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## *Kamala Harris Needs to Get Serious*

Her shaky standing is a danger to the country given the position she could be called on to fill.



By

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Dec. 9, 2021 7:05 pm ET



Vice President Kamala Harris smiles at a vaccine mobilization event in Detroit, July 12.

PHOTO: ANDREW HARNIK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Biden's poll numbers are bad and Vice President Kamala Harris's are worse. A survey this week from conservative-leaning Rasmussen had her at 39% favorable, 57% unfavorable. The number that stuck in the public's mind came last month, from a USA Today/Suffolk poll that put her approval at 28%, disapproval at 51%.

The past few weeks she's been hammered by bad news. There's been an exodus of high-level staffers. The Washington Post had a sweeping, searing piece that described a "dysfunctional" and chaotic office full of bitter enmities. A consistent problem: Ms. Harris refuses "to wade into briefing materials prepared by staff members" and would "then berate employees when she appeared unprepared." A former staffer said she's not "willing to do the prep and the work." There had been a similar, heavily sourced report

from CNN. In the San Francisco Examiner an aide to Ms. Harris when she was California's attorney general, Gil Duran, wrote a column saying such tales of chaos have a familiar ring.

All this leaves people uneasy. The president is old and his judgment questionable; she seems out of her depth. We will have another three years of this? It is also dangerous: We don't want their weakness to become America's weakness.

And so some thoughts on how she might improve her situation.

First, the good news. The Harris Is Incompetent stories are played out, at least for the next few months. More would be overkill. The good thing about having been killed is nobody expects anything from you because you're dead. Expectations are low. Ms. Harris can use the time of her deadness to focus on why she's failing. Those who know her doubt she is capable of deep change, and a reset would have to deal not with surface matters but those more fundamental. Still, she'd be staring into the abyss right now, and perhaps seeing this is her last chance to correct a bad impression.

I trace her decline to when she went to Guatemala and Mexico in June for meetings on immigration. Near the end in what should have been a highly prepared meeting with the press, she launched into a sort of mindless ramble in which she kept saying we have to find out the "root causes" of illegal immigration. She said it over and over. "My trip . . . was about addressing the root causes. The stories that I heard and the interactions we had today reinforce the nature of these root causes. . . . So the work that we have to do is the work of addressing the cause—the root causes."

There is no one in America, including immigrants, who doesn't know the root causes of illegal immigration. They're coming for a better life. America has jobs, a social safety net, public sympathy for the underdog. *Something good might happen to you here*. Nothing good was going to happen at home.

That's why immigrants have always come. Studying "root causes" is a way of saying you want to look busy while you do nothing.

She seemed unprepared, unfocused—unserious.

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Her supporters grouse that she is criticized because she is a woman of color. Axios' Jonathan Swann quoted some in August. They see "sexist overtones" and "gendered dynamics in press coverage." This was echoed in this week's Washington Post piece: Her defenders say criticism is steeped in "racism and sexism"; she faces a double standard "for women who are ambitious, powerful or simply unafraid to appear strong in public."

But she doesn't seem strong in public; she seems scattered and unprepared. And as Mr. Duran wrote in the Examiner, what prejudice there is, is "baked into our politics," and a competent politician doesn't blame bigotry but beats it.

Her real problems look more like this: She loves the politics of politics too much, and not the meaning. When people meet with her they come away saying that what she cares about is the politics of the issue, not the issue itself. But even as she's obsessed with the game of national politics she's not so far particularly good at it. When she sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020, she spectacularly flamed out.

She came from a generation of California Democrats who never even had to meet a Republican, so great was their electoral dominance. It was too easy for them. She only had to speak Democrat, only had to know how they think and put together party coalitions. But half or more of the country is conservative or Republican. She never had to develop the broad political talents to talk to them too.

What can be done? First she must come to terms with her job. John Adams, the first vice president, called it "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived." Every cliché about it is true. Including: Today you are nothing, but tomorrow you could be everything.

The reason people watch Ms. Harris so closely isn't that she's a woman of color or a breakthrough figure, but that she could become president at any moment the next three years.

They want to have some confidence. *They don't want to have to worry about it.*

We face grave challenges—China, Russia, the endurance of the American economy. Who leads us *matters*. Ms. Harris should set her mind primarily on the deep and profound responsibilities of the job she may have to fill. She should do this as an act of will. Only secondarily should she be thinking about her political prospects.

She seems to have the order confused. And when that is true everybody can tell.

Second, she must make herself useful. She's there to help the president. Recent vice presidents who were good at their job and evaded this kind of criticism were longtime Washington hands who made their experience useful to the president, helping him navigate the town, find old levers, forge new relationships. George H.W. Bush did this for Californian Ronald Reagan ; Al Gore knew things that benefited Bill Clinton, former governor of Arkansas.

The Washington insider path is closed to Ms. Harris because she's relatively new to town and her president's experience dwarfs hers.

But here's something she could do for Mr. Biden to be useful to his larger project. She could lend what skills she has to the public presentation of the administration's stands. Mr. Biden isn't strong there; he's uneven in his attempts to explain and advance policy thinking.

To do this Ms. Harris would have to decide to become serious—to inform and immerse herself, meet with party thinkers, study her briefing books. Her current strategy, to the extent it exists, appears to rely on her sense of her own personal charisma—delighted laughter, attempts to connect personally, to convey zest.

She should speak instead with sincerity and depth. She shouldn't confuse Happy Warrior with Hungry Operative.

Ms. Harris has never seemed especially earnest. This would be a good time for earnestness.

Would a new and serious Kamala Harris be spoofed? Yes, but it would be a better kind of spoofing. Let them say you look chastened: People would be relieved to see you look chastened. Let them snidely suggest you had previously hidden your serious side. You did. Let them say you've been humbled. You should be. So far you've got a lot to be humble about.

Get your mind off yourself, give America a break, get this thing turned around.

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