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COLUMNIST

Covid-9 Crisis Deprives Biden of a Big Campaign Moment

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In ordinary times, the past two weeks would have been a campaign highlight reel for former Vice President Joe Biden.

First, his closest — but rapidly fading — competitor, Vermont socialist Sen. Bernie Sanders abandoned his quest for the nomination and endorsed Biden.

Sanders' announcement was followed a few days later by former President Barack Obama's endorsement, a not unexpected development but a valuable one nonetheless.

To Biden's dismay, these are not ordinary times.

The national struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically altered American life and completely upended traditional politics.

What might have been major national media events with Biden locking arms with Sanders and Obama in a vivid display of party unity to cheering packed houses fell victim to the national lockdown and prohibition on public gatherings.

The Sanders and Obama endorsement announcements were carried out by video, a comparatively sterile atmosphere lacking the enthusiasm and fire of orchestrated public appearances.

Any potential to quickly capitalize on the endorsements with a barnstorming national tour featuring Biden and Obama is now out of the question, robbing the former vice president of massive media coverage and a reminder to Americans that he sat at the ex-president's right hand for eight years, unique and immensely valuable qualifications for occupying the White House in his own right.

The Democratic convention with its free four-day televised celebration of the candidate and merciless pummeling of the sitting president is in peril as well as consideration turns toward a virtual gathering rather than a raucous 30,000 strong extravaganza.

How much of the six months remaining until election day will be free for traditional campaigning is unclear.

The pandemic has shown early and small signs of slowing, but vast regions of the nation face long recovery times.

While Biden's campaign will be hampered by this new political normal, he faces another challenge as well in overcoming the misgivings of the dedicated Sanders supporters, deeply disappointed their candidate fell short yet again and who remain unpersuaded that Biden shares their vision of government.

Biden, they feel, is the epitome of the old and out of touch party establishment, much as Hillary Clinton was four years ago. Many are still smarting over what they are convinced was a primary process rigged to cheat Sanders out of the nomination.

Some have already expressed reluctance to cast their lot with Biden until he professes a commitment to their agenda — unequivocal support for a Medicare for all system but also, among others, forgiveness of student debt, tuition free higher education, reform of the tax code to eliminate income inequality, citizenship for undocumented immigrants and abolition of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.

Sanders' campaign press spokesperson, for instance, has publicly refused to endorse Biden and New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — the acknowledged leader of the progressives — has been less than enthusiastic. Her pledge to support the party's nominee was tempered by her remarks that she intended to "wait and see" how the Biden campaign evolved.

Ocasio-Cortez stunned and infuriated the Biden campaign when she described as a "legitimate" topic of discussion the allegations of sexual assault lodged against the former vice president by a Senate staffer who claimed she was victimized by Biden in 1993.

His campaign has vigorously denied the accusation, but it has achieved some measure of currency in the media. The Ocasio-Cortez comment was impossible for the media to ignore and produced additional accusation/denial coverage much to the chagrin of the Biden campaign.

Biden moved perceptibly to the left during the primary campaign season, but not sufficiently so to satisfy those in the Sanders orbit.

The party establishment feared that, if nominated, the Sanders agenda would surely be rejected nationally as far too radical and work to the benefit of Trump's re-election.

Biden is in a position to attempt to thread the needle — keeping the centrist establishment satisfied while, at the same time, luring the Sanders progressives into the fold.

And, he must accomplish it in a truncated time frame and in competition with a president who continues to command an inordinate share of media time and attention and not constrained by a need to unify his party.

Clearly, the Sanders wing will not defect to the president. They may dislike Biden, but they detest Trump.

They can, though, respond unenthusiastically and refuse to mobilize or provide the ground troops crucial to any campaign; i.e., door to door visits, voter registration sign-ups, get out the vote drives, etc.

In the end, Biden may get their vote, but Sanders will retain their hearts.

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