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PALIN'S ASCENDANCE PUTS HER ON THE SPOT

By LAWRENCE C. LEVY

Suddenly Sarah.

Suddenly, last week, a virtual unknown in national life was asked to make history as the first woman to win the vice presidency.

Whether in an act of cynicism or courage, Sarah Palin was asked to "change the conversation" of the race, inject new life and energy into John McCain's campaign that seemed old and slow, especially in light of Denver's stellar performance by an united Democratic Party and its standardbearer, Barack Obama. And suddenly, Wednesday night, in a single speech after nearly a week of withering criticism for her lack of experience and alleged failings of character, the Alaska governor was asked to do more than merely shore up her own credibility. As questions mounted about McCain's seeming haste and carelessness in vetting his No. 2, Sarah Palin found herself in the position of doing nothing less than saving her party – saving its chance to run America.

"When I think about the pressure she must be under, it's hard to imagine," said Joseph L. Bruno, the former New York state Senate Majority Leader, as he waited for Palin to deliver her speech at the XCel Center in St. Paul. "If she is as articulate and likable as she has been, the people will love it."

Certainly, the Republicans in the arena loved it. They cheered and clapped again and again as Palin tried to balance the hard and the soft – to weave her appealing personal story with her harder-edged professional accomplishments, a defense of McCain with attacks on Obama.

"Do you know the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull?" she said. "Lipstick."

The Republicans saw her introduce her family, including her soldier son, her Down Syndrome infant and the 17-year-old daughter, whose pregnancy has dominated news coverage. They heard her talk about being an executive and a "reformer" – a woman tough enough to take on oil companies over their revenues and competent enough to cut her state's billion-dollar budget – an anti-elite who drives herself to work.

It's impossible to know for sure if the speech played well with the millions of undoubtedly more curious and even skeptical viewers. Her job on the ticket is to appeal to conservative Christians who were tepid on McCain. But Palin also was brought on to try to attract some moderate, middle-class women, possibly some supporters of Hillary Rodham Clinton, whom she has credited as a trailblazer.

"This is America, and every woman can walk through every door of opportunity," she said. "I was just your average hockey mom, and signed up for the PTA because I wanted to make my kids' public education better."

She never once mentioned abortion or any other social issue.

While critics can make the case that this is disingenuous – that her rise from small-town politics to the statehouse was marked by a cunning use of religion, patronage and, some say, abuse of power – nothing has yet emerged to make her a certain liability. The polish in her performance, as well as her biography, and her sprinkling of references to Iran and Russia could very well make some viewers wonder what all the fuss was about her experience. She even tried to turn the experience issue around on her opponents.

"Before I became governor – I was mayor of my hometown," she said. "And since our opponents in this presidential election seem to look down on that experience, let me explain to them what the job involves. I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a 'community organizer,' except that you have actual responsibilities."

Palin showed great poise. And her speech hit many of the targets that Republicans had hoped she would – especially the media that has been pursuing her. "Here's a little news flash for all those reporters and commentators: I'm not going to Washington to seek their good opinion."

If anybody wondered if, as a woman, she would shy away from taking swipes at her opponents, they need wonder no more. "Here's how I look at the choice Americans face in this election," she said. "In politics, there are some candidates who use change to promote their careers. And then there are those, like John McCain, who use their careers to promote change."

Last night, Palin passed the first big test of her ability to connect with America. Some of her extreme conservative views – efforts to ban books and and abortion – may eventually undermine her with moderate women. But unless "the big one" explodes in the media, Suddenly Sarah may keep her party in the race.

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