

NEW YORK TIMES - The Running Mates Debate

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During the final summation in last night's vice-presidential debate, John Edwards focused on the new Kerry campaign theme: that a vote for George Bush and Dick Cheney would mean "four more years of the same." And Mr. Cheney, when his turn came, said it was important to re-elect the president so he could keep doing what he has been doing. It was a rare moment of agreement.

Like the presidential foreign policy debate that preceded it, the clash of the vice-presidential candidates was 90 minutes of serious talk about the issues.

It was also very hard-fought - the contenders managed to be remarkably aggressive for two men who were sitting next to each other at a small table. Mr. Cheney called Mr. Edwards's remarks so thick with misrepresentation that he hardly knew how to respond. Mr. Edwards, when talking about the economy, said, "Mr. Vice President, I don't think the country can take four more years of this kind of experience."

Mr. Cheney, who won over many voters four years ago with his grandfatherly demeanor during a debate with Joseph Lieberman, seemed tired and angry. He was particularly dyspeptic when he responded to criticism of his relationship with Halliburton by claiming that Mr. Edwards had a bad attendance record in the Senate.

Mr. Edwards is normally known for his wide grin and boyish appearance, but he was serious and tough last night. If his main task was to show that he could stand up to the older and more experienced vice president, he did everything he needed to do, especially during the discussion of foreign policy - the area that is supposed to be his weak suit. Mr. Edwards was particularly on point when Mr. Cheney attacked John Kerry as a lawmaker who had consistently voted against military expenditures. Much of the arms spending Mr. Kerry voted against, Mr. Edwards noted, was for the same programs Mr. Cheney had fought to cut when he was secretary of defense.

When talk turned to Iraq, viewers must have wondered whether the two men were discussing the same war. Mr. Cheney stuck to the Bush administration's mantra, insisting that the invasion had been carried out for all the right reasons and that things were going well in Iraq, and very well indeed in Afghanistan. Mr. Edwards described a war that was badly planned, launched on the basis of incorrect intelligence and turned into a morass that sucks American attention away from a struggling Afghanistan and the war on terror.

Mr. Cheney had by far the harder job because even loyal supporters of the administration acknowledge that things are not going all that well overseas. It was hard to seem credible when he insisted repeatedly that the Bush administration had done "exactly the right thing" in Iraq and that if he had to do it again, he would recommend the "same course of action."

One of the most poignant moments in the evening occurred when Mr. Cheney, who has a gay daughter, was asked about the administration's support for a constitutional amendment against gay marriage. He danced gingerly around the topic, expressing loyalty to the president without indicating that he really agreed with him. After Mr. Edwards said he admired the vice president's support for his daughter, Mr. Cheney declined to discuss the matter further, limiting himself simply to thanking his opponent for his comments.

That moment of congeniality aside, if those famous few undecided voters were waiting for a real debate about different positions and philosophies, they got it last night.