FRED THOMPSON AND THE IOWA CUCKOO'S NEST

Those who watched the Republican presidential "debate" in Iowa yesterday (12/12) now understand why the Des Moines Register is such a lousy newspaper.

"That was not just the worst debate of 2007, that was the worst debate in Western history, and that includes the ancient Greeks," said columnist Charles Krauthammer. "There is no record in any major European record of a debate this transcendingly and crushingly dull."

Mr. Krauthammer arguably wasn't engaging in hyperbole. Imagine a boxing match in which the boxers aren't allowed to lay a glove on each other, and you have an idea of what this "debate" was like.

This wasn't the fault of the candidates, all of whom turned in credible performances. Even Ron Paul seemed to be on his meds.

The blame for this flop belongs to the debate's moderator, Des Moines Register editor Carolyn Washburn. While most commentators compared her to an overbearing elementary school teacher, Fred Barnes of the Weekly Standard likened her to Nurse Ratched, the villain in Ken Kesey's 1962 novel "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

Ms. Washburn decreed there would be no questions on immigration or the war in Iraq, which opinion polls indicate are the subjects of greatest concern to Republican primary voters. Instead, she asked snoringly dull questions about issues that were important to few others than herself, questions that were so open-ended the candidates could fall back on their talking points rather than engage with each other. On the rare occasions when the candidates did try to mix it up, she cut them off.

"The Register's Carolyn Washburn seemed unfamiliar with such concepts as the follow-up question, or contrasting one candidate's position with another," said Howard Kurtz of the Washington Post.

The "debate" also was marred by the puzzling presence in it of Alan Keyes, who demonstrated yet again that he belongs in a strait jacket, not public office. The Register's purported rules for participation were that a candidate was to have a campaign headquarters in Iowa, and the support of at least one percent of those polled.

Mr. Keyes has no campaign headquarters in Iowa, received 0% (as in zero) support in the Register's poll last month, and had not been permitted to participate in any of the previous GOP debates. Yet there he was on the dais with the real candidates - and was granted more air time by Ms. Washburn than either Sen. John McCain or former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

I had thought it impossible to have a more biased or incompetently managed debate than the CNN-YouTube Republican debate last month, where a third of the questions CNN selected were from Democratic plants -- including a member of Hillary Clinton's Gay and Lesbian Task Force who CNN flew from California to Florida for the occasion -- and most of the rest were from fringe lunatics.

But Ms. Washburn proved me wrong. The CNN-YouTube debate at least was lively.

There will be no more debates before voting begins in Iowa Jan. 3rd. The bias and incompetence of CNN and the Des Moines Register have deprived Republican primary voters of the opportunity to hear the serious candidates interact on the issues that are most important to Republicans.

Biased and incompetently managed debates have political consequences. The Iowa frontrunner, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, is judged a winner because the format denied his rivals the opportunity to challenge some of the more bizarre policy positions he has taken recently.

Sen. McCain and Mayor Giuliani suffered because Ms. Washburn took their signature issues off the table. One wonders why the GOP candidates so meekly put up with this.

There may be a ray of hope. The highlight of the debate, such as it was, came when Fred Thompson, like Kesey's hero Randle McMurphy, defied Nurse Ratched.

He refused to participate in a show of hands Ms. Washburn ordered on a global warming question. "I'm not doing hand shows today," he informed her. "You want a show of hands? I'm not giving it to you." His putdown was quickly put up on YouTube:

Apparently he thinks presidential candidates ought not to be treated like fifth graders. When Sen. Thompson stood up to Ms. Washburn, the response meters in the focus groups went through the ceiling.

Sen. Thompson has proposed the serious GOP candidates engage in a round table discussion where they -- and not journalists -- set the agenda. If Iowans reward him in the caucuses next month with, say, a respectable third place finish, perhaps the others will join him in flying over the cuckoo's nest.