

# KAMALA HARRIS, PROTAGONIST

Shortly before the debate started (I watched it after it was over, after getting some sleep), I tweeted that I wasn't sure if journalists would even notice if Kamala Harris' obvious efforts to get under Trump's skin didn't work.

There are so few journos who seem to understand (or be interested in) VP's efforts to get under Trump's skin, I'm not sure we'll see a piece abt what happens if that effort fails.

The tweet is most interesting, in retrospect, as a record of my shock that so few experts understood Kamala Harris' plan.

I first laid it out two weeks earlier. "I don't think that even the outlets that recognize the troll are giving the Kamala Harris campaign enough credit for the jujitsu they're engaged in with the debate," I said in a post on how the Vice President's campaign was deliberately pushing on Trump's impulse control problems. My preview yesterday attempted to correct the misimpression that Harris was asking for open mics out of some sense of insecurity, before I noted that releasing a video of Trump's top aides calling him unfit and another video mocking his obsession with crowd sizes made her plan clear.

There has been far less focus – or just as often, outright misunderstanding – on Harris' efforts to make a Trump meltdown more likely. I've argued that was one purpose of Brian Fallon's very public effort to get ABC to allow live mics. Even though the effort failed, it sets up a focus on the worries from Trump's own handlers that he'll lose his cool.

And yesterday and today, Harris has taken steps to make that more likely.

I'm not entirely sure what ABC did with the mics, because you could hear both at various times. Indeed, one of Trump's biggest zingers, a preplanned one, came when he repeated her line back to her, "I'm speaking now."

But the Vice President did with her animated, often mocking facial expressions what she might have done with an open mic in any case. She kept the camera on her, the entire time. And more often than not, even her facial expressions conveyed far more than Trump's rants did.

Nate Silver and Frank Luntz both claimed that Harris failed the visuals, but here's a good Bulwark post laying out how she beat Trump at his own TV game, and NYT framed the way she dismantled Trump's ego in terms of her expressions. Something important Harris' team did was force ABC to provide a podium sized to her height, limiting the visual impact of the ten inch difference in their height (though that's one thing Nate said he didn't like).

One of the more honest previews of the debate, from Hugo Lowell, described that Trump's handlers were worried about whether Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde would show up.

Donald Trump's campaign is most concerned going into the debate against Kamala Harris with the former president's mood, afraid that the mercurial Trump could engage in the kind of self-sabotage that turned off voters in the 2020 presidential election, according to people familiar with the situation.

The campaign's internal refrain is whether they get "happy Trump" or "angry Trump", the people said, as they count down the days to perhaps the final presidential debate this cycle.

Kamala Harris had absolutely no intention of leaving that choice to Trump.

She took every opportunity she could, from an initial handshake that turned that common gesture of courtesy into a remapping of the stage space for her own benefit, to get in his skin. (Presidential historian Michael Beschloss reminded that Ronald Reagan similarly surprised Jimmy Carter with such a handshake.)

And yes, she even mocked him about crowd size. If he weren't already at the party by that point, Mr. Hyde arrived to stay.

WaPo said she "baited him." So did CNN. BBC called it "goaded." And while it took NYT a few tries before they could come up with a headline that described reality (as is their wont), they described that the Vice President "burrow[ed] under his skin." A WSJ editorial described:

She won the debate because she came in with a strategy to taunt and goad Mr. Trump into diving down rabbit holes of personal grievance and vanity that left her policies and history largely untouched. He always takes the bait, and Ms. Harris set the trap so he spent much of the debate talking about the past, or about Joe Biden, or about immigrants eating pets, but not how he'd improve the lives of Americans in the next four years.

Chris Christie critiqued, "she laid traps, and he chased every rabbit down every hole."

There was little doubt what happened last night, after the fact. A dramatic success, CNN judged.

Harris came onstage with a clear plan: Throw Trump off his game.

It was, by any measure, a dramatic success.

Even at Fox News, there was little doubt what happened: both Bret Baier and Brit Hume saw what Kamala had done.

But beforehand, the press conceived the debate almost exclusively about what Harris had to do, not what she could or planned to do. Would she be up for it, journalists seemed to doubt, most buying into Trump's hype that even Tulsi Gabbard could "eviscerate" Harris.

Journalists missed the Vice President's clear intent because they treated Donald Trump as the protagonist of this story.

I don't know how much the debate will affect the direction of the race. Though she struck blow after blow, it was still the 60/40-40/60 result I also predicted. The debate itself is most likely to have an effect for the way it gives Brian Fallon another opportunity to suggest Trump is too weak to take Harris on in a second debate. It might even lead some Trump cultists to wonder – to merely begin the process – of asking whether he really *is* the loser that Kamala Harris said he is.

But it may do something more important, indirectly.

In August, the press treated Kamala as the story largely because Trump was huddled in his mansions. But they still treated him as the protagonist. Every time he gave the order, they scurried to attend things billed as press conferences which were little different from his rambling rally speeches. He made them props in a fantasy that he had shared more about what he plans to do as President than Kamala Harris, and they were happy to play the role he demanded.

Yesterday, the press got their first chance – likely their only chance – to see the two candidates side-by-side.

And they left with the certainty that Vice President Kamala Harris was the protagonist of that story. Of this story.

Last night's debate may not, directly, persuade many voters. But if it cures the press of their addiction to the Donald Trump con, it may have a dramatic effect on the race.

Update: Added the WSJ editorial. Noted that Fox News did too recognize what happened.