



TRANSCRIPTS

[Transcript Providers](#)

Shows By Category:

[Return to Transcripts main page](#)

PIERS MORGAN TONIGHT

South Carolina Primary Coverage; Interview with Lenny Curry and Bryant Wright

Aired January 21, 2012 - 23:59 ET

THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT. THIS COPY MAY NOT BE IN ITS FINAL FORM AND MAY BE UPDATED.

PIERS MORGAN, HOST, PIERS MORGAN TONIGHT: Thanks, Anderson. It's been an extraordinary night. I want to come back to a few of you in a moment, but more on Newt Gingrich's decisive victory in South Carolina over Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum and Ron Paul.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

FORMER REP. NEWT GINGRICH, R-GA., PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: We don't have the kind of money that at least one of the candidates has. But we do have ideas and we do have people. And we've proved here in South Carolina that people power with the right ideas beats big money. With your help, we're going to prove it again in Florida.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MORGAN: Three states, three winners. Next stop, Florida, where at the moment, anyway, Mitt Romney still has a commanding lead according to the latest poll. Wolf Blitzer, Gloria Borger and John King will be here in a moment to talk about it in just a moment.

But first, two people that are very happy with the results. I spoke with Newt Gingrich's daughters, Jackie Gingrich Cushman and Kathy Gingrich Lubbers.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

WOLF BLITZER, HOST, THE SITUATION ROOM: Newt Gingrich, a decisive, impressive win in South Carolina. Now everyone moving ahead to Florida, but right now, I'm going to Piers Morgan. He's standing by with two very, very special guests. Piers?

PIERS MORGAN, HOST, PIERS MORGAN TONIGHT: I certainly am, Wolf. I'm with two people who are very happy with the results tonight in South Carolina, and why wouldn't they be? Because both their names involve the word Gingrich, speaking of his daughters, Jackie Gingrich Cushman and Kathy Gingrich Lubbers.

Ladies, judging by the whacking big grins on your faces, you're pretty happy down there.

JACKIE GINGRICH CUSHMAN: Absolutely. We're thrilled to be here in South Carolina.

KATHY GINGRICH LUBBERS: It's a great place to be tonight. MORGAN: I'll bet it is. I mean, what an amazing turn around for your father. You know, I've spoken to him a few times, as you know, and you know, he was dead on arrival in the summer. He made his amazing comeback. Then he was like the has-been who had blown his chance. Now he's the front-runner. How do you feel?

JACKIE GINGRICH CUSHMAN: Oh, we're very excited. And I think what it proved to everybody, the American people, is that he's more like the Energizer bunny. He just doesn't give up. He just keeps going, he goes on and on and on. He's very, very persistent and that's one of the things that we love about him.

KATHY GINGRICH LUBBERS: He's here to do what we need him to do, as the American public.

MORGAN: It seemed to me that his fortunes -- his fortunes seemed to change rather dramatically when he stopped being Saint Newt, this weird new creation he had come up with, with the halo, and took the gloves off and became Nasty Newt.

KATHY GINGRICH LUBBERS: Well, I wouldn't say that exactly. What I would say is that he tried to stay positive, and then he had to go to contrast, and contrast is clear. Contrast is good for him.

In the Republican primary, it's going to be even better for him when you think about the contrast of the Republican conservative candidate, Newt Gingrich, debating Barack Obama. So I think that the contrast is our future.

MORGAN: And there was nobody else predicting this. Your father most definitely was. Now I want to play you a clip from the interview I did with him about 10, 11 days ago, in

which he said the following:

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

FORMER REP. NEWT GINGRICH, R-GA., PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: Well, first of all, I think I'm going to win. This is going to be Armageddon. I mean, they will come in here with everything they've got, every surrogate, every ad, every negative attack.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MORGAN: Well, he was right. This is going to be Armageddon and I'm going to win. And he didn't just win by a small margin. He had a thumping victory basically tonight.

It sort of told me that your father, he likes nothing better than when everyone is attacking him, whether it's his ex-wife, whether it's John King, my colleague, quite rightly taking him on or whether it's Mitt Romney or whoever it is, your dad likes it when the bullets are firing at him.

JACKIE GINGRICH CUSHMAN: I think part of that is he's the son of an infantry man. His father served 27 years in the infantry. So a lot of what Dad does is through service to his country. And again, he's had a very clear vision of what he wants to go with the American people.

He understands that we're in a crisis situation, and he is the only candidate, including President Barack Obama who's balanced a budget, cut taxes, cut spending and cut welfare. And he did this with a Democratic president. So he has governed before, and he knows that he can govern again and that's exactly what we need right now.

MORGAN: What did you think of the interview that his ex-wife gave? I know that you and he both tried to get ABC not to run it, and were unsuccessful. In the end, it doesn't look like it damaged him very much, in fact, probably the opposite. But how did you feel, on a personal level, to see such an incredibly personal interview attacking your father in that way?

KATHY GINGRICH LUBBERS: Well, we haven't -- I haven't actually seen it, but I can tell you that, of course, in these times, when it is heated, things come out of the blue. You don't expect it, but the reality is, the people of South Carolina were not interested. They knew who they wanted to be leading the charge.

They do elect presidents here and they knew who has the capability and the background and the capacity to go toe -to-toe with Barack Obama. And they made a statement and that's what we're here to celebrate.

MORGAN: Do you think that your father is a reformed character? He certainly tells me that he is, and you told me last week that you felt he was. Do you feel that he really is

genuinely a different man now to the man that he was maybe in his 30s and 40s?

JACKIE GINGRICH CUSHMAN: Absolutely. I mean, several things have happened with him. He's owned several small businesses. He's created businesses that were successful. He's had two grandchildren, he's gotten much closer to God, his faith is much deeper and much stronger. I see that through with my interactions with him.

I mean, I see -- when -- I (inaudible) spend a lot of time with him on the campaign trail. And the man that he is today is much more patient, much more interested in listening to people, and he really is -- I mean, he talks about why he's running, he is so authentic and so -- well, he's running for president because he knows that he's the leader we need right now.

He could have stayed home and done nothing, but I'm very proud of him, because he's acted on the campaign trail, working very hard, because he knows that America needs a real leader with courage, and my dad is that guy.

MORGAN: I did another interview with Former President Jimmy Carter this week, in which he accused your father pretty directly of using what he describes as subtle racial terminology to whip up support.

How did you feel when you heard that? Because your father certainly had a whack at Jimmy Carter tonight, so he clearly wasn't very happy about it.

KATHY GINGRICH LUBBERS: Well, our father is very much equal opportunity in the realm of his heart. He doesn't -- I can't imagine anyone who actually knows him having any room to even discuss the fact of whether or not he has an issue with race. That is not the man we know.

And the fact of the matter is, we love the man who wants everyone to have a job, everyone to have a better job, and everyone to have the opportunity to own the job. That's the America we love and that's our father.

MORGAN: Now you managed to, between all of you, persuade Rick Perry to come on board and got his endorsement. Who's next for your predatory clutches? Who are you targeting?

JACKIE GINGRICH CUSHMAN: I love the way you framed that question. We're obviously are very thrilled with Governor Perry's decision.

KATHY GINGRICH LUBBERS: (Inaudible) thankful.

JACKIE GINGRICH CUSHMAN: But, yes, he's a wonderful guy. He's a real American hero. He -- you know, he served in the military. He's a very good governor. He's a -- you know, my father thinks very highly of him, and we're thrilled to have his endorsement.

And he's going to lead the 10th Amendment Project. And we're -- welcome anyone that wants to join the conservative movement. We really are about people returning the power to the people, not to government. And that's what Dad's all about. So we'll wait and see who's next.

MORGAN: I believe this may be the first time your father has had an outright state victory in his illustrious career. This, I would imagine, will give him a huge amount of increased energy driving into Florida. But he knows in Florida it's going to be one hell of a battle with Mitt Romney.

I would imagine whatever the upside of Armageddon is, I can't think of what that would be, but whatever it is it's going to rain down on your father's head. What do you think his strategy will be in Florida?

KATHY GINGRICH LUBBERS: Well, I happen to be from Florida now. I've been in the Miami area for over a decade, and I can tell you that my father has worked diligently for many, many years, to include the Hispanic -- you know, as far as every part of his being, he's been -- there's been an inclusion component in our campaign.

Prior to our campaign, we had volunteers and staff at all levels in the Hispanic community. That's going to be a component. We're not going to be able to match Romney dollar for dollar, but Romney is not going to be able to match Barack Obama if he were to even get there.

So this is not a dollars game, this is about people understanding the ideas and the solutions and the courage that our father has, the fact that he has a history of governing successfully, that he promised, when they came together and produced the Contract with America, that they would vote on those tenets. They did within the first 100 days. He delivers on his promises and once we get that message out loud and clear, I think we'll have a very good chance of at least, you know, holding our own and this is going to be a long race. This is not just Florida. There are many, many more states out there.

MORGAN: And final question, ladies, where is the party tonight? Because I can get the last flight out of here and join you.

:JACKIE GINGRICH CUSHMAN That's exactly right. We're in the Hilton down here in Columbia. We have a great deejay. We're having a lot of fun. We've got people that are very excited. They worked very hard here in South Carolina and we're so thankful to the people of South Carolina that, once again, have picked the right man to be the president and the nominee.

MORGAN: Well, a great night to be a Gingrich. Go and have a good celebration, ladies.

JACKIE GINGRICH CUSHMAN: Thank you.

KATHY GINGRICH LUBBERS: Thank you.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

MORGAN: Certainly the biggest smiles of the night. But has tonight's big win for Newt Gingrich reset the Republican race? Here to answer that, my CNN colleagues Wolf Blitzer, Gloria Borger and John.

Well, welcome back to you guys. I was, I suppose, reminding myself that it was after New Hampshire, I was with you in Atlanta there at the mother ship, as we call it. And it seemed then like this race was near over, this was Mitt Romney, two for two, ahead in all the polls in South Carolina. And we really thought this might be the beginning of a very, very quick end to the race.

Now Mitt Romney is not even two for two. He's gone back to one out of three, Santorum won in Iowa. I mean, now we see Gingrich not just winning tonight, but absolutely thumping Romney to second place. Everything has changed, hasn't it?

WOLF BLITZER, HOST, THE SITUATION ROOM: It certainly has, and I think there's no doubt, I think it's going to be a race because Florida, you know, 10 days between now and January 31st, Piers, a lot could happen.

Here's one thing that I think is definitely going to happen. There's going to be an enormous amount of attack advertising that's going to be broadcast in all those major media markets in Florida, in the South, for Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, up in the north, the central part of the state, Orlando and Tampa.

You're going to see a tremendous amount of those super PAC negative attack ads coming in. Millions and millions and millions of dollars. It worked against Newt Gingrich in Iowa. We'll see what happens in Florida. The other thing we know is going to happen, next Monday night and Thursday night, two major debates, Republican debates. We're going to have the CNN debate next Thursday night in Jacksonville, Florida. And all of us know how powerful these debates have been. So 10 days is a lifetime in politics. Anything can happen between now and January 31st.

MORGAN: It certainly is. And John King, what's been fascinating to me about this is that I was being told, look, when they get to South Carolina, the evangelical South will rally against Newt Gingrich because of all the baggage, because of all the marriages, all the stuff that you got into with him at the debate the other night in spectacular fashion.

And yet the opposite seemed to happen. It seemed to rally him to say, you know, don't judge me on my past. I'm here for the future. And he seems to have won that debate pretty comprehensively. You know, his ex-wife goes on television with what, in normal circumstances, could have been an incredibly damaging interview, and it seems to just galvanize his vote even higher.

JOHN KING, HOST, JOHN KING U.S.A.: As that sinks in, we'll see if there's any

impact as the character questions sink in with the voters. And you can count on both Senator Santorum and Governor Romney getting more into the character debate. They'll start with ethics, but they'll be trying to get backhanded into personal character as we go on.

But an important point, evangelical voters in a state where you have 9.9 percent unemployment, they were voting more on the economy and they were also voting more on passion. What we saw tonight, Piers, was a dramatic shift. This could be a game changer if it continues.

South Carolina conservatives, evangelicals, and Tea Party voters, coming to the conclusion they believe Newt Gingrich has the right experience to be the Republican nominee. That has been Romney's big argument. Don't put a Washington insider, vote for a governor, vote for a business man.

Hurt, seriously, by Newt Gingrich tonight. Who can best beat Barack Obama? That's the number one concern for Republicans, especially for conservative evangelicals, Tea Party voters. South Carolina, a very conservative state, they are hungry, hungry for somebody who can go in and debate fiercely, passionately against Barack Obama and hopefully beat Barack Obama.

That has, again, been the strength of the Romney argument all along, a majority of South Carolina Republicans tonight say they think Gingrich is a better candidate. Now, Gingrich is winning big, so in some ways you discount those numbers.

But if he can carry anything like that, that he's better experienced to be president, that he's the better candidate to beat Obama, if he can carry that into Florida, Romney has problems.

MORGAN: Yes, Gloria, let's talk about Mitt Romney, because this has been a bad night for him, whichever way you try and spin this.

GLORIA BORGER, CNN CHIEF POLITICAL ANALYST: Terrible.

MORGAN: It's been a bad week. And I thought his performances in the debates were pretty lackluster. He looked weak on this whole tax issue, you know, he should have just come out and come clean, I think, and now he's under real attack and he doesn't seem to have a change of gear. Whereas Gingrich looks really fired up.

BORGER: Right. I mean, and Romney needs to have a change of gear. I think what the campaign discovered is that inevitability is not a great campaign strategy and I don't think they're going to do that again and they're not going to talk about how electable he is anymore.

I think what you're going to see a different, finely tuned Mitt Romney. They realized that they can't have all the surrogates attacking Newt Gingrich, that Romney has to take it to

him, Newt Gingrich directly.

I think we saw a little bit of that tonight in his speech. But what they're going to talk about is the fact that Newt Gingrich is a lobbyist and he is somebody who lobbied, as they say, for Freddie Mac. And when you look at the value of housing and how it's declined in the state of Florida, they are going to go after him on that.

They're also going to say he's out of touch with the Republican Party, that he called the Republican budget right-wing social engineering, something that almost every House Republican voted for.

You know, so they're going to also say that he's unreliable, that he's erratic, that you need somebody who is steadier at the helm and who can be depended upon to beat Barack Obama, because in the end, it's going to be a race about who is best able to beat the President of the United States.

And Romney has to show in these debates coming up, including the one with Wolf on Thursday, that he can take it to Barack Obama and go the long haul with him and win for the Republican Party. That's what they want.

MORGAN: Well, it's going to be a fascinating week.

And, Wolf, I hope you're ready to eclipse John King's current crown as best question in debate history. So a lot of pressure on you, now, Wolf, to get one over on Mr. King.

BLITZER: I'll do my best. Thank you. I'll do my best, Thursday night, 8:00 pm Eastern -- Jacksonville, 8:00 pm Eastern. We'll all be there.

BORGER: Be there.

MORGAN: Going to be terrific. Congratulations on the brilliant -- on the coverage again. It's been exhilarating to watch from start to finish, so, Wolf, Gloria, John, thank you all very much.

BORGER: Thanks, Piers.

MORGAN: When we come back, how will Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum respond to tonight's Gingrich's surge? And will his win in South Carolina give him the nomination?

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

FORMER GOV. MITT ROMNEY, R-MASS., PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: The Republican Party doesn't demonize prosperity, we celebrate success in our party. Those who pick up the weapons of the Left today, will find them turned against us tomorrow.

That's the choice our party gives America.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MORGAN: Just days ago, Mitt Romney had a solid lead in South Carolina, then Newt Gingrich scored big in local debates and started surging in the polls. Joining me now to talk about why it happened, a man who knows South Carolina pretty well. Rick Grinnell, a spokesman for the former governor, Mark Sanford. He's currently the longest serving U.S. spokesman at the U.N.

Rick Grinnell, thank you for joining me. I mean, a big night in many ways. Maybe not, though, the end of the story by a long way, because Florida is looming large in everything, isn't it?

RICK GRINNELL, U.N. SPOKESMAN: Yes, I think the beauty is we have 50 states that are very different. South Carolina is a very interesting state. They usually go with the eventual GOP nominee.

But I think they got it wrong this time. I think, for some reason, there was a lot of pressure to support Newt from the media. He did a great job in the debates. He gave it to the media. People like that. South Carolinians like that. There are a lot of retired folks and snowbirds in South Carolina.

MORGAN: But my sense was this: don't Americans just like a politician standing up going, no, and taking on his critics, his enemies, you know, his ex-wives, whoever it might be, they like this pugnacious style that Newt Gingrich has, and they don't really like the fact that Mitt Romney is always this same paced, even tempered guy, smooth, slick businessman who may be completely detached from their world.

GRINNELL: I wouldn't call Mitt smooth or slick. I think he's a nice guy and I think that people try to make him more than just a nice guy. He needs to just be Mitt. And I think he is that earnest guy who is just going to be honest. And he needs to draw attention to the fact that Newt Gingrich is a master of government. He's the former Speaker of the House.

The South Carolinians, I think they really like the fact that Newt said, you know, I messed up, I'm sorry, I've talked to my Creator and I really want to move on. People like that. I think Americans want to forgive.

But let's start turning to Florida. In 10 days, we have a lot of snowbirds, we have a lot of people who reflect more of all of America, all of the United States. And I think you're going to see Florida come around and Mitt is going to be back on top and be the nominee.

MORGAN: But before Florida, we have two more debates coming up this week, and Newt Gingrich is really turning it on in these debates. I mean, it's the first time I've seen

where the debates are almost winning primaries.

GRINNELL: Well, I think that's true. I think people want to hear a nice sound bite and Newt has great sound bites. But in the end, I think that we've got to talk on the Romney camp about electability, because Newt is not electable. He's absolutely not someone who is going to beat Barack Obama. The more the Romney people --

MORGAN: Do you really think that?

GRINNELL: Yes, it's absolutely true, I think there's no question that Newt Gingrich cannot beat Barack Obama.

MORGAN: OK. Well, fascinating observations, Rick. I'm not sure I agree with you. I think that Newt Gingrich has got something going for him right now, which is momentum. And in politics that can be very a powerful thing.

GRINNELL: The only thing I would say is Iowa, New Hampshire, he was fourth and fifth and, yes, he did well in South Carolina. But now we got a big state. He doesn't have a lot of money and Florida is going to be about who has got a ground game, who's got an operations game.

One last point, I'll say that Mitt Romney, 2008, got 15 percent of the vote. He doubled his voting this time around. So I think a lot of people saw him and now are supporting him more than ever.

MORGAN: Bring it on, Florida. Rick Grinnell, thank you very much.

GRINNELL: Yes, thanks.

MORGAN: Rick Santorum didn't make much of a dent in South Carolina tonight, so what will that mean for his campaign in Florida? Here with me now is John Brabender, senior Santorum campaign strategist.

John, a tough night for you guys. Obviously the Gingrich surge became a reality and he stormed it. Where does that leave you?

JOHN BRABENDER, SENIOR SANTORUM CAMPAIGN STRATEGIST: Well, actually, this was about the second best night we could have. We certainly wanted to win South Carolina, that would be great. But with Newt Gingrich winning, that means that there's been three regional primaries, and three completely different winners.

First time that's ever happened in the United States. So it shows how wide open this is. And I think it really means a lot for us. It really shows the distinction between these three candidates. It's a great story line. You have the redemption in some sense of Newt Gingrich. You have Mitt Romney spending more money than anybody knows what to do with to basically win only one of out three.

And Rick Santorum, the blue-collar fighter, winning officially yesterday in Iowa. We all move on. There's a lot of take, and I this is going to be kind of fun.

MORGAN: How angry are you guys about what happened in Iowa? Because until this political momentum (ph), had you been able to be declared the outright winners, it would have made a big difference, I suspect, to your ability to raise money and therefore to perhaps to do more ads in South Carolina and so on. It's like a domino effect, isn't it?

BRABENDER: Well, the real interesting thing about Iowa was that we spent by far the least amount of money and, as we know, officially yesterday won it. What it tells me more importantly is that in America it's not about who spends the most but who has the most compelling message and messenger.

We can look back, sure. Would it have been great if we had a lot more press and so forth, but we still raised significant money coming out of Iowa. There's only three people, for all practical purposes, left on the island, if you will, and we're one of them. There's all these states ahead, so we're excited about where we are.

MORGAN: At what point, though, does the campaign hit the buffers in the sense that at some stage, there is going to have to be a -- probably a two-horse race here. Everybody knows Ron Paul won't get out. So Rick Santorum, if he doesn't perform very well in Florida, for example, he will get a lot of heat from the -- from other Republicans to do the decent thing and stand aside.

At what point do you think you would reach that moment if you had to?

BRABENDER: Well, let's put this in context, first of all. Before tonight, the highest finish Newt Gingrich had was a fourth in Iowa, and a fifth in New Hampshire, beat both times by Rick Santorum.

Second of all, what's going to happen now we're down to three candidates. They're all going to receive a lot more scrutiny, particularly Newt Gingrich. And I think the question that's going to come up with all of them is, which one can beat Obama, which one might be a risk in the fall and, frankly, I think that this thing is so wide open right now, they've all won one out of three states.

I mean, so it's equal right now. And you have a lot of debates coming. It's no longer about who can run the most TV commercials. When you get down to only three candidates, people are paying attention to all of them.

Last week Rick Santorum, most people felt won the debate Thursday night. We have two coming up this week, including one on CNN on Thursday night and we're looking forward to another winning debate.

MORGAN: Final question, the one thing that Rick Santorum has done is propel himself

almost from nowhere now into serious contender here. If he ends up in a position where he could be a running mate to either Newt Gingrich or Mitt Romney, and I accept you're not going to throw the towel in -- he may -- he may yet go on to win it -- but would he be prepared to be a running mate to either or both of those candidates?

BRABENDER: Not even looking at that right now. Rick Santorum got in this race to be the next President of the United States. He feels that he obviously is the best contrast with Obama. Unlike the other two, he didn't support mandates.

Unlike the other two, he didn't support the bailouts, those type of things. Unlike the other two, he has significant foreign policy experience. Rick Santorum is in this because he believes he's the trusted conservative that can be the next President of the United States, has the best opportunity to beat Obama and that's where our focus is going to remain.

MORGAN: John Brabender, thank you very much for your time.

BRABENDER: Thank you, sir, and thank you for a great interview, first with the Santorum family and Karen and Rick together, and I think that's the first time that ever happened. Our phones have been ringing off the hook with people saying it was a great interview and I think you got a lot of new fans last night.

MORGAN: Well, say what you like about your man, but it's a great family and they've been through a hell of a lot, and I thoroughly enjoyed meeting them all.

BRABENDER: Well, thank you.

MORGAN: When we come back, why South Carolina's evangelicals went for Gingrich and a look ahead to the critical battle in Florida.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

FORMER SEN. RICK SANTORUM, R-PA., PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: We went out and all across this country in these three states now, but let me assure you, we will go to Florida, and then we're going to Arizona, and Colorado (inaudible).

(END VIDEO CLIP)

PIERS MORGAN, HOST, PIERS MORGAN TONIGHT: Three states, three winners, now the focus shifts to Florida. Joining me now is the chairman of that state's Republican Party, Lenny Curry.

And to give us some perspective on why Newt Gingrich did well with evangelicals, Bryant Wright. He's the president of the Southern Baptist Convention and senior pastor of Johnson Ferry Baptist Church. Welcome to you both.

Mr. Curry, let me start with you. All eyes on Florida now. This is a pretty crucial primary now, isn't it? FLORIDA GOP CHAIRMAN LENNY CURRY: It's all about Florida. For over a year now, we've been saying Florida is the place to be. So I say welcome to Florida. Over 4 million registered Republicans where our primary is already under way with over 200,000 votes cast as of today.

MORGAN: The polls at the moment have Romney ahead, 43 percent. I think Santorum's second with 19, Newt Gingrich has about 18 percent. But I would imagine after tonight these could change quite rapidly. We saw a movement in South Carolina which really, really was dramatic, in favor of Gingrich and away from Romney. What are you expecting to happen in Florida?

CURRY: Well, I think, you know, it's like in the NFL, they say on any given Sunday now with -- we're down to the Final Four, these are all professionals, they've got great resumes, they know what they're doing.

So with these debates, I say on any given debate, the last two debates in Florida, particularly the one hosted by CNN and the Republican Party of Florida here in Jacksonville, I think is going to be critical in voters making up their minds.

MORGAN: There were lots of rumors flying around earlier tonight that Jeb Bush was going to be giving an endorsement to Mitt Romney. But that now appears to be untrue and, in fact, what we're hearing is that he decided not to give an endorsement to anybody. What are you hearing?

CURRY: I'm -- yes, the stories that I'm hearing, what I'm reading is that he's not planning on endorsing. Certainly, though, we've seen this primary season, a lot of surprises. So nothing would surprise me at this stage. But I expect Florida to remain competitive and volatile right up until, again, the last debate.

MORGAN: Let me bring in Bryant now. The evangelical issue in South Carolina was fascinating. Everybody expected Newt Gingrich to cop a load of flak, frankly, for his marital baggage and so on, particularly with his ex-wife giving this dramatic interview, but actually the reverse happened. It seemed to galvanize a lot of evangelicals into supporting him. Why do you think that happened?

BRYANT WRIGHT, PRESIDENT, SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION: Well, I think people are most of all looking to see a candidate that can defeat Barack Obama, that are thinking about supporting the Republican candidate for presidency.

And I think when Newt Gingrich came across so strong in the debates, it really galvanized a lot of folks in wanting to support him. It was an obvious, dramatic change this past week because of the debates.

And I think the Gingrich camp probably needs to write a thank-you note to John King for

that opening question, because it really threw a softball to Newt that he was prepared for, that really caused people to be excited about how he responded.

MORGAN: Yes, I mean, I'm not sure softball is the right word, because I think what it was was a perfectly valid question based on this sense that, as in previous elections, this kind of bombshell of an ex-wife coming out and making all kinds of claims of open marriage and so on, would potentially be incredibly damaging to his campaign.

But the way that Newt Gingrich handled this was so right on the point. He went after John King. He went after his ex-wife. He went after the whole thing. And at the end of it, the crowd gave him a standing ovation, and you could almost feel voters in South Carolina rushing to the polls.

WRIGHT: There's no doubt that people in South Carolina can respond to that kind of fighting spirit to stand up to those who may have a viewpoint that they really have a strong disagreement with.

It is going to be interesting to see over the course of time, though, for evangelical voters who learned from scripture and the teaching of Jesus Christ that marriage is really a sacred calling.

And over the course of the campaign, as people reflect on what has happened in Newt's life, in regards to marriage, because of adultery happening two times, it's really just going to be interesting to see how that's going to affect evangelical voters.

Obviously that would be a concern to a lot of folks, and yet people right now are so interested in finding some -- a candidate that can be successful in the election.

MORGAN: Yes, it seems to me that actually they're more concerned with somebody that can beat Barack Obama than they are about his marital woes 10, 15, 20 years ago. But anyway, a fascinating debate.

Lenny Curry and Bryant Wright, thank you both very much.

WRIGHT: Glad to be with you.

CURRY: It's a pleasure.

MORGAN: Coming up, what went right for Newt Gingrich in South Carolina and what went so wrong for Mitt Romney? I'll ask Andrew Breitbart and Michael Reagan and Amy Holmes after the break.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REP. RON PAUL, R-TEXAS, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: Have you ever noticed other candidates are going up and then down, up and then down? So far I'm very proud to say that our efforts is steady growth. It's steady growth like this.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MORGAN: That was Ron Paul earlier, tonight's Gingrich victory left the GOP race wide open and pretty unsettled. So what happens next?

Joining me now is Michael Reagan, author of "The New Reagan Revolution," and, of course, the son of Ronald Reagan; also conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart; and Amy Holmes, anchor of Glenn's Beck's TV's "The Blaze," and posted the network's real news, an integral show (ph).

Welcome to you all. Let me start with you, Michael, a few interesting things, most of which, you just reminded me that your father, of course, was the first divorced man to become president. So this whole debate about Newt Gingrich's marital baggage, you could argue that tonight the people of South Carolina, very evangelical lot, have voted with their feet and said we don't care.

MICHAEL REAGAN, REPUBLICAN STRATEGIST: Yes, because I think the issues are much different than they were back in 1980 when my father ran, but the campaign back in 1980 was scared to death with the fact that Ronald Reagan had been married to my mother, Jane Wyman.

And so with Maureen and I, they almost, in some ways, tried to hide us events and put us in separate rooms and bring us out so they wouldn't get the idea that Patty and Ron and Maureen and Michael were all part of the same clan, and remind people that Ronald Reagan had been married once before.

And so it was something that was really worked on during the campaign. But things changed 30 years later, now you're in the middle of what's going on with Newt Gingrich.

And you're right, people look at the fact that Barack Obama needs to be replaced as the main issue of this campaign, not the private life of one of those who is running for office, which my father, by the way, would not have paid attention to the private life at all, because we had that discussion back in 1960 with Richard Nixon and John Kennedy and the photographs the RNC had.

MORGAN: Andrew Breitbart, let me bring you in here. You're looking, I must say, a lot less evil than you were the other night, which is a good start for the proceedings. That's a joke, obviously.

ANDREW BREITBART, THE WASHINGTON TIMES: Thank you.

MORGAN: And let's talk about --

BREITBART: British humor.

MORGAN: -- the issue --

(LAUGHTER)

MORGAN: Let's talk about the issue of Newt Gingrich's morality or otherwise, as to how important it is, because there was this pivotal moment in that debate when John King, off the top of the debate, put it directly to him, and Gingrich went on the attack.

And he went on a fantastic kind of torrid (inaudible) assault back at all the media for dwelling on what he believes is just trivial nonsense from his past. Do you believe that was a -- really a turning point for dealing with that kind of baggage? BREITBART: We've got a situation here where Newt Gingrich, right now, before that, you had Chris Christie, Donald Trump, any candidate that goes out there and attacks the mainstream media immediately gains 20 points amongst conservatives.

The people in South Carolina had been attacked mercilessly, whether for their evangelical faith or for supporting the Tea Party by the mainstream media. So they're looking for somebody out there who is going to defend them when they know that there's a double standard in the media.

Four years ago, the media knew that John Edwards was carrying on an affair while he was claiming to be a family values liberal, while his wife had cancer. And everybody knew in the mainstream media that he was carrying on that affair.

Yet on the eve of this debate, ABC News played that thing up against Newt Gingrich. They saw that as dirty tricks, and they voted for him because he stood up to what is going to be a media defense of President Obama in this election cycle.

MORGAN: Yes, but I mean, Amy Holmes, let me bring you in here because I suppose another way of looking at this, in a White House way, is that this is all quite good for Barack Obama, because you've got the heavyweights of the Republican Party right now just taking seven lumps out of each other every two seconds, negative ad, negative ad, all this stuff accumulates and becomes, I would imagine, a rather useful punch bag for Barack Obama when he works out who the nominee is going to be, isn't it?

AMY HOLMES, NEWS ANCHOR, GBTV: Sure. President Obama, he gets to just sit back, eat the popcorn and watch the show. He doesn't have to spend his own money attacking any of his potential opponents right. And then he can, of course, use all of these attacks and accusations in a whole string of clips in his own ads.

He can say, and the -- his rival candidate, whether it's Romney or Gingrich or Ron Paul or Rick Santorum, he can quote them out of their own mouths against whoever he is up against.

But I want to get back to Andrew Breitbart's point about the media and how Newt Gingrich so successfully put the media in the crosshairs. I think tonight showed that the media really was the big loser. Public polls -- policy polling found that 77 percent of South Carolina GOP primary voters have an unfavorable view of the media.

And we know that Newt Gingrich talked a lot also about the media elite. So the media I think in attacking Newt Gingrich, by saying they were somehow, I don't know, doing something favorable for the electorate, that they could explore this character issue, they got that thrown back in their face. And I think --

MORGAN: Well, hold on, wait a minute, wait a minute --

HOLMES: -- a comedic caricature -- MORGAN: Another way -- what you may -- yes, but, Amy, what you may also be seeing is some brilliant politics by Newt Gingrich. I mean, remember, at the end of the debate, the very first thing he said was, John King did a great job. And of course he did, because he put the question to him.

Newt Gingrich could feign outrage, go on the attack and actually it was clearly a vote winner in the impassioned way he defended himself. Now I thought John King was perfectly right to ask the question, perfectly entitled to ask it off the top, is what everyone was thinking. But Newt Gingrich was also perfectly entitled to go on the attack.

Michael, go ahead.

REAGAN: Yes, what it is all about is how you react to these things. Newt Gingrich reacted correctly. Hit it out of the park. Look at Mitt Romney, reacting to, are you going to let us see your taxes?

MORGAN: He looked weak on that.

REAGAN: He's so weak on that. I said -- I think I tweeted the other day, I would rather go down swinging with Mitt -- I mean, swinging with Newt than muttering with Mitt. Mitt can't find his voice and, in fact, Newt Gingrich has found his voice. And it's taking -

-

(CROSSTALK)

MORGAN: Andrew Breitbart, come in there, because that's a good point, isn't it?

BREITBART: Whether Mitt Romney wants to accept it or not, this -- the last three years was the era of the ascendancy of the Tea Party and he's done everything he can to say, well, I -- he likes to parrot Tea Party phrases and Tea Party ideas that are out there only because of the Tea Party, but he wants to distance himself from the people that were maligned by the media.

And they see that defensiveness. They see the distance that he's created between the Tea Party and he -- and people out there don't feel like he's been in the trenches defending them.

HOLMES: Piers, I want to get to your point about how Newt demonstrated how to handle one of your greatest liabilities. And he did. He handled it brilliantly, and that is in contrast with Mitt Romney.

And what's so strange about it is Mitt Romney is rich. He started Bain Capital. He was engaged in all of this kind of thinking, and yet he doesn't have an articulate -- either explanation or defense or however you want to put it. It's like he's a deer caught in the headlights, and that's so strange.

And it reminds me of Rudy Giuliani back in 2008 when he was running for the GOP nomination and one of the first questions he got was about being pro-choice and he didn't have an adequate answer. And yet that was his biggest liability --

(CROSSTALK)

MORGAN: Yes, let me -- let me leave the final word here with Michael.

REAGAN: There are two Republican parties, there's the Rockefeller Republicans and the Reagan or the conservative Republicans. And the battle is between those two Republican Parties. Tonight, the Reagan Republicans won.

MORGAN: Yes, indisputable.

Michael Reagan, a good night for all Reagan conservatives, I would imagine.

Andrew Breitbart, nice that you and I patched things up.

Amy, thank you for your contribution, too.

HOLMES: Thank you.

MORGAN: Just ahead, the truth about Mitt Romney, the capitalist from a couple of guys who wrote the book about him.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MORGAN: Mitt Romney has been taking a lot of heat over his tax returns and his corporate career. He's accused of cutting jobs rather than creating them. Well, is it true?

With me now is Michael Kranish and Scott Helman, authors of "The Real Romney," who've covered Mitt Romney for years.

And Carol Roth, business strategist and author of "The Entrepreneur Equation."
Welcome to you all.

Let's start with Michael and Scott, you wrote the book literally on Mitt Romney. And here's an interesting about him. He -- on the face of it, has a brilliant curriculum vitae to be president. His economic record is fantastic. He bailed out Olympics. He's run Bain. He's done all these good things.

And yet at the moment, this message is being translated into he doesn't understand the cares and concerns of ordinary people. He's a job slayer, not creator and so on. Where is he going wrong in selling this message?

MICHAEL KRANISH, DEPUTY CHIEF OF THE WASHINGTON BUREAU OF THE BOSTON GLOBE: Well, Piers, it's interesting, because we go back in his history to 1994 when he ran for the U.S. Senate against Edward Kennedy, a lot of the same issues came up, for example there were ads run by the Edward Kennedy campaign against him, saying that he was killing jobs. So this should really not be a surprise at all.

Also interesting the tax returns that you brought up, in '94, Mitt Romney challenged Ted Kennedy to release his tax returns, Kennedy obviously being very wealthy. Kennedy declined. And Romney said, well, if releases his tax returns, I'll release mine.

So the issue of tax returns has actually been going on for 18 years, and if Romney, let's say next week, continues to say maybe or I'm not sure or a few years, it will just continue to be asked about him and people will say, well, you challenged Kennedy, what about yourself? You really need to see the tax returns from 1984, at least to 1999, because that's the time he ran Bain Capital.

So then you would really learn exactly what he learned at companies that may have been closed down. You've got a much better idea. But if he only says the last few years, there will still be all these questions raised about this.

MORGAN: Let me bring Carol in there, because I suppose that the suspicion that is growing is that in these returns are some murky stuff that's going to make people think lesser of him.

Tell me about Bain, for example, because you know, you could argue that Bain just did what a lot of companies like that do, they go along, they bail out struggling companies, they make cuts to improve the business, and, yes, they sell them and they make a profit, but by doing so, they've also saved a lot of jobs. I mean, there are two ways in looking at what they did, aren't there?

CAROL ROTH, AUTHOR, "THE ENTREPRENEUR EQUATION": There always are, Piers, and I think the problem is that the American public doesn't understand finance very well. So his campaign is saying, well, you know what, let's take the NFL strategy. We're in the fourth quarter and we've got a little bit of a lead.

So instead of, you know, going on the offense here, we're just going to run the ball, we're going to go to the prevent defense. And what happens in those scenarios in the NFL is that the other teams start saying, hey, I've got nothing to lose and so they start chipping away at that lead.

And I think the same thing has happened to Romney. He's on the right side of this issue. It is all about the economy, and he has a track record not just at Bain, but in Massachusetts, and in the Olympics, as well. And Mr. Turnaround, he has turned around everything that he's touched.

But somehow the campaign has him scared to come out and take that stand. If you look at the one time he got applause in that debate, it's when he said I'm not going to apologize for my success. And everybody went, yes, and then he kind of backed off.

So I just think that he needs to bring it and own it and say, you know what, I'm not going to apologize. I turned things around. We need to turn around this economy and he'll be in good standing then.

MORGAN: And let me bring in Scott there. I mean, I don't know what is stopping him. What I do know from watching him, the body language of Mitt Romney all week, and Newt Gingrich, is that Mitt Romney now looks on the defensive, and Newt Gingrich looks on the attack and is gaining confidence. From what you know about Mitt Romney when you did this book, it seems a bit strange that a guy that's run such huge businesses and been so successful wouldn't be a bit more chest-beating about this. Why isn't he showing more passion?

SCOTT HELMAN, THE BOSTON GLOBE: I think one of the big problems for him is the Occupy movement. I mean, income inequality is suddenly the issue that everyone has been talking about for the past few months, and it's the one issue that's really uncomfortable for him. He's incredibly wealthy and he's not done a terribly good job at showing that he can empathize with people who aren't.

I mean, I look at the comments in the last few weeks, about liking to fire people and how his speaking fees of 375 grand weren't that much money, and it comes out that he pays a low tax rate. I think, in some ways, that is his biggest opponent.

I mean, the Occupy movement and the sort of the consciousness that that occupies, because I mean, look, like you just said, I don't think people begrudge his wealth. They don't mind when people are successful. They want to be successful. They want role models.

But it's are you comfortable in that and do you know how to talk to people? Do you know how to sort of get down on their level and say, look, I get it, you don't get a job, I've been there, I've had friends who are there and he just has not been able to do that.

MORGAN: I think one of the problems --

HOLMES: He hasn't articulated --

MORGAN: -- when he dismisses the money from speaking, which is whatever it was, 350 grand or whatever, that's a lot of money, isn't it? We've got to leave it there, I'm afraid.

Scott, Carol, Michael, it's been a pleasure talking to you. That's all for us tonight. Monday, I'll talk exclusively to the second lady of the United States, Jill Biden, her thoughts on the State of the Union; also actor and humanitarian Sean Penn. That's it for us. Good night.