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The marketing of Kamala Harris.

Americans have sent many presidents to the White House less because of their policies than their images. The election of 2000 is a ready-to-hand case in point. Al Gore was, on the whole, far more qualified figure than George W. Bush—this despite Gore’s many shortcomings. But Gore lost to Bush precisely because he ran on his ideas. He was too much the technocrat—no match against a candidate with no ideas, a “down home” demeanor, and a slogan, “compassionate conservatism,” that seemed to mean something even if voters could not decipher quite what.

One can go further back in history to elaborate this point. Jack Kennedy sealed his victory over Richard Nixon in 1960 in the course of [one debate, the first in U.S. history to be televised](#), on 26 September 1960. Nixon was a veteran of high office, but viewers saw a perspiring man with a receding hairline and a 5 o’clock shadow. He sat across from a trim, handsome figure full of youthful spark and energy. JFK took office four months later.

A few months after Kennedy moved into the White House Theodore White, a prominent journalist at *TIME*, published *The Making of the President 1960*, a sober analysis of the forces—social, political, even psychological—that propelled the young John F. Kennedy to office. But Nixon and his people had learned their lesson. After Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey eight years later, Joe McGinness, at the time a 26-year-old political reporter of modest reputation, published *The*

Selling of the President 1968, scoring cleverly off White's famous title. In the interim, American politics had become theater; candidates were products to be marketed.

Images, appearances, and manner have always figured in America's political life—sometimes decisively, as the cases of Kennedy and Nixon and Gore and Bush II demonstrate. But nothing in my lifetime comes anywhere close to the sales job that could very plausibly propel Kamala Harris to victory over Donald Trump on 5 November. The Harris campaign is more, far more, than astute marketing. Harris, who has been distinctly unpopular as Joe Biden's vice-president, is sheer invention, an empty vessel who has never, so far as I know, articulated a thought or principle not subject to opportunistic abandonment.

I do not know what this political season in America looks like to those watching from abroad. Something close to a carnival, I would imagine.

You have on one hand Donald Trump, who has a few sound ideas—a new *détente* with Russia, an end to America's wars of adventure—but very many bad ideas and a limited capacity to execute any of the good ones. However the Trump campaign balances out, this is not a man qualified to act as America's chief executive as the country faces grave crises (of its own making) more or less across the world.

And on the other hand you have Kamala Harris, a political figure conjured from thin air who says as little as possible about her policies and intentions and has, most uncannily, so far gotten away with this. She has—let me rephrase this—not only gotten away with her unprecedented refusal to explain herself even to an elementary degree: She rides a wave of popularity among Democratic voters who

can scrawl across the blank slate of her candidacy anything they wish to see because she has left it almost entirely empty.

Harris has refused to expose herself to American media, having so far given only one interview—a carefully staged, 27-minute encounter with Dana Bash, a CNN news presenter with a long, consistent record as a shill for the Democratic Party. You would think American reporters and editors would raise vociferous objections to this outlandish hide-and-seek, but they have instead apologized profusely for it. I love especially *The New York Times* extraordinary explanation for Harris’s vapidness: Telling the American public virtually nothing of her intentions if she is elected, *The Times* explains, is to be understood as “strategic vagueness.”

This purposeful vacuum—a presidential candidate undemocratically imposed on Democratic voters by party elites and financial donors who refuses to identify herself—has encouraged what I count the most ridiculous political campaign of my lifetime. American support for terrorist Israel’s genocide in Gaza, the dangerous proxy war in Ukraine, so costly in terms of human life and ill-spent resources, the incessant provocations at the western end of the Pacific, the cruel suffering caused by sanctions imposed on Venezuela, Syria, Cuba, and other nations not to Washington’s liking: Harris addresses none as she campaigns. Instead, the Harris campaign floats on clouds of “joy” and “vibes,” the latter a usefully foggy term from the 1960s denoting generalized feelings, as in “good vibes” or “bad vibes.”

Kamala Harris, if the point is not already clear, is put across as good vibes. She endorses all of the Biden regime’s foreign policies, notably its support for the genocide in Gaza—this much she has been forced to acknowledge—but more

voters than you might think view her as “the change candidate” and even, to judge by some of the campaign’s iconography, the candidate of peace.

As preposterous as the Harris-for-president campaign is in itself, and as unfathomably gullible as many of her supporters appear to be, it is the broader and deeper implications of the Harris phenomenon I find yet more disturbing. In my read Kamala Harris’s rise in national politics signals the precipitous collapse of American political discourse and the near-complete stupefaction of mainstream American voters.

The troubled American republic, to put this point another way, has reduced itself to bread and circuses—without, given the country’s radical economic inequality, not much in the way of bread for a growing plurality of its citizens, if not the majority. This cannot possibly end well, whenever the price of all this irresponsibility comes due.

The most disturbing aspect of this political season is that its emptiness marks the completion of a long transformation of American politics into pure spectacle. And this is—a point we must not miss—precisely as it is meant to be. Step back and note: American voters are given absolutely no say in the most important question facing them and weighing upon their lives. This is the question of empire. Neither candidate offers American an alternative to its costly, destructive, conduct. The exceptions here are the minor “third parties,” and, as everyone understands, a vote for any of their candidates comes to no more than a protest vote.

The reality, now more evident than in the past—and this visibility I count a perverse benefit of this year’s elections—is that the American presidency has

devolved over some decades into little more than a figurehead post, behind which the policies that determine the imperium's conduct are conceived and executed by what I am perfectly at ease calling "the Deep State."

Vladimir Putin remarked quite cogently on this during his interview earlier this year with Tucker Carlson. You talk to an American president and come to terms with him on this or that question, the Russian president told the American webcast host. Then he returns to Washington, and—this is Putin's phrase—the men in dark suits and blue ties arrive to tell the president how things will actually be.

Three presidents in my lifetime have attempted to address question of dark suits and blue ties. The first was Eisenhower, who, as he handed over to Kennedy in 1961, warned the country of the dangers ahead in his now-famous speech wherein he named "the military-industrial complex." Kennedy, we can assume, was listening. And as he attempted to exert executive power, political power over the national-security state and its appendages, especially but not only in countering the out-of-control Central Intelligence Agency, said agency assassinated him. I am not alone in reading the events of 1963 as the Deep State's announcement that the power it had accumulated in the first postwar decades had reached the point it could no longer be challenged.

The third president to take on the Deep State, or attempt to do so, was Donald Trump. His name for it was "the swamp," and those good ideas mentioned earlier—better ties with Moscow, etc.—were, whether or not Trump understood this—direct challenges to the Deep State's extrajudicial power. This is why the swamp immediately set about subverting the Trump presidency—and, more or less, succeeded in doing so.

The near certainty of a Trump victory in November is gone now that the Democratic Party's elites and financiers have unceremoniously removed Joe Biden and installed Kamala Harris in his place. Will Trump, should he win in November, attempt again to "drain the swamp," as he puts it? This is no more certain than the election's outcome. It is more certain, I would say, that if he does embark on such a project he will again get dragged under.

As to Harris, the saddest thing about her candidacy is that she is exactly the kind of candidate the permanent state that effectively runs Washington prefers. Biden was a good one—an old, vain man increasingly incapable of managing anything other than appearances (and even these not terribly well). Harris, who is the sum total of her advisers and nothing more, is yet better.

This is not merely American politics in 2024. It is in my read American politics from here on out—until, I mean to say, the U.S. sustains a near-fatal blow in its overseas affairs, the economy collapses, or enough Americans are stirred to form a popular movement resembling something like the 1960s on steroids.

I put no money down on any of these eventualities. But I would welcome any one of them.

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