

Clinton Proved Why She's the Front-Runner in Dem Debate

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden faced an altered political dynamic on Wednesday after Hillary Clinton reasserted her command of the Democratic Party race during a debate that may have left little room for him to run.

Clinton, 67, was widely hailed by analysts as turning in a nimble, effective performance on Tuesday night, perhaps easing the fears of some Democrats fretting that the flap over her use of a private email server while in the Obama administration was torpedoing her candidacy.

In doing so, she at once may have dampened calls for Biden to make a belated entrance into the race, while also blunting the threat from insurgent candidate Bernie Sanders, a 74-year-old U.S. senator from Vermont and self-described democratic socialist.

"If you're a Hillary supporter and you were worried for whatever reason, you should feel very good about yourself," said Rodell Mollineau, a Democratic strategist who attended the debate in Las Vegas. "This is the kind of debate that helps build momentum."

Sanders, Clinton's top rival among declared presidential candidates, was handed the opportunity by debate moderators to assail her over the email issue. Instead, he dismissed the controversy as trivial, drawing an ovation from the crowd and shoving the spotlight away from Clinton's most profound political weakness.

For Biden, 72, who continues to ponder a bid for the presidency in the November 2016 election, the evening served as a reminder of how tenacious Clinton, steeled by scores of debates in her 2008 presidential run and four years as

secretary of state, can be as a candidate.

Reaching for Progressives, Moderates

At times Clinton seemed to be reaching out both to the progressives in her party more likely to back Sanders and the moderates who may prefer Biden.

She went toe-to-toe with Sanders over gun control, addressed income inequality, and advocated for more liberal family-leave policies. At the same time, she refused to go along with Sanders' call to break up Wall Street banks, reiterated her support of the Patriot Act, and said she would not hesitate to use military force if necessary, at times obliquely criticizing President Barack Obama's White House – and by proxy, Biden – for failing to stand up to Russian President Vladimir Putin and for doing too little with regard to the civil war in Syria.

"I think Biden probably has less room (for a bid)," said Brad Bannon, a Democratic strategist in Washington. "People had questions about how well Hillary can handle herself. I thought she performed very well."

The evening may have also exposed Sanders' limitations. As a candidate, he has made populist economic themes central to his campaign, almost to the exclusion of other issues. His discomfort on guns – his home state of Vermont is protective of gun rights – and with foreign policy seemed evident. At one point, Sanders loudly protested he is not a pacifist.

"He didn't handle himself well on guns or on foreign policy," Bannon said. "He seemed flustered and defensive. Americans want someone calm and collected when dealing with a crisis."

Candidate Jim Webb, the former senator from Virginia who also took part in the debate, may have delivered the most scathing indictment of Sanders' candidacy, telling him at one point, "Bernie, I don't think the revolution is going to come."

Still, Sanders' liberal base likely saw little to prompt a second thought about supporting him. "It was a good night for him too," said Stephanie Taylor, co-founder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, who also praised Clinton.

She said the scrutiny of Sanders' positions on guns and national security demonstrated his viability as a top-tier candidate and alternative to Clinton. "People were attacking him like he is the front-runner."

If anything, that may mean that when Biden takes a fresh look at the Democratic field, he may see that Clinton has solidified her standing with establishment Democrats while Sanders has kept his grip on populist progressives, leaving even less space for him.

Whether that ultimately affects his decision remains anyone's guess. {eo}

© 2015 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.