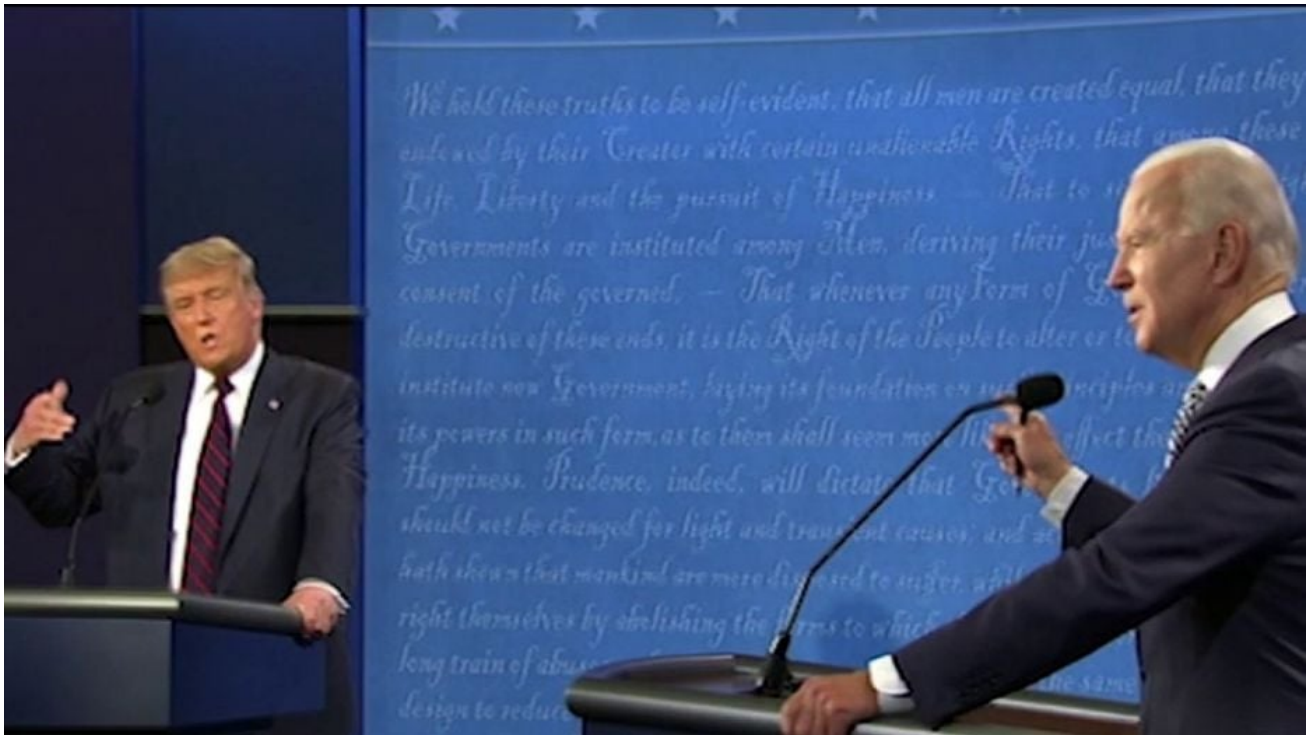


Trump Wins Round One, Barely

by Conrad Black



There was no clear winner in Tuesday's presidential debate and the country was the loser.

President Trump could have won decisively if he had just followed Napoleon's famous advice not to "interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake." The moderator, Fox News Channel's Chris Wallace, did an excellent professional job largely without bias, and undoubtedly more fairly than those who will conduct the next two debates, but he didn't come down hard enough on the interruptions. If Trump had just allowed Wallace to follow up on his questions of Biden, the former vice president would have stumbled badly. Trump's irritating interruptions created an incoherent cacophony that enabled Biden to escape severe embarrassment.

On balance, Trump almost certainly won, but a very few viewers would have had the perseverance to listen carefully enough to note that Trump defended his own record quite capably, and

Biden was very shaky and imprecise both in criticism of his opponent and in explaining why he should be president. As was expected, the fact that he got through 90 minutes in the ring with Trump without becoming incomprehensibly muddled, empowered his supporters to claim that in limping out intact, he had won.

For those who followed it carefully or replay it, it will be clear not only that Trump is a much more forceful and articulate man than Joe Biden, but that he also clearly won the argument, insofar as it could be perceived within the tumult of interruptions.

The Democrats can claim the partial victory of their candidate having survived to fight another day, but the Democratic campaign—which has consisted exclusively of nonstop defamation of the president with a new false allegation every week—was discredited by Biden’s failure to make any of his accusations stick, or even sound like he believed them himself.

These Foolish Things . . .

For those who want a strong president, Trump won; for those who do not want an overbearing president, he did not win and to the extent that he did not win, perhaps Biden did.

But Biden could not refute Trump’s strong argument in favor of the COVID-19 shutdown that he sponsored and against Biden’s predisposition to shut the economy down again. Biden did not reply to the question of whether he favored ending the Senate filibuster and packing the Supreme Court. He did not make a strong argument against the confirmation of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the high court. He was unable to give any evidence whatsoever of support for his campaign from any law enforcement organization; he denied the charges of his son’s corruption in Ukraine and China, a subject that he invited Trump to take up by mentioning his other son who was a decorated combat veteran.

Biden had no answer to allegations about the Trump-Russian collusion fraud, of which he was to some degree aware from the start, and was not altogether successful in trying to straddle between the militant African Americans in his party and opposition to mob violence. He was reduced to saying that "Antifa is just an idea," and that sociologists and psychologists should accompany police in their general tasks of law enforcement. He will have disappointed the Left of his party, announcing (unconvincingly) "I am the Democratic Party now."

But they now have nowhere else to go. The best he could do for them was to allege that there was "systemic injustice" in the country. He made no effort to defend his media allies and protectors from Trump's dismissive attacks.

Biden denied that he was in favor of the Green New Deal even though his vice-presidential candidate Senator Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) cosponsored it and he presented a harebrained proposal for giving \$20 billion to Brazil to help reverse the reduction of the Amazon rainforest. He completely bobbled his attempt to explain his healthcare plans and the impossible fiscal burden of enactment of the Biden-Sanders taxing and spending proposals. Trump effectively exposed the Democrats' panic campaign on the coronavirus but was careful to be solicitous of victims.

The Record, For What It's Worth

For anyone who analyzes the exchanges at all, it is obvious that Biden continued the Democratic campaign of incitement of Trump-hate. He called Trump "a clown," "a liar," "a racist," "the worst president in U.S. history," accused him of being "unpresidential," told him to "shut up," and had no answer, after saying the Trump was not "smart," to Trump's references to Biden's false claims to academic distinction in a university he did not, in fact, attend.

Biden's charges that Trump was trying to prevent millions of people from voting, and was responsible for killer floods and fires and hurricanes because of his climate policy were just rubbish. Trump explained his opposition to Critical Race Theory effectively and was also plausible in the elaboration of his reservations about sending out ballots to the entire voters' list in many states. But Trump failed to raise a number of points that would have been of great assistance to him.

He rebutted the argument that he was a racist but failed to mention his Opportunity Zones program, his aid to historically African American universities, and the fact that he had produced full employment and more swiftly rising incomes for the lowest 20 percent of income earners than for the top 10 percent. He did not mention the southern border wall or the 90 percent reduction of illegal immigration. Neither did he mention Biden's opposition to the killing of Osama bin Laden, and while he chastised him for his environmental nonsense, he did not make the point that enactment of the Democratic green new deal program would eliminate at least 7 million jobs in the oil and related industries.

Trump did not reject white supremacists as promptly as he should have done and, when he did, it was scarcely audible amid the contending voices of all three participants speaking at once. He was reasonably effective in rejecting the myth that he had ever endorsed the Klan and the Nazis at Charlottesville in 2017.

Raising the Game . . . Maybe

If it could be measured in points as in a prizefight, Trump was the victor, but few voters will do that and those who disliked Trump would not have been persuaded to soften their views and will be relieved that Biden survived.

Those who have a positive opinion of Biden knew his

limitations and he did not exceed them. But it was an unedifying spectacle: I suspect Biden's vagueness, his scrutiny of notes, and his outrageous insults of the president personally will be found more unsatisfactory than Trump's endless interruptions and his general belligerence. Trump is the one who needed to win and while he marginally did so, it is unlikely that his performance will provide him any sort of breakthrough. He dodged the tradition of an incumbent president losing the first debate, as Carter (1980), Reagan (1984), George H.W. Bush (1992), and Obama (2012), did; my guess is that Trump will gain one or two points in most polls, but I do not predict that with any confidence, and it remains a very close election.

Wallace did his best, but he should have absolutely disallowed any interruptions in the two minutes allowed to each candidate to respond, and that practice should be stipulated for the balance of the debates. This extremely important and very nasty campaign is unlikely to become any more civilized or intellectually distinguished.

One longs for Kennedy and Nixon, civilized, well-informed, highly articulate and courteous Navy combat veterans in their 40s. But Trump set out in 2015 to overthrow the entire political establishment, and he can raise his game. I doubt that Biden can.

First published in