

HEATHER COX RICHARDSON

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When President Joe Biden announced that he would not accept the Democratic nomination for president and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris on July 21—less than three weeks ago—the horizon for the 2024 presidential election suddenly shortened from years to about three months. That shift apparently flummoxed the Republicans, who briefly talked about suing to make sure that Biden, rather than Harris, was at the head of the Democratic ticket, even though the Democrats had not yet held their convention and Biden had not officially become the nominee when he stepped out of contention. Lately, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump has suggested that Biden might suddenly, somehow, change his mind and upend the whole new ticket, although Biden himself has been strong in his public support for Harris and her vice-presidential running mate, Minnesota governor Tim Walz, and Democrats held a roll-call vote nominating Harris for the presidency.

The idea that presidential campaigns should drag on for years is a relatively new one. For well over a century, political conventions were dramatic affairs where political leaders hashed out who they thought was their party's best standard-bearer, a process that almost always involved quiet deals and strategic conversations. Sometimes the outcome was pretty clear ahead of time, but there were often surprises. Famously, for example, Ohio representative James A. Garfield went to the 1880 Republican convention expecting to marshal votes for Ohio senator John Sherman—General William Tecumseh Sherman's brother—only to find himself walking away with the nomination himself.

As recently as 1952, the outcome of the Republican National Convention was not clear beforehand. Most observers thought the nomination would go to Ohio senator Robert Taft, the son of President William Howard Taft, but after a tremendous battle—including at least one fist fight—the nomination went to war

hero Dwight D. Eisenhower, who challenged Taft because of the senator's opposition to the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Taft supporters took that loss hard: Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. drove Eisenhower's victory, prompting right-wing Republicans' enduring hatred of what they called the "eastern establishment."

The 1960 presidential election ushered in a new era in politics. While Eisenhower had turned to advertising executives to help him appeal to voters, it was 1960 Democratic nominee Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy who was the first presidential candidate to turn to a public opinion pollster, Louis Harris, to help him adjust his message and his policies to polls.

Political campaigns were modernizing from the inside to win elections, but as important in the long run was Theodore H. White's best selling account of the campaign, *The Making of the President 1960*. White was a successful reporter, novelist, and nonfiction writer who, finding himself flush from a movie deal and out of work when *Collier's* magazine went under, decided to follow the inside story of the 1960 presidential campaign. "I want to get at the real guts of the process of making an American president—what the mechanics, the mystique, the style, the pressures are with which an American who hopes to be our President must contend," White wrote to Senator Estes Kefauver (D-TN).

White set out to follow the campaigns of the many primary candidates that year: Democrats Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon Johnson, and John F. Kennedy and Republicans Richard Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller.

Before White's book, political journalism picked up when politicians announced their candidacy, and focused on candidates' public statements and position papers. White's portrait welcomed ordinary people backstage to hear politicians reading crowds, fretting over their prospects, and adjusting their campaigns according to expert advice. In heroic, novelistic style, White told the tale of the struggle that lifted Kennedy to victory as the other candidates fell away, and his book spent 20 weeks at the top of the bestseller lists and won the 1962 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction.

White's book emphasized the long process of building a successful presidential race and the many advisors who made such building possible. In the modern world a presidential campaign lasted far longer than the few months after a convention. In his intimate portrait of that process, White radically transformed political journalism. As historian John E. Miller noted, journalists who had previously covered the public face of a candidacy "now sought to capture in minute detail the behind-the-scenes maneuvering of the candidates and their strategy boards and to probe beneath the surface events of political campaigns to ascertain where the 'real action' lay."

For journalists, seeing the inside story of politics as a sort of business meant leaving behind the idea that political ideology mattered in presidential elections, a position that political scientists were also abandoning in 1960. It also meant getting that inside story by preserving the candidates' goodwill, something we now call access journalism. Other journalists leapt to follow the trail White blazed, and by 1973 the pack of presidential journalists had become a story in its own right. White told journalist Timothy Crouse that he had come to regret that his new approach to presidential contests had turned presidential campaigns into a circus.

Over time, presidential campaigns began to use that circus as part of their own story, spinning polls, rallies, and press coverage to convince voters that their candidate was winning. But now the 2024 election seems to be challenging the habit of seeing a presidential campaign as a long, heroic sifting of advice and application of tactics, as well as the perceived need for access to campaign principals.

Yesterday, apparently chafing as the Harris-Walz campaign turns out huge crowds, Trump called reporters to his company's Florida property, Mar-a-Lago. Those determined not to miss any twist of the campaign—and who had enough advance notice to make it to Florida—listened to him serve up his usual banquet of lies: that doctors and mothers are murdering babies after they're born; everyone wanted *Roe v. Wade* overturned, no one died on January 6, 2021; he

loves autocrats and they love him; and so on. The journalists there did not ask him about the recent bombshell report suggesting that Egypt poured \$10 million into his 2016 campaign.

But, as conservative writer Tom Nichols of *The Atlantic* noted, Trump appears nonetheless to have gone entirely off the rails. He claimed that the crowd he drew on January 6 was bigger than those who gathered in 1963 to hear the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his famous I Have a Dream speech, and he told the entirely fabricated story of surviving an emergency landing in a helicopter with former San Francisco mayor Willie Brown. As Nichols put it, “The Republican nominee, the man who could return to office and regain the sole authority to use American nuclear weapons, is a serial liar and can’t tell the difference between reality and fantasy. Donald Trump is not well. He is not stable. There’s something deeply wrong with him.”

But the media appears to be sliding away from Trump: today he angrily insisted he could prove that the dangerous helicopter trip actually occurred, leading *New York Times* reporter Maggie Haberman to note that “Mr. Trump has a history of claiming he will provide evidence to back up his claims but ultimately not doing so.” When asked to produce the flight records he claimed to have, Trump “responded mockingly, repeating the request in a sing-song voice.”

In contrast, as presidential candidates, first Biden and now Harris have not appeared to bother with access journalism or courting established media. Instead, they have recalled an earlier time by turning directly to voters through social media and by articulating clear policies that support their dedication to the larger project of American democracy.

Yesterday, after journalists had begun to complain that they did not have enough access to Harris, she came to them directly on the tarmac at the Detroit airport and asked, “What’cha got?” All but one of their questions were about Trump and his comments; the one question that was not about Trump came when a journalist asked when Harris would sit down for an interview.