

Where Things Stand After the Las Vegas Debate

After watching the Las Vegas Democratic debate, it's becoming less and less clear how the Democrats plan to defeat, or even challenge, President Donald Trump this fall. As a conservative Republican watching just for kicks, the debate was amazing -- tons of drama and entertainment value. But if you are a Democrat committed to getting rid of Trump, it was probably not so much fun. In fact, it had to have been depressing to watch. There were fireworks and interesting storylines, but when the smoke cleared, who was left to take on Trump?

Sen. Elizabeth Warren came out scorching against Michael Bloomberg: "So I'd like to talk about who we're running against, a billionaire who calls women 'fat broads' and 'horse-faced lesbians.' And, no, I'm not talking about Donald Trump. I'm talking about Mayor Bloomberg," she said.

Bloomberg's response? Not a word. He just took it. It left you wondering: Who advised Bloomberg to get into this debate? Bloomberg was chugging along, gaining ground in the polls. His unprecedented campaign, consisting of an advertising onslaught and nothing else, was actually working. But then someone decided Bloomberg should pay off the Democratic National Committee to change their debate qualification rules so he could participate. Besides the obvious corruption of allowing Bloomberg, one of the committee's biggest donors, to change a policy that was not changed for a sitting U.S. senator like Cory Booker, it's pretty clear this strategy backfired on Bloomberg. He could have and should have used the DNC's debate rules as an excuse for staying out longer.

Bloomberg took hits all night for his stop-and-frisk policies, his tax returns, his Republican past, his wealth and a host of other issues. On his record with women Bloomberg looked especially bad -- not-ready-for-prime-time bad. He looked guilty, nervous and flat-out unprepared for the onslaught he faced. Like many other powerful people, he appears to live a life where he just isn't challenged very often. Bloomberg had a shocked "I can't believe anyone's talking to me like this" look on his face for most of the night. It was a little like the look on Jeb Bush's face when Trump first went after him during the 2016 debates.

There was complete malpractice by Bloomberg's massive staff in preparing him for this debate. The overall impression was a guy who's just not ready for such a big stage. Bloomberg's huge bankroll -- along with the desire of many Democrats to find an electable alternative to Trump -- gives him plenty of opportunity to recover, but this was not a good start.

Joe Biden is becoming a sad afterthought. He's slid so much the others barely even bother attacking him. He's perilously close to becoming the "Saturday Night Live" caricature of himself. There's no coming back when you cross that line. Ask Sarah Palin.

As Biden slips away, it's important to remember that Barack Obama could have helped him at any point -- but refused. Biden was Obama's loyal junior partner for eight years. Biden was never treated very well by Team Obama, a pattern that's continuing now. Obama clearly doesn't think Biden's up to the job, and based on his performance to date, it's hard to disagree.

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Unless you think Pete Buttigieg, Elizabeth Warren or Amy Klobuchar have a real shot at the nomination, that leaves Sen. Bernie Sanders. Is America ready for a socialist president who honeymooned in the Soviet Union? Sadly, that may be a real possibility. Sanders helped himself a lot in Wednesday's debate. He has a coherent worldview, and at a time when every financial, academic, political and media institution in America is endangered by failure and corruption, Sanders' tear-it-all-down attitude appeals to the public more than that of any other candidate. When Sanders unloaded on Bloomberg, he spoke for a growing number of Americans who see our system as rigged:

"We have a grotesque and immoral distribution of wealth and income. Mike Bloomberg owns more wealth than the bottom 125 million Americans. That's wrong. That's immoral ... We have enormous problems facing this country, and we cannot continue seeing a situation where, in the last three years, billionaires in this country saw an \$850 billion increase in their wealth -- congratulations, Mr. Bloomberg -- but the average American last year saw less than a 1% increase in his or her income. That's wrong."

Sanders, along with Trump and unlike all the establishment candidates, has a feel for the frustrations of regular Americans. But in the back of their minds, Democratic primary voters know that Sanders is risky. Going with your heart and voting for Bernie could usher in four more years of Trump. Interestingly, as first Biden and now maybe Bloomberg falter, voters may decide that Sanders isn't much more of a risk after all. The Vegas debate certainly suggested as much. Does anyone think Biden or Bloomberg can debate Trump after their performances? Sanders can. He's a long shot, but amazingly, he may be their best chance at victory.

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