

US vice-presidential debate: A window on the right-wing character of an Obama-Biden administration

Patrick Martin
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Thursday night's vice presidential debate, having been heavily promoted by the media, was watched by the largest television audience to view such an encounter, larger than the number who watched the presidential debate September 26. The event itself, however, was notable mainly for its avoidance of any serious discussion of the biggest financial crisis in the United States since the Great Depression.

The media speculation about who "won" the debate, or whether the Republican candidate, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska, had survived what one commentator called "the most public IQ test ever administered," is largely pointless. The debate did little to change the outcome of the presidential election, in which the Democratic ticket of senators Barack Obama and Joseph Biden has now taken a sizeable lead.

The event did reveal the contours of a future Obama-Biden administration as one that will undertake whatever measures are required to defend the interests of the American corporate elite in both domestic and foreign policy. Biden, a 36-year veteran of the US Senate and longtime member of the Washington establishment, spoke more bluntly than had Obama in his debate last week with the Republican presidential candidate, Senator John McCain.

This was particularly the case on foreign policy, where Biden repeatedly sought to attack McCain and Palin from the right. He reiterated Obama's call for military strikes against Al Qaeda targets in Pakistan and for a greatly increased US military presence in Afghanistan. He denounced the Bush administration's policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, claiming that the White House had been too soft on Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah organization, both targets of Israeli

military action.

In response to one question from moderator Gwen Ifill of PBS, Biden boasted of his long experience as an advocate of US military interventions overseas, going back to Bosnia in the early 1990s, the US bombing of Serbia in 1999, and ongoing efforts to engineer a major military push in oil-rich Sudan, using the mass suffering in Darfur as a pretext.

On domestic policy, the debate was framed by the agreement of both parties on the \$700 billion bailout of Wall Street. Obama, McCain, and Biden all voted for the bailout legislation the day before the vice presidential debate, demonstrating that, despite the exchange of charges and countercharges, the two campaigns share a common standpoint.

The discussion of the bailout during the debate was brief and superficial. Despite McCain's vote for the plan, Palin sought to adapt rhetorically to the widespread popular opposition, making several references to Wall Street greed, predatory lenders, corrupt money managers, and so on.

Palin's anti-Wall Street demagoguery was combined with assertions that McCain represents "reform," although her use of the term remained an abstraction without the slightest content. It resembled Obama's call for "change," which has been shown in the course of the campaign to mean nothing more than changing the party in power.

For his part, Biden avoided any harsh anti-business rhetoric and made a vigorous defense of the bailout legislation, emphasizing that the Democratic Party and Barack Obama had considerable input into its provisions. He went out of his way to signal that an incoming Democratic administration will safeguard the

property and profits of the rich, notwithstanding some populist-sounding flourishes performed for electoral purposes.

On two occasions, he specifically rejected suggestions that the Democratic ticket was hostile to the interests of the wealthy. The first came when Ifill asked him whether Obama's proposal to raise taxes on those with incomes over \$250,000 a year could be considered "class warfare." Biden replied indignantly that it was simply a matter of "fairness."

Palin followed up this suggestion by declaring, "I do take issue with some of the principles there, with that redistribution of wealth principle that seems to be espoused by you."

Seemingly flustered by the attempt to link him in any way to a policy of wealth redistribution, Biden gave his most incoherent response of the debate: "Gwen, I don't know where to start. We don't call a redistribution in my neighborhood, Scranton, Claymont, Wilmington, the places I grew up, to give the-fair to say that not giving Exxon Mobil another \$4 billion tax cut this year, as John calls for-and giving it to middle class people to be able to pay to get their kids to college. We don't call that redistribution. We call that fairness, number one."

While Palin occasionally referred to the working class in the course of the debate, Biden was careful not to use that term, speaking always of the "middle class."

Both candidates espoused a completely stereotyped view of the working class, summed up in Palin's use of the term "Joe Sixpack," a vulgar label that defines the American worker as socially and politically backward, i.e., the worker as conceived of by the privileged elite and its political and media servants.

Despite the words from both candidates about their supposed identification with ordinary working people, Palin and Biden both belong to the upper crust of the American population, with family incomes of \$230,000 and \$250,000 a year, respectively. Their financial position is modest only in comparison with their running mates. Barack Obama is now a multimillionaire, while John McCain married an heiress whose holdings are estimated at over \$200 million.

One of the most significant aspects of the vice presidential debate was what was *not* discussed-Palin's ultra-right-wing views, grounded in an evangelical version of Christian fundamentalism. According to press accounts, Palin has expressed the belief that men

and dinosaurs shared the Earth 6,000 years ago (just after Biblical creation), and she advocates the teaching of creationism in public schools. She opposes abortion even in the case of rape and incest and rejects the separation of church and state. She has invoked religious criteria for political decisions in areas as disparate as going to war and building a pipeline.

Ifill chose not to make any inquiries in this area, other than a question about civil rights for gay couples, which Palin answered by espousing tolerance, a standpoint radically in conflict with the Republican Party program. Biden readily accepted Palin's supposed agreement on gay rights and did not pursue any of the other "social" issues that define the religious right.



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