

The Veep Debate

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 12, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

The hard part about determining a "winner" in these debates is that there are two audiences the candidates have in mind and while it is fairly easy to judge how a candidate's performance did or did not excite the base of his or her party, the effect on undecided voters is more difficult to assess. Some undecided voters are ambivalent. Some of known as "low information" voters — they were probably watching the playoffs but will see clips of the debate in the days ahead. Some undecided voters are deeply skeptical about politics per se. How these different groups within the already small group of undecided voters will react to last night's debate is anyone's guess.

Both men accomplished their most essential tasks last night. Vice President Joe Biden had to stop the bleeding that began after last week's lackluster performance by President Obama. Congressman Paul Ryan had to look like he belonged on the national stage. Both men accomplished these essential tasks for those who were watching. Biden will suffer a bit in the days ahead however: He repeatedly showed derision when Ryan was speaking, and it will be easy enough to slice together a reel of those moments that could become the equivalent of Al Gore's 2000 sighs. Note to debate performers: When you are not speaking, make sure you are not making news.

The debate was dominated by foreign policy, and Ryan was surprisingly strong for someone with no real foreign policy experience. He painted a dark picture of events in the Mideast that corresponds to the nightly images on the news of riots in Cairo, more killings in Syria, unsmiling mullahs in Iran. He evaded the key question — what would you do differently? — and he seemed to get lost in the weeds discussing Afghanistan and the planned draw down of troops.

Biden did a fairly good job on foreign policy. His fluency with policy options shown through and he had one of the best moments in the night when he explained why the U.S. does have to announce our planned dates of departure, that despite fears of alerting our enemies, announcing a date certain forces the Afghans, as it forces the Iraqis, to step up to the plate. But, he missed an opportunity in discussing Libya to talk about the Arab Spring more generally and why it may look chaotic, as the birth of democracies always are, but that the alternatives are much worse. Case in point: After the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, the Libyan people took to the streets, marched on the headquarters of radical groups, and shut them down. That is what we want, yes? We want the people of the Muslim world confronting the radicals in their midst, not the U.S. marines confronting the radicals in their midst. Biden was, however, very strong when he said that war must be the absolute last resort for American foreign policy, touching on the fear the American people rightly have that a Republican president is going to be surrounded by people who are trigger happy.

Throughout the night, however, Ryan was better at sketching his vision, connecting his policy details to central ideas that might resonate with voters. He mentions opportunity a lot, and who doesn't like opportunity? Ryan was less certain in arranging his policy ducks in a row. He has the quality of an ideologue, someone who assumes that everyone in the room agrees with his premises. One of Biden's strongest moments came after Ryan tried to defend his Medicare proposals and Biden rejoined, "Common people, use your common sense. Who do you trust?" Indeed, Ryan was at his least persuasive when discussing his Medicare proposals, and that was

probably not accidental. He said what he needed to say and moved on to something else. Smart strategy, but if seniors were watching, not a very comforting one.

Biden's other strongest moment came when discussing the economic downturn: "And, by the way, they talk about this Great Recession if it fell out of the sky, like, "Oh, my goodness, where did it come from?" It came from this man voting to put two wars on a credit card, to at the same time put a prescription drug benefit on the credit card, a trillion-dollar tax cut for the very wealthy. I was there. I voted against them. I said, no, we can't afford that." It is imperative that in the remaining debates, President Obama states that he is not recalling the events of 2008 to blame President Bush. He is recalling them because Mr. Romney's policies are so similar to those that got us into the economic mess in the first place. Narrative, narrative, narrative. Biden also scored during this exchange by pointing out that while Ryan complained about the ineffectiveness of the Stimulus Bill in 2009, he was all too happy to try to get his slice of the Stimulus pie for his district.

The question about the two men's Catholic faith was put strangely, tied exclusively to abortion. This was Ryan's worst moment. He did not respond immediately, but paused, seemingly swallowing hard before replying, as if he was thinking of what to say. That pause was not caused by any doubts about his stance. That pause was a political pause, the result of a concern about the political consequences of what he would say. And, while he seemed so enthusiastic about everything else he said, his wishy-washy demeanor and speech at this moment guaranteed that the issue will continue to be raised by the press in the days ahead. Americans are more ambivalent about abortion than candidates are allowed to be, but the GOP's chances of success require them to keep the focus on the anemic economy, and a day parsing Romney's position on abortion is another day lost for the Republicans. But, don't you wish someone from NCR had been there to do a good follow-up on the question about the two men's Catholicism?

What is clear in both debates is that the Democrats have not made a central, single sentence defense of some of their core policies. When the discussion comes to Medicare, why can't they say something like: "We do believe that Americans, having worked all their lives, are entitled to Medicare, that they are entitled not to have to fight with insurance companies, and we are a rich country that can afford this." When the discussion comes to the economy, why can't they say something like: "Everyone is for opportunity, but the fact is that for our opponents, opportunity trickles down from the super-rich to the rest of us and for us, we want to create a level playing field, to bring back fairness to the economy. We don't penalize the rich for being successful, we ask them to do their fair share to keep America moving forward." Only on foreign policy did Biden come close to this kind of succinct statement of an overarching narrative when he said, a couple of times, that the security of Afghanistan had to be won by Afghans not Americans.

So, who won? Most of the talking heads called it a draw. The CBS instant-poll had Biden winning by a wide margin, but the CNN instant-poll had Ryan winning by a whisker. I suspect the replay of the tapes of Biden's chortling while Ryan was speaking will cost the Democrats a few points in the days ahead. (If only Biden had explained himself, saying something like, "You know, listening to the Congressman talk about the economy makes me laugh because he never lets facts get in the way of his ideology, but there is nothing funny about what he is proposing.") And, this debate will have a very short shelf life as the next presidential debate is early next week. Increasingly, all the news coverage will focus on two things, the horse race and any gaffes. I suspect that the polling movement towards the GOP over the past week since the Denver presidential debate will stop now. Biden's performance was strong enough to guarantee that Democrats to not become disaffected and undecided voters do not start breaking towards the GOP. It is now up to President Obama to make the case he failed to make in Denver as to why he should be re-hired.

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