

Extra Feature Story

October 3, 2008

Vice Presidential Candidates Hold Their Own in Closely Watched Debate

After weeks of hype and nail biting, the vice presidential candidates, Senator Joe Biden and Governor Sarah Palin, finally met for their one and only debate this election season. As they sparred over the economic bailout, Iraq, and education, both insisted that their presidential candidate was the one to lead the country through tough times ahead.

Polls this week show a marked bump for the Democratic ticket as the economy continues to worsen. Thursday's debate moderator, PBS's Gwen Ifill, opened the debate asking if lawmaker wrangling over a massive Wall Street rescue bill represented the best or worst of Washington.

Senator Biden, who voted for the bill in the Senate, responded that it was a necessary evil because of the failed policies of the last eight years under the Bush administration. He added that his running mate, Senator Obama, had pushed for additions to the bill that added oversight and some help for homeowners and taxpayers.

Governor Palin distanced the current Republican ticket from the Bush administration by reminding people that her running mate, Senator John McCain, had called for reform of Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae two years ago, that she claimed would have held off the current economic crisis.

Iraq and Afghanistan

The debate moved quickly to the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: while both Biden and Palin have sons in the armed forces deployed overseas, they offered widely different views of the next steps in the conflicts.

The two tickets have sparred several times about whether or not there should indeed be a timeline for withdrawal from Iraq, and whether Iraq or Afghanistan is the frontline in the War on Terror, and last night was no exception.

Palin maintained that there could not be a timeline for withdrawal of the troops in Iraq stating that the end of the war and the winning of the war will come when Iraq has a stable and secure government.

Biden disagreed, insistent that the real front in the war on terror is Afghanistan and Pakistan. He argued resources should go there instead of Iraq, claiming that the U.S. government had spent more in Iraq in three weeks than in Afghanistan since the invasion in 2001.

Education

While there were no direct questions about education, both candidates mentioned education as a major point in their public policies.

Biden called for more direct funding to early education and to No Child Left Behind.

Palin pointed out that many of her family members are teachers. She also urged more flexibility for No Child Left Behind and the need to "put more of an emphasis on the profession of teaching." However, neither candidate directly explained their full ideas on education nor how they were going to pay for them.

Agreements

The candidates did not disagree on all issues. Biden and Palin agreed that same-sex couples deserve equal rights under the law but neither ticket would support same-sex marriage amendments to the Constitution.

They also agreed over support for Israel with Palin calling Israel the "strongest and best ally" in the Middle East and Biden calling himself a personal friend to Israel.

Darfur was also a point of agreement as they both fully support imposing a no-fly zone over southern Sudan in an effort to end the genocide in Darfur. Governor Palin even pointed to her record of divestment from Sudan while she was Governor of Alaska.

What do the pundits say?

Much was said pre-debate about the different styles of the two candidates. Palin, new to the national scene, was rumored to be a confident debater that could connect with the audience but perhaps not knowledgeable enough. Expectations for her were lowered, however, given her halting performance in recent network television interviews.

Biden, with his 26 years in the Senate, is known to be armed with facts and statistics but can sometimes be wordy and is prone to verbal gaffs. Supporters of both sides rejoiced as neither candidate committed a huge error and most pundits said they came out better than they went in.

But author and historian Michael Beschloss, scholar in residence at George Mason University, says they did not come out equally matched. Palin "got through without saying something that would damage her in the way that some of these interviews that she's done with Katie Couric and others have done during the last week," he said on the NewsHour "But I think Biden gave the sense of someone who's a little bit more human, a lot more willing to confess human error."

-- Compiled by Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra

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