about Governor Romney's legal tax-avoidance schemes in this campaign.

Cub: Then who's running all the negative ads about his tax returns—space aliens?

Romney: There he goes again, smearing me for obeying the law.

The President has had more than three years to make the federal tax code simpler and fairer to the middle class that he's so enraptured with. And yet, he hasn't done it.

The rich hire smart lawyers and accountants to duck taxes. If rates were lower, we would duck less. Americans should elect me, because I know where the tax bodies are buried.

The President hasn't messed with the interest deduction that made Bain's leveraged buyouts possible or "carried interest" that allows me to pay

the capital-gains rate of 15 percent. He's in the pocket of Big Finance on Wall Street, and I should know.

Obama: Both Republicans and Democrats get campaign money from Wall Street. The finance guys are too big to pinch hard. Things are what they are. I don't like it; the Governor thinks it's good for everybody.

Cub: Governor, what's the key to getting the private sector to start growing faster?

Romney: Cut, cut, cut.

Cut taxes. Cut government spending. Cut regulations. Cut the deficit. Cut costs. Cut red tape. Cut public employees. Cut federal programs. Cut the welfare state—Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security retirement, disability payments, food stamps, AIDs programs, medical research, conservation, unemployment benefits, National Parks, land-grant universities, *etcetera*.

Cut grants and loans for highways, airports, trains, inland waterways, green energy, schools, college aid, mortgages, disaster relief, libraries, rural health centers—you name it, I'll cut it.

The more we cut, the more money Americans will have to spend. Consumer spending will grow the economy.

Obama: Governor Romney's plan will either work or fail. I'm not sure which outcome will be worse for America.

The key to getting the private sector to grow faster?—beats me.

Maybe, it's a sense of a predictable future. And they don't see that in me.

Some business guys hope the Tea-Party Republicans will come in and take things back to where they were before the New Deal. They don't want a federal retirement and disability program like Social Security. They're against public dollars used for health care. In theory, they oppose all subsidies and tax breaks; in practice, they're selective. They think that workplace and environmental regulation is unnecessary. Same with regulation of banks, securities, food, drugs and everything else. They say they want a business environment that depends on competition to regulate business practices.

If I ran a business, I might want the same things.

Romney: Then why don't you get on board?

Obama: Because other business guys want the government to manage retirements, health care and cost internalizations to keep those costs even across the board. They fear that unregulated competition leads to death spirals of cost-cutting, bankruptcies and monopolies.

A 1900-style free market comes at too high a price. That's why we backed away from it.

The market works well in getting things produced at a low cost. It doesn't work well in making sure that all costs are factored into price. It's too easy to get a competitive advantage by running a dirty plant. It's too easy to shift to many costs onto individual employees.

The market didn't keep sawdust out of hotdogs in 1900. Why? Because meatpackers could sell hot dogs cheaper when they were part sawdust. Everyone went to sawdust to keep cost competitive.

Romney: It's the responsibility of individual consumers to avoid businesses that sell bad products. If a product or service harms a consumer, he or she can sue. Government should not be in the prevention business.

Obama: A successful lawsuit doesn't help you much after you're dead.

Romney: No, but enough lawsuits should correct the abuse.

Cub: A last thought from each of you.

Romney: If people want jobs, they should vote for me.

Obama: If people want jobs that pay as little as possible and nothing else, they should vote for the Governor.

Cub: Thank you gentlemen. I'm glad this is on the record.

Obama/Romney: Not on your life!

Cub: Finally...an area of agreement.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books -- **Snowy Mountain Breakdown**, **Land Matters** and **Blue Grass Notes** -- are available through his website.

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