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Joe's Big Problem

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As I watched a recent interview, it struck me that Joe Biden has the toughest job in politics.

Questioned by the affable, but persistent John Roberts on CNN, Biden did what he does best. He talked. He talked past the answer. He talked about things other than the question. And he talked fast -- all the time with that "I know so much more about this than you do, I can't believe you're interrupting me with questions" smirk on his face.

That will be a problem come debate time.

True, new polls say that America's fascination with Sarah Palin is starting to feel a bit like thinking you have found "the one" -- only to realize he bites his toenails. Her Mrs. Smith goes to Washington narrative isn't holding up all that well to a careful examination of the plot lines.

She fires people who cross her (or anger her NRA supporters). The idyllic small town she created for the convention is actually a gritty and crime-plagued place that is the meth capital of Alaska -- where you can find a bar to serve up liquor until 5 a.m. and, if she and the NRA had their way, where you could walk in with a pistol in your boot. And she believes that if she says "thanks but no thanks" often enough, people will forget she supported the now infamous bridge and even after lack of congressional support forced her to kill it, she kept the money.

However:

In an election that, right now, is a statistical dead heat, there is a free-floating contingent of female supporters -- including, incredibly enough, former Hillary backers who say they are willing to ignore the fact that she and Clinton share positions on nothing and will vote for her because she's a woman.

The debates are looming, and those women will be watching.

Obama vs. McCain should be Kennedy versus Nixon -- casual confidence versus sweaty upper lip. Obama lives for this kind of thing. McCain will have to operate without his trusty notes and must try to stop baring his teeth in that oddly unsettling approximation of a smile.

It will be the vice presidential debates that produce the drama. On paper, it should be a replay of Lloyd Bensten toying with hapless Dan Quayle like a cat with a cricket.

Even after intense weeks of charm-school and flash cards sessions, Palin can't go with Biden fact for fact -- on anything. She can't out-debate a guy who plays in the majors.

That is his biggest advantage and his biggest problem.

If he goes all Biden on her, two things could happen. Some of those free-floating women will resent him slapping around their hockey mom. Others will find virtue in the fact that this brave frontier girl who took on the big boys with pluck, grit and common sense (see narrative) doesn't know as much as this mouthy Washington insider, a member of a club that has an approval rating even lower than George W. Bush.

If she holds her own, she wins. If Biden attacks, she wins. It's possible she could win simply by not looking intimidated.

The points for knowledge and experience are already on the board. What he has to do is convey them in a very un-Bidenesque way.

A suggestion, Senator, if I may: There is a big difference between a conversation and a lecture. Use your humor. Showcase your experience. But remember these words: listen, answer, stop. Also: don't make a face when she says nuclear.