

THE “TRUTH” ABOUT JD VANCE

Before the Vice Presidential debate last night, I tested a hypothesis.

Hypothesis: Like Trump, JD is a sociopath.

Unlike Trump, JD is not a narcissist.

It’s a lot harder to work that to your advantage in a debate.

By that I meant that JD lies as much as Trump does, but because his ego is not as fragile as Trump’s, he would bulldoze through the same lies Trump wanted to tell without getting distracted by his own ego.

That prediction held up. JD smoothly lied over and over again. This is a man who – by description – came naturally to pitching the Iraq invasion. Occasionally (such as when Walz noted that Trump built just 2% of his wall and Mexico didn’t pay for it), Vance seemed to visibly wince about how bad the product he’s selling is. But otherwise he smoothly pitched policies that only work when they come packaged in fear-mongering and hatred. He smoothly claimed that censorship by private companies was a bigger threat to democracy than Donald Trump siccing a mob on Mike Pence.

Earlier in the day before the Vice Presidential debate, I suggested one should read Amanda Marcotte and John Ganz’ columns of the day in tandem. The columns provide a useful background to the debate.

Marcotte observed that JD Vance routinely whines about press coverage not just because he’s thin-skinned, but because that whining is viewed as strength.

In the dull world of the extremely online right, where “cat lady” is

forever the sickest of burns, it is also common to mistake throwing a tantrum for strength. “Free speech” is defined as “we speak, you listen – and faint in adoration.” Live in that space long enough and you start to think that yelling at a reporter for asking a question isn’t embarrassing behavior. No, in the online MAGA world, sputtering “How dare you!” at a journalist for doing their job is regarded as a feat of strength on par with storming the beach at Normandy. It’s tempting to see Vance whining yet again and assume that he’s sorely in need of therapy. That may be so, but it’s also true that his online space is a culture where whimpering like a spoiled child is mistaken for toughness, and he’s forgotten that most people are rightfully grossed out by it.

But in a piece explaining why there’s such a real risk Trump will still win, John Ganz raised another reason why, I think, JD whines so much about the media. Ganz noted that consensus media has collapsed in America – and Donald Trump has stepped into that void, cultivating rabid support from the fragmented world of disaffected conspiracy theorists left behind.

We are accustomed still to thinking of the country at its post-War self, dominated by mass media, mass politics, the mass movement, the struggle for political and cultural hegemony, that is to say, the struggle over the definition of common sense and what is “normal.” Prime Time. Must See TV. The water cooler. That’s all gone now. We should think of the United States today as being more like the country Gilbert Seldes portrays in his classic on 1800s America, *The Stammering Century*, where he documents not unified nation, but a patchwork of small movements lead by “fanatics, and radicals and

mountebanks," a country of "diet-faddists and the dealers in mail-order Personality; the play censors and the Fundamentalists; the free-lovers and eugenists; the cranks and possibly the saints...Sects, cults, manias, movements, fads, religious excitements..." Trump knows how to reach those people. Democrats today, much less so. Maybe they shouldn't even try. I certainly think pandering to that tendency in American culture isn't good. But maybe that's not a tendency in American culture at all, it just is American culture.

Trump and Vance thrive on the fragmentation of America created by the collapse of the media. And so they treat the media as a performance of power.

Vance attacked experts and the media over and over in yesterday's debate, appealing instead to "common sense." He appealed to and encouraged distrust in government. His attack on what he falsely termed "censorship" was a defense of the crackpots Trump mobilized to attack the Capitol on January 6 (and he made two implicit defenses of Russian disinformation along the way).

The second most notable moment in the debate came when Vance complained that, "The rules were you weren't going to fact check," when he falsely claimed the Haitians in Springfield were undocumented. It was a tell. Vance and Trump *need* these false claims to sow division. They need these false claims to attack rationality.

Shortly before the debate, 60 Minutes announced that Trump was going to forgo their traditional pre-election interview. After 60 Minutes made the announcement, Trump's bouncer-spox Steven Cheung tried to spin it in a way that didn't amount to Trump chickening out again:



Steven Cheung
@TheStevenCheung

...

Fake News. 60 Minutes begged for an interview, even after they were caught lying about Hunter Biden's laptop back in 2020. There were initial discussions, but nothing was ever scheduled or locked in.

They also insisted on doing live fact checking, which is unprecedented.

60 Minutes @60Minutes · 6h

A Programming Note: 60 Minutes is scheduled to air a primetime election special on a Monday edition of the broadcast on October 7 at 8 PM. For over half a century, 60 Minutes has invited the Democratic and Republican tickets to appear on our broadcast as Americans head to the [Show more](#)

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Here's what Cheung said:

1. Hunter Biden's laptop
2. Nothing was scheduled
3. CBS was going to commit the "unprecedented" sin of fact-checking Trump

There's a tiny bit more substance on the laptop comment than the normal invocation of "Hunter Biden's laptop" as foundational moment in Trump's cult than there normally is. Trump is complaining that he is owed an apology because Lesley Stahl refused to report on its contents in 2020 – ignoring the question of newsworthiness! – only after she could verify it.

Trump, 78, was referring to "60 Minutes" reporter Lesley Stahl admitting to him in a 2020 sitdown that she refused to cover The Post's bombshell Hunter Biden laptop story in 2020 because "it can't be verified."

I learned that from NYPost, which *didn't* wait to verify the hard drive of a laptop before it misrepresented what an email said, which used a copy of the hard drive copy that had at least one email added to it after it left John Paul Mac Isaac's custody, and which itself was based on a copying process that resulted in 62% bigger copy (measured in page size – blame prosecutors for doing that!) than the underlying laptop.

Even as Xitter, Google, and Facebook censor the JD Vance dossier stolen from a Trump staffer far more aggressively than anyone ever throttled NYPost stories about the Hunter Biden hard drive (outlets besides Xitter are fairly invoking a policy against foreign malign influence campaigns; Xitter claims it's about Vance's privacy), Trump is claiming he was injured because news outlets didn't chase a laptop copy to which they were not granted access by Trump's own lawyer.

But the function of his invocation of a hard drive that even the FBI never validated serves as the same marker it always does: Four years later, four years in which media outlets have *still* never found anything more than dick pics and completely *legal* influence peddling, merely the invocation of the hard drive serves as the foundation of an object of faith for Trump's mob. One must believe in it even if one cannot validate it. Goodness knows, that's what got Hunter Biden convicted on gun crimes.

Relatedly, on Monday, Judge Robert Richardson finally ruled on John Paul Mac Isaac's defamation claims: none of his defamation claims held up (partly because he was a limited public figure, partly because most of his defamation claims never even mentioned him. Hunter Biden's counterclaim was dismissed on statute of limitation grounds. Along with Judge Rudy Contreras' decision, last Friday, that the disgruntled IRS agents can't intervene in Hunter's lawsuit against the IRS, he can include their lawyers in his claims, but cannot sue for a Privacy Act violation, the rulings close off much of what we might learn from these lawsuits.

The Hunter Biden hard drive and its aftermath will continue to serve as an untethered article of faith among those who need to believe the Bidens are more corrupt than Trump and his son-in-law.

And in that same world of faith, neither Donald Trump nor JD Vance are going to willingly participate in a venue where their false

narrative of fear might be disturbed by facts.

Most people treat debate as a draw. Virtually all agree that, like almost all VP debates, it won't make an ounce of difference in the race, because they never do. Even after admitting the latter point, though, Bulwark's Jonathan Last assessed JD's success in smoothly delivering those lies differently.

Vance was so good that I wonder if this debate might become a case of catastrophic success. Because tomorrow a whole bunch of people in Conservatism Inc. are going to be talking about how Vance is the post-Trump savior they've been waiting for.

I wonder what Donald Trump will think about that?

That's the question I kept coming back to, all night long.

[snip]

I doubt Vance did anything meaningful to help Trump's electoral prospects. But he *absolutely* helped his own prospects for 2028, or 2032, or whenever Trump leaves the scene.

Or gets pushed.

Donald Trump created his own fictional character, the successful tycoon who gets things done by firing people and exacting revenge.

JD has no such persona. He has, instead, a flawless ingratiating ability to deliver lies credibly.

The debate is not going to affect the election.

But I think JD did what he needed, for his own wildly ambitious goals: He doubled down on undermining democracy, and ratcheted up the professionalism of Trump's attack on truth.

Update: Added the ad that Harris did of the JD

non-answer.