

The Reinvention of Kamala Harris

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The only real question for the 90 days remaining in this presidential campaign: Can Operation Transfiguration succeed? Can the Democrats and a collaborative media pull off their recasting of Vice President Kamala Harris from the verbally maladroit, politically inept, ruinous-policy-espousing electoral dud we have all seen over the past five years into the holy trinity of Joan of Arc, Harriet Tubman and Margaret Thatcher we have been presented within the past two weeks?

Can, shall we say, the protective phalanx of Democratic aides, strategists, fundraisers, reporters, editors, influencers and Taylor Swift persuade enough voters to imagine a presidential future of what can be, unburdened by the reality of the vice president, presidential candidate, senator and state attorney general that has been?

Time—or the lack of it—is the key to the operation’s success. I say 90 days but in practice they will need to keep the hype show on the road for just two months after an August of jubilees.

This week the hosannas will ring anew when Ms. Harris announces her vice-presidential nominee. It’s a sure bet that when the man is unveiled, we will be treated to a week of gauzy newspaper accounts of his genius and kindness. Television pundits will explain how the pair on the ticket represent the perfect distillation of American diversity. They will take their campaign on the road, Ms. Harris never more than a few feet away from her truly indispensable companion, the teleprompter, and a much safer distance from any enterprising reporter who may ask a difficult question.

Then we will have a week of a Democratic convention like no other. It will open with Biden Night (only one), when the withered man the party has just knifed will be hoisted aloft before adoring delegates and media panegyrists and hailed as Mount Rushmore-ready. Then three nights of tributes to the Pantsuit Pericles bidding to run the country for the next four years, culminating in a peroration that will leave White House correspondent sweeping.

Operation Transfiguration may be the most audacious plan a political party has ever undertaken. It requires the effective deployment of the full tool kit of press and social media deception: selective editorial amnesia, gaslighting, memory-holing. The whole campaign is the political and media equivalent of answering every question voters may have about the pre-July 21 Ms. Harris with “404 Error Page Not Found.”

If you think I'm overstating the extent to which Ms. Harris is being reclothed, cast your mind back oh so many weeks ago, before President Biden self-immolated at the presidential debate, before a would-be assassin nearly took down Donald Trump, before Mr. Biden was bundled out of the race—to late June, a political epoch away, when polling, punditry and political logic all told us the same thing: Ms. Harris was a loser. Her approval rating had been hovering lower even than Mr. Biden's for most of the past few years. Many Democrats were saying privately—and some publicly—that if Mr. Biden were jettisoned from the ticket, there should be an accelerated primary contest because they couldn't risk letting the vice president simply ascend to the job.

We are all familiar with why that was: memories of Ms. Harris's political identity as the most liberal member of a Senate that included Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren; a presidential campaign five years ago in which she pledged to eliminate private health insurance, ban fracking, give benefits to illegal immigrants, and force gunowners to sell certain firearms to the government; more recent recollections of her San Francisco-bred extremism such as when she helped raise money for the legal defense of rioters and looters in the summer of 2020; and her role in helping Mr. Biden deliver a long list of economic, social and national-security failures for the country—most obviously at the border. All this is why so many Democrats were alarmed at the thought of a Harris nomination, the same nomination they now trumpet as triumphant.

Only two things can derail Operation Transfiguration: The first is a focused, disciplined and relentless Republican campaign that raises the debate above the vacuity of social media memes and reminds voters that the Democratic candidate is the same person—and her party is the same party—that she was two weeks ago. If the election is decided on the issues, on voters' perceptions of the state of the country, Ms. Harris is surely in as much trouble as Mr. Biden was. If the campaign is dominated by pointless assertions about Ms. Harris's racial identity or her maternal status or all the other entertaining little diversions Mr. Trump likes to indulge, she may get away with skating past the realities of her past.

The other is the media. Are they really going to guide this campaign gently across the finish line? Is there anyone left beyond hostile outlets with a modicum of journalist dignity who is prepared to ask serious questions, do serious reporting, demand a press conference or two? Or are they all intent on doing what they nearly got away with doing for Mr. Biden the last few years and cover for someone evidently incapable of holding office?