

The Bloomberg Is Off the Rose

The former New York City mayor remains the Democrats' best bet, but his bantam rooster-moneybags routine is off to a rocky start and at this point he is no match for Trump and his army of supporters and strong record in office.

by Conrad Black



Instant dismissals of Michael Bloomberg's Wednesday night performance in the Democratic debate as a disaster are exaggerations of what happened. But there is no question the reality of him was a let-down to such an idolatrous, \$400 million advertising build-up. Bloomberg was not overly articulate or ingenuous, and he was too impersonal to satisfy a party that likes to think of itself as impassioned. As someone who had been preceded by such a mighty fanfare, he was the victim of his own largesse—more than 20 times the advertising expense of his nearest competitor.

The public had been led to expect the arrival of a demiurge, but Bloomberg has little physical presence (unlike Trump), and is far from a stem-winding speaker. He handled the disparagements of his status as a billionaire ably—"I worked hard for the money and I give most of it away to charities each year." But he got the worst of the predictable questions about stop-and-frisk, and bombed badly when asked about the alleged sexual harassment episodes which were settled with pay-offs and non-disclosure agreements.

Bloomberg only really excelled when taxes and economics were the focus. Here he (rightly) derided the views of all of the other candidates as "ridiculous," and Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) accused him of a "cheap shot" when Bloomberg said Sanders' socialism was really "Communism and that was tried and didn't work."

"Marxism" would have been more accurate than Communism, but Sanders opened the kimono for such a reflection by amplifying his call for confiscatory taxation on high wealth and incomes, and redistribution to the lowest third on the economic scale, along with the outright nationalization or heavy regulation of the private sector. It is an insane program and Bloomberg's dismissal of it was authoritative.

The two previous front-runners, who seemed to run out of steam in Iowa and New Hampshire, Joe Biden and Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), made a bit of a comeback.

Warren seemed less strident than usual but she speaks with a tremulous voice, and emotive twitches and palpitations, reinforcing her sincerity but not her persuasiveness.

The former vice president, for the first time that I've seen, made count his experience, and especially his time in national office. After an outburst of unseemly heckling, Biden gave a good, punchy wind-up, and graduated from the amiable but fading water buffalo to the old contender torquing himself up

for a last hurrah; from a somewhat pitiable state to a rather endearing one. If anyone gained, Warren and Biden did.

Pete Buttigieg, as Klobuchar tellingly remarked, has “talking points,” but he hasn’t really done anything in his career that entitles him to be thought of in presidential terms. He is admirably glib, but he is a fraud, a construct, as if fabricated from a child’s erector set. Klobuchar is amiable and relatively sober politically, but terribly unexciting. Sanders is always high-pitched, angry, arms waving, plunging ever further into his socialist cul-de-sac.

Bloomberg had to do well to confirm the position he has bought in the polls and add momentum; the party establishment, desperate at the collapse of Biden and the rise of Sanders, bent the rules to shoe-horn him into the debate. He cannot have reassured the party elders.

Instead of rising to the presidency, Bloomberg tried to redefine it down to the necessity to defeat Trump (called “a disaster,” for reasons that weren’t hinted at), and the identification of the best executive. As he was the only Democratic candidate who had ever been an executive, there wasn’t much suspense to his pitch, but it trivialized the office.

The one point everyone agreed upon was the necessity of defeating Trump. But the big takeaway from the debate was that none of them could win a debate with Trump, much less an election. And none of them could pull the people on the hustings as Trump always does (and did Wednesday night in Phoenix).

Bloomberg bandies about that he, too, is a New Yorker and he can deal with a con man and face down a bully. But he wasn’t credible; he was the little guy talking tough in the absence of the enemy.

Trump exaggerates, but none of the Democrats acknowledge that there are now more jobs to be filled in the United States than there are unemployed, and none shows any awareness that the incomes of the lower 20 percent of American income-earners are now rising more quickly, in percentage terms, than the incomes of the most wealthy. They are still preaching the hackneyed Democratic litany of “45 years of work for no increase in real income,” (Sanders), and “one percent income growth annually” (Buttigieg). It is piffle and Trump will blow them to pieces.

Except for Bloomberg, they all buy into the zero-sum game of third-grade arithmetic economics: wildly inflated ideas of what increased revenue tax increases will yield, as if reducing the disposable income of people and corporations would not reduce their investment and spending; and a complete naïveté about both the cost and benignity of government administration of all the additional regulation and taxation that even the comparative moderates envision.

The discussion of the environment was a painful, fiercely contested six-way race to see who could produce the more fearful alarms about the future of the planet if we did not hasten to reduce carbon emissions at the expense of employment in many industries, including oil and natural gas.

Fortunately, there was no real discussion of foreign relations and not much about immigration. All the bunk about Trump blowing up the world, or at least blundering into a new Middle Eastern or Korean War, is hard to sustain, and the Democrats seem to recognize by their silence (Speaker Nancy Pelosi) that a southern border is not “immoral,” and illegal immigration is not popular, apart from Democratic ward-healers who use the illegals (noncitizens) to stuff the ballot boxes and Republican employers who like the cheap labor.

The picture for the Democrats is likely to grow steadily darker, unless Bloomberg can come out of the gate on Super Tuesday much closer to Sanders than the polls now show him to

be. He will have to do much better to drive out Biden, Warren, Buttigieg, and Klobuchar and reduce it to a showdown with Sanders.

The presidency is a glamorous position and needs to be filled by a star. Franklin Roosevelt, as he said to Orson Welles, was "a great actor," in addition to possessing other aptitudes. Harry Truman was Everyman; Ike was the likable victorious five-star general; John F. Kennedy was an idol; Reagan was also a great actor (who starred in a lot of grade-B movies), Bill Clinton at least excited his followers, as did Obama; both are suave and fluent.

And Trump pulled between 5 million and 25 million viewers every week for 14 years and has commanded a huge following as president. None of these Democrats is a star—Bloomberg was supposed to be a star but didn't look like one on Wednesday night. None of them excites anyone, except Sanders, who frightens twice as many people as he enlists.

The Democrats' nightmare scenario now looms: there is no sign that the number of candidates is going to shrink appreciably and if it does not, it will be a messy convention. (I suspect Sanders and Bloomberg will offer the vice-presidential nominations to Buttigieg and Klobuchar and induce Biden and Warren to withdraw.)

They can't crank up the fake scandal machine against Trump again, and the Obama Justice Department and intelligence agencies are likely to be exposed in indictments in the spring for truly shocking and unconstitutional misconduct during and after the 2016 election. It is increasingly difficult to see how the Democratic leadership, which first thought Trump was a joke, then a disposable president, and then an easily defeatable president, is going to make it even a close race.

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