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COLUMNIST

Dem Establishment Overcomes Hand-Wringing to Close Ranks Behind Biden

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The Democratic Party establishment got what it wanted — a presidential nominee who's a charter member of the club, knows the secret handshake, reveres the old school necktie and — most importantly — as President can be relied upon to consult with and seek the wisdom and counsel of the entrenched establishment leaders.

Their relief is palpable now that former vice president Joe Biden is a lock to emerge from the Milwaukee convention in July as the chosen one to take on President Donald Trump.

Less than a month ago, the establishment was panic-stricken when Vermont's fire-breathing socialist Senator Bernie Sanders surged into the lead and posed an existential threat to the establishment's survival.

Biden performed poorly in candidates' debates, rambling through often incoherent responses and raising grave doubts about his age-related intellectual agility. Forgetting what state he was in or who he shared the platform with was evidence, his opponents said, of a man in decline.

He was battered into a fourth-place finish in the Iowa caucuses, fifth in the New Hampshire primary and teetered on the ragged edge of irrelevancy.

In the face of this crisis, the establishment overcame its hand-wringing paralysis and closed ranks behind Biden. His outlook turned in the South Carolina primary and he went on to storm through the subsequent primaries, devastating Sanders, piling up double digit blowout victory margins and chasing the competition out of the race altogether.

Suddenly, speculation about a brokered convention turned into speculation about vice presidential selection.

Sanders was on the ropes and whatever glimmer of hope existed that he could climb back into contention was extinguished when the coronavirus epidemic forced a virtual shutdown of campaign activities. Any potential for a rebound has vanished.

The packed arenas and auditoriums which fueled the energy and enthusiasm of his supporters have been foreclosed by the exigencies of dealing with the pandemic.

Biden has rolled up nearly 1,200 delegates, nearly 400 more than Sanders and — in the wake of three more lopsided losses yesterday — Sanders announced he will spend the next several weeks assessing his candidacy.

For failing candidates, "assessing" is a euphemism for figuring out a way to gracefully exit with dignity intact.

He's under enormous pressure to withdraw and free the party to turn its resources toward building a strategy for victory rather than drag out a pointless contest and the hard feelings and ill will it produces.

Sanders and his dedicated army of supporters will leave the national convention as embittered as they were four years ago when they believed — with some justification — that the Democratic National committee had rigged the primary process to favor Hillary Clinton and cheated him of the nomination.

They will attempt to exert influence over the party platform, urging and fighting for inclusion of the agenda Sanders laid out.

There may be some compromises reached to mollify the progressives, but most party platforms are documents which disappear down a black hole before the sound of the gavel falling to adjourn the convention fades.

The realization that this was Sanders' last hurrah only adds to the disappointment. He will reach his early 80's by 2024 and America's voters will shrink from supporting a presidential candidate closer to 90 than to 70.

The party establishment can breathe easier with Biden's nomination assured. Their immediate fear was that Sanders at the top of the ticket would result in election day disaster, that his unabashed socialism and far left platform would be so unacceptable to Americans that the prospects of Trump carrying upwards of 40 states and an Electoral College landslide was real. The result would be an overwhelmingly Republican Congress and a Trump stranglehold on the national government for at least four years.

Simply put the establishment argued that Biden is electable, Sanders is not. The former vice president provides comfort and eases fears on the part of the party leadership. Despite a leftward shift on some issues to deal with the demands of aggressive progressive elements of the party and blunt criticism leveled by Sanders and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, he's left himself sufficient flexibility to slide back to the moderate center with little difficulty.

Beyond that, however, and more critical to the establishment is their access to a Biden Administration would be preserved. Their telephone calls would be returned, lines of communication would remain open and their voices would be heard at the highest level of government.

Sanders' campaign pledged to drive the establishment out of the government temple, restricting, if not eliminating, access and eroding their influence.

They'd be replaced by a new and younger generation of activists and ideologues who viewed them with undisguised contempt and blamed them for all that was wrong with government.

Whether Sanders' supporters vent their frustrations on Biden come November by refusing to vote at all or skipping over the presidential contest remains to be seen.

There's little argument that Biden stands a better chance than Sanders against Trump, although underestimating the president can be risky. Just ask all those folks who spent October 2016 rehearsing the proper pronunciation of "Madame President."

The party establishment demonstrated that, when threatened, it can summon up its power, defend itself and turn aside a serious threat to its dominance.

The Sanders army learned "The Empire Strikes Back" is more than a motion picture.

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