

Kamala Harris and the Audacity of Desperation

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Across Donald Trump’s presidency, the American establishment achieved an unprecedented level of ideological unity and conformity — first in opposition to Trump himself, and then in the embrace of progressive ideology, in the “Great Awakening” that reached a crescendo in the hotter months of 2020.

Since then we’ve watched cracks spread throughout this edifice, dividing groups and institutions that once seemed to move in lock step. These fault lines include the split between a more ideological academic culture, where wokeness seems entrenched, and corporate and media realms, where its hold has somewhat weakened. They include the divisions between donors, university administrators and activists exposed and heightened by the Hamas attacks and the Israel-Gaza war. They include the struggle over Joe Biden’s fitness to run again, in which the liberal intelligentsia and the Democratic Party were temporarily at war, and the emergence of new [right-leaning factions](#) within the American elite.

But now, with the surge of support for Kamala Harris's candidacy, you can sense an effort to overcome these divisions, to reassert the establishment's anti-Trump consensus, to recover the unity of 2020 and put the full power of what Nate Silver once called the "[indigo blob](#)" at the presumptive Democratic nominee's disposal.

This means money: a surge of tens of millions of dollars into Democratic coffers. It means star power, whether through endorsements or just associations: Olivia Rodrigo and George Clooney, Charli XCX and Beyoncé. It means [soft-focus media treatments](#) and even the updating of inconvenient language, as Axios did when it corrected a past reference to Harris as the Biden administration "border czar" amid conservative criticism of her role in immigration policy. It means squelching any chance of an intra-Democratic conflict or a convention fight, while delivering hype from every corner, from liberals to [ex-Republicans](#) to [TikTok users](#), in an attempt to gild the Harris candidacy with the magic of Obamamania.

What the Kamalamentum effort shares with that 2008 phenomenon is one of Barack Obama's favorite words: "audacity." But not the audacity of hope this time, so much as the audacity of desperation — a sense that in this late hour the only hope for stopping Trump is to set aside all differences, bury all doubts and present Harris to the world not as an unhappy default but as a potentially transformative candidate, the kind that any Trump opponent should have wanted all along.

This is especially audacious because the agony that the Democrats only just escaped, the disgraceful attempt by Biden's inner circle to prop him up through one more campaign cycle, was itself a direct response to a consensus among savvy political observers that Harris was an exceptionally *poor* candidate, exactly the *wrong* person to set against Trump, not another Obama but a liberal answer to Dan Quayle.

The speed at which this consensus shifted should not exactly be surprising; we just watched, after all, the rapid dissolution of a shared liberal reality in which Biden's aging was at most a minor problem magnified by Fox News and Republican disinformation efforts. Just as that consensus turned out to be a fond delusion, perhaps the underestimation of Harris will look unmoored from reality in hindsight. Even poor Quayle might have outperformed his reputation if someone had only given him a chance.

But the basic facts that made Harris seem like a dubious choice remain. She is a politician who built her career inside a liberal state where what matters is winning over Democratic Party elites and liberal-leaning voters, not the conservative-leaning independent voters she needs to persuade now. She flopped completely in her bid for national office in 2020 and was rescued and elevated only by the exigencies of George Floyd-era progressive politics. As vice president she has no notable successes, no impressive portfolio, and her [struggles and miscues](#) have inspired comparisons to HBO's "Veep" for a reason.

Today she occupies an odd position as presumptive nominee, having succeeded in neither of the traditional means of ascent: She won no primaries or caucuses, and no smoke-filled room of Democratic grandees agreed on her electability. Democrats have made their peace with her nomination, but they are making a virtue of necessity, not crowning a victor or rewarding a great success.

That necessity has brought us to a double test. For Harris herself, the question is whether she can rise to the occasion, conduct outreach more effectively than the current president has, shed her Quaylian baggage and show skills that even her allies have worried that she lacks.

For the establishment rallying around her, the question is whether the united front that's contained Trump but failed to bury him has enough remaining juice, enough potency in spite of its divisions, to achieve a great and heretofore unlikely seeming feat: making Kamala Harris happen.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/27/opinion/kamala-harris-democrats.html>

Ross points out something that needs to be said. American politics remains caught in "Nobody but Trump vs. Anybody but Trump." Can Kamala demonstrate she is harmless enough to move enough swing voters—or voters who would otherwise abstain—to vote Democrat? And if they come to the poll to vote for her, they will also vote for the Democratic candidates in the House and the Senate. America is now divided between competing elites, a Republican Trumpian rabble and the old Democratic one that won't let go and hopes it can attract enough disaffected old Republicans to keep their power. A major failure in all of this has been in the Democratic Party, as epitomized in the Biden malaise. The best thing they could do would be to tell the Clintons and Obamas, and now Bidens, to go away and stay away, then drop a lot of their pet progressive, diversity propensities. The Democratic elite needed to reinvent the Party in light of the grievances exploited by Trump that are legitimate, and they have delegitimized themselves by refusing to do so. TJB