



The smirk that didn't work

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No matter how contentious Thursday night's debate between vice presidential candidates Paul Ryan and Joe Biden appeared, no matter how different the policies seemed, ultimately there was very little difference in what they said.

Both men defended U.S. military presence in places that don't threaten American national security. Neither man seriously addressed ways to tackle the debt or cut the massive federal budget. Rep. Ryan criticized the stimulus, only to have Vice President Biden remind him of his letter to the administration begging for stimulus grants for his Wisconsin congressional district. Both men, time and time again, talked about ways to empower the government, rather than empowering the American people to address problems.

It was clear that Biden believed that government has a primary role in choosing the health care, education and retirement available to Americans. Ryan, who professes otherwise, certainly failed to articulate those differences in a meaningful way.

Biden's attack on personal retirement accounts was ill-informed and untrue, but Ryan was unwilling to forcefully defend an individual's right to control his own retirement decisions. If he was quick on his feet, Ryan could have pointed out that, if "workers who retired in 2011 had been allowed to invest the employee half of the Social Security payroll tax over their working lifetime, they would retire with more income than if they relied on Social Security," according to the Cato Institute.

The biggest difference wasn't policy, it was demeanor. And that's what this debate will be remembered for -- Vice President Biden's overzealous and, often, disrespectful conduct.

Ultimately, the clear winner was the dentist who glued on Biden's veneers. He got a 90-minute ad for his work as the vice president smiled in amusement, contempt, disbelief, confusion and bewilderment. It seemed the only time Biden's smirk wasn't apparent were the times he interrupted Rep. Ryan or tried to tell the debate's moderator, Martha Raddatz, how to do her job.

Debates are about memorable moments, and this one lacked any particular knockout lines or outrageous gaffes. If anything, the debate will go down in history for its one

annoying constant, Biden's grin, which, like Al Gore's endless sighing during a 2000 presidential debate against George W. Bush, might have worked on a more limited basis, but ultimately got very old very fast.

The night, however, wasn't without a major mistake. Vice President Joe Biden claimed that the administration wasn't aware of requests for more security in Libya before the Sept. 11 attacks on the U.S. mission in Benghazi. That statement, according to Foreign Policy magazine's website, contradicted "two State Department officials and the former head of diplomatic security in Libya." Biden's attempt to brush off the administration's culpability in the deaths of a U.S. ambassador and three other diplomats is just another in a long line of lies, contradictions and misinformation about the Benghazi attack.

Biden's most compelling point during the debate -- and there were a scant few from which to choose -- was that Iran is simply not a legitimate nuclear threat now, or in the near future. It has yet to produce a nuclear warhead or the delivery system for the nonexistent warhead.

It seems that for Romney and Ryan -- along with many other Republicans -- the threat of a nuclear Iran is a convenient narrative, even if that narrative is rooted more in fantasy than reality. After all, it allows them to justify their resistance to trimming America's bloated defense budget, which, of course, has to please the defense contractors who make up a large portion of the party's donor base for campaign contributions.

Biden managed to continue one constant rallying point for the administration; the idea that the Obama administration saved the U.S. car industry and, if he had been president, Romney would've let Detroit go bankrupt. It's too bad that both Romney and Ryan remain unwilling to point out the fact that, by trying to save Detroit and so many other industries, Obama let America go bankrupt.

If the debate was measured on biggest American flag lapel pin, Rep. Ryan won. If the debate was scored on condescending chortles, Vice President Biden dominated.

In the end, it's hard to believe that Americans will be better off either way.