

Palin and Biden Are Cordial but Pointed

di Patrick Healy

Gov. Sarah Palin used a steady grin, folksy manner and carefully scripted talking points to punch politely and persist politically at the vice-presidential debate on Thursday night, turning in a performance that her rival, Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., sought to undermine with cordially delivered but pointed criticism.

If the issues and positions were familiar to many viewers — on taxes and the economy, energy and oil, same-sex marriage, Iraq and Afghanistan — it was Ms. Palin's debut in a nationally televised debate that made for unusual theater. And Ms. Palin, a former small-town mayor, was unlike any other running mate in recent memory, using phrases like "heck of a lot" and "Main Streeters like me" to appeal to working-class and middle-class voters who feel abandoned by Washington.

Mr. Biden, a six-term senator who has twice sought the presidency, remained forceful and composed against an opponent who proved difficult to attack, given that she is a newcomer and a woman in an arena long dominated by men.

Focusing his attacks on the Republican presidential nominee, Senator John McCain, Mr. Biden only occasionally lost patience with Ms. Palin's debating tactics, as when she used Mr. Biden's words against him.

In the only vice-presidential debate of the campaign, at Washington University in St. Louis, Ms. Palin exceeded expectations in this highly anticipated face-off, though those expectations were low after she had stumbled in recent television interviews. She succeeded by not failing in any obvious way. She mostly reverted to and repeated talking points, like referring to Mr. McCain as a "maverick" and the Republican ticket as a "team of mavericks," while not necessarily quelling doubts among voters about her depth of knowledge.

Instead Ms. Palin emphasized her down-home qualities and her membership in the middle class, a group that she and Mr. Biden sparred over repeatedly during their 90-minute encounter.

"Go to a kids' soccer game on Saturday and turn to any parent there on the sideline and ask them, 'How are you feeling about the economy?' " Ms. Palin said. "And I'll betcha you're going to hear some fear in that parent's voice, fear regarding the few investments that some of us have in the stock market — did we just take a major hit with those investments?"

Mr. Biden, standing at a lectern a few feet from Ms. Palin's, replied with one of his characteristic strategies in the debate: portraying Mr. McCain as unaware or unmoved by voters' problems and as an ally of the deeply unpopular President Bush.

"It was two Mondays ago John McCain said at 9 o'clock in the morning that the fundamentals of the economy were strong," Mr. Biden said. "Eleven o'clock that same day, two Mondays ago, John McCain said that we have an economic crisis. That doesn't make John McCain a bad guy, but it does point out he's out of touch. Those folks on the sidelines knew that two months ago."

Rarely has a vice-presidential showdown been packed with such political importance. Ms. Palin's unsteady performances in recent interviews turned this debate into can't-miss television, but they have also raised questions — from conservatives, among others — about the soundness of Mr. McCain's judgment in picking a relative newcomer as his running mate. Recent polls have

suggested that his shifting statements on the economic bailout talks in Washington have not reassured some of these conservatives, raising the stakes for Ms. Palin to deliver steady, informed answers and repartee in the debate.

Mr. Biden's aides had their own concerns before the debate, worrying that a single gaffe by him could shift the onus off Ms. Palin. They worried that even the slightest miscalibration of his tone, body language and mien could imply condescension or worse toward Ms. Palin and become the story of the night.

With both candidates keeping their cool and addressing each other politely with honorifics — Mr. Biden said “Sarah Palin” at one point and then correct himself with “Governor Palin” — there was a certain symmetry to the debate.

Both candidates have a son preparing to serve in Iraq. Every time Mr. Biden seemed to criticize Mr. Bush, Ms. Palin would mention “mavericks.” And when Mr. Biden criticized the Bush administration at one point, Ms. Palin replied: “Say it ain’t so, Joe. There you go again, pointing backwards again.”

The two candidates have both faced personal challenges, too: Ms. Palin’s baby son has Down syndrome, while Mr. Biden, in the 1970s, lost his wife and daughter in a car accident. As he recalled that time and the near-death of one of his sons, Mr. Biden briefly choked up — the one moment of raw emotion in an otherwise stable debate between two fairly disciplined candidates.

“The notion that, somehow, because I’m a man, I don’t know what it’s like to raise two kids alone, I don’t know what it’s like to have a child you’re not sure is going to make it,” Mr. Biden said. “I understand as well as, with all due respect, the governor or anybody else, what it’s like for those people sitting around that kitchen table. And guess what? They’re looking for help.”

The extraordinary interest in Ms. Palin’s performance elevated the debate into nothing less than a cultural event. Viewers flocked to their Facebook and MySpace pages to critique her answers, her poise and even her hair; others lamented Senator Barack Obama’s choice of Mr. Biden instead of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, an agile debater who could go gender-to-gender against Ms. Palin. Even a “Palin Bingo” card was in circulation on the Internet, with participants told to check off trademark words of Ms. Palin’s when she uttered them, like “bad guys,” “pro-life” and “mayor.”

If Ms. Palin suffered in rapid-fire news media interviews in which she was the sole person in the spotlight, she fared much better at Thursday’s debate, where half of the questions were posed first to Mr. Biden — which, in turn, meant that Ms. Palin had 90 seconds to prepare her answer or riposte. Indeed, in her political campaigns in Alaska, Ms. Palin came across as confident and on point, as she did for the most part against Mr. Biden.

“I do respect your years in the U.S. Senate, but I think that Americans are craving something new and different and that new energy and that new commitment that’s going to come with reform,” Ms. Palin said. “I think that’s why we need to send the maverick from the Senate and put him in the White House, and I’m happy to join him there.”

Although Ms. Palin name-dropped several times, presumably to show fluency in foreign affairs, she did not always drop the right name. At one point, she referred to the top American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David D. McKiernan, as “McClellan.”

Ms. Palin also tended to seize on a single point or phrase of Mr. Biden or the moderator, Gwen Ifill of PBS, and veer off on her own direction in her 90-second answer. Asked whether the poor economy would cause Mr. McCain to cut his spending plans, Ms. Palin picked up on Mr. Biden’s discussion of energy to criticize Mr. Obama’s positions on energy and talk about her fights against oil companies in Alaska.

In response to a question about her views on an exit strategy in Iraq, Ms. Palin championed Mr. McCain's support for the "surge" of American troops there; hailed "a great American hero," Gen. David H. Petraeus; and attacked Mr. Obama's Senate vote against federal financing for troops in Iraq, which Mr. Biden also once criticized.

After that, Mr. Biden turned to the moderator and said, "Gwen, with all due respect, I didn't hear a plan."

"Your plan is a white flag of surrender in Iraq," Ms. Palin shot back. "You guys opposed the surge, the surge works, Barack Obama still can't admit that the surge works." (Mr. Obama has said in recent weeks that the surge had worked beyond most people's expectations.)

Fifty-five minutes into the debate, Mr. Biden seemed to lose his patience after Ms. Palin recalled, as she had a couple of times before, that Mr. Biden had praised Mr. McCain's views or actions in the past and added, "I respect you for acknowledging that."

Mr. Biden replied by linking Mr. McCain with Mr. Bush more crisply than he had done previously in the debate.

"The issue is how different is John McCain's policy going to be than George Bush's," Mr. Biden said. "I haven't heard how his policy is going to be different on Iran than George Bush's. I haven't heard how his policy is going to be different with Israel than George Bush's. I haven't heard how his policy in Afghanistan is going to be different than George Bush's. I haven't heard how his policy in Pakistan is going to be different than George Bush's."

"It may be, but so far it is the same as George Bush's."

Mr. Biden also turned tougher in the final half-hour after Ms. Palin had, several times, referred to Mr. McCain as a "maverick."

"He's not been a maverick when it comes to education — he has not supported tax cuts and significant changes for people being able to send their kids to college," Mr. Biden said. "He's not been a maverick on the war. He's not been a maverick on virtually anything that generally affects the things that people really talk about."