Former president Trump has always approached debates as professional wrestling events in which the key is not to explain policies or answer questions, but rather to demonstrate dominance over your opponent. In 2016 the Democratic nominee, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, had a hard time countering this strategy effectively because of the many expectations of what was appropriate behavior for a female presidential candidate. In 2020 and then again in the June 2024 "debate," Democratic candidate Joe Biden's stutter made it difficult to counter Trump's scattershot attacks.

The question for Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris in tonight's presidential debate was not how to answer policy questions, but how to counter Trump's dominance displays while also appealing to the American people.

She and her team figured it out, and today they played the former president brilliantly. He took the bait, and tonight he self-destructed. In a live debate, on national television.

The Harris campaign began the day trolling Trump with a new campaign ad featuring the pieces of former president Barack Obama's speech at the August Democratic National Convention that concerned Trump. "Here's a 78-year-old billionaire"—the ad cuts to a photo of Trump in a golf cart—"who has not stopped whining about his problems." Then a clip of Trump shows him complaining about Harris's crowds, before Obama notes Trump's "weird obsession with crowd sizes," complete with Obama's hand motion suggesting Trump's sizes were small. "It just goes on, and on, and on," Obama says, before the ad shows empty seats and people yawning at Trump's rallies.

"America's ready for a new chapter," Obama says to the overflow crowd cheering at Chicago's United Center during the Democratic National Convention. "We are ready for a President Kamala Harris!" At the end, even Harris's standard statement, "I'm Kamala Harris and I approved this message," sounds like a challenge.

This morning, the Harris campaign began running the ad on the Fox News Channel.

At the same time, they began running Philadelphia-themed ads across the city on billboards, in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and on food trucks and taxi cabs, sidewalk art, and digital projections making fun of Trump's fascination with crowd sizes. They showed, for example, a full-sized Philadelphia pretzel labeled "Harris" alongside a piece of one that looked like an upside down U labeled "Trump."

The taunting might have been behind Trump's demand for loyalty from Republican lawmakers this afternoon, telling them to shut down the government if he doesn't get his way on the inclusion of a voter suppression measure in the bill to fund the government. The right has often relied on threats of government shutdowns to try to get their way, but such shutdowns are never popular, and even moderate Republicans are leery of launching one just before an election.

Nonetheless, Trump tried to lock them into such a shutdown, reiterating in a post this afternoon the lie that undocumented immigrants are voting in presidential elections. "If Republicans in the House, and Senate, don't get absolute assurances on Election Security, THEY SHOULD, IN NO WAY, SHAPE, OR FORM, GO FORWARD WITH A CONTINUING RESOLUTION ON THE BUDGET. THE DEMOCRATS ARE TRYING TO 'STUFF' VOTER REGISTRATIONS WITH ILLEGAL ALIENS. DON'T LET IT HAPPEN—CLOSE IT DOWN."

Throughout the day, the Harris campaign placed posts on social media showing Harris looking crisp and presidential and Trump looking old and unkempt. And then, for ten minutes in the hour before the debate, the Harris campaign held a drone show over the Philadelphia Museum of Art showing campaign slogans and then turning the words "MADAM VICE PRESIDENT" into "MADAM PRESIDENT."

Hugo Lowell of *The Guardian* reported today that Trump's advisors were concerned ahead of the debate about whether they would get "happy Trump" or "angry Trump," worrying that a frustrated Trump would engage in the vicious personal attacks that turn voters off. They expressed relief that having the microphones muted when it was not a candidate's turn to speak would prevent Harris from irritating him with fact checks and snark of her own. Conservative lawyer George Conway noted that it was "[i]nteresting how one campaign is extremely concerned about the emotional stability of its candidate, and how the other is not."

Harris's attacks on Trump, including her campaign's subtle digs at his masculinity, appeared to have accomplished what they set out to. When the two came out on stage, he went straight to his podium, while she strode across the stage, moved into his space, held out her hand, introduced herself and wished him well: "Kamala Harris. Have a good debate." He muttered in response, "Nice to see you." Then she took her own spot at the podium. When the debate opened, it was clear that Harris was the dominant figure and that her opponent was "angry Trump." He would not look at her during the debate.

In her first answer, Harris tried to set out both her own story as a child of the middle class and how she intended to build an opportunity economy for others, lowering food and housing costs and opening the way for more small businesses. It was a lot, quickly, and she looked a little nervous.

Then Trump spoke and it was clear he was going off the rails. His first comment was to suggest Harris was lying, and then to insist that his proposed tariffs will solve everything, although he has the way tariffs work entirely backward: they are paid by the consumer, not by foreign countries. As he followed with a long list of his rally lies, Harris started to smile.

From then on, he continued to produce rally stories full of wild exaggerations and attack Harris with lies in what CNN fact-checker Daniel Dale called "a staggeringly dishonest debate performance from former president Trump." "No major presidential candidate before Donald Trump has ever lied with this kind of frequency," Dale said. "A remarkably large chunk of what he said tonight was just not true. This wasn't little exaggerations, political spin. A lot of his false claims were untethered to reality." As Harris spoke directly to the American people, growing stronger and stronger, Trump got wilder and angrier and told more and more crazy stories.

And then, about ten minutes into the debate, Harris baited him. She invited the American people to go to one of his rallies, where "he talks about fictional characters like Hannibal Lecter, he will talk about 'windmills cause cancer.' And what you will also notice is that people start leaving his rallies early out of exhaustion and boredom."

Trump lost it. He defended his rallies, said Harris couldn't get anyone to attend hers and has to bus in attendees (in reality, her rallies are packed and he is the one who reportedly hires

attendees), and then, in his fury, repeated the lie about immigrants eating pets. When a moderator fact-checked that story, he fought back, saying he heard it on television.

And from then on, Harris kept baiting him while explaining her own policies directly to the camera, and he took the bait every single time. He ran down every rabbit hole and appeared unable to finish a thought. Notably, he refused to say he would not sign a national abortion ban and admitted that after nine years of promising one, he had no health care plan (he has, he said, "concepts of a plan," and if they pan out, he'll let us know in the "not too distant future").

He threatened World War III and repeated that the U.S. is "a failing nation." He told a long story about threatening "Abdul," the leader of the Taliban; in fact, the leader of the Taliban since 2016 is Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada. In response to Harris's statement that foreign leaders thought he was a disgrace, Trump answered that Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who destroyed his country's democracy and replaced it with a dictatorship, says he's a good leader. *New York Times* columnist David French wrote: "It's like she's debating MAGA Twitter come to life."

The debate moderators, David Muir and Linsey Davis of ABC, asked solid questions and corrected the most egregious of Trump's lies. But as he continued to interrupt and yell at Harris, they increasingly gave him leeway to do so. This meant he spoke more often and for more time than Harris; MSNBC's Stephanie Ruhle reported that he spoke 39 times for a total of 41.9 minutes, to her 23 times for a total of 37.1 minutes. But the extra time did him no favors.

By the end of the evening, Harris had delivered a clear message about her hopes to move the country forward beyond years of using race to divide people who have far more in common than they have differences. She promised to develop an economy that will build small businesses and support a growing middle class, while protecting rights, including the right to make reproductive decisions without the intrusion of the state. And she showed the nation that Trump can be baited, that he lies freely and incoherently, and—perhaps crucially—that he is no longer the dominant politician in America.

Immediately after the debate, the Harris campaign continued their demonstration of dominance. Harris-Walz campaign chair Jen O'Malley Dillon released a statement recapping Harris's strength and Trump's angry incoherence. She concluded: "Vice President Harris is ready for a second debate. Is Donald Trump?"

Then things got even worse for Trump.

Music phenomenon Taylor Swift endorsed Harris, telling her 283 million Instagram followers that she felt she had to because of Trump's earlier reposting of an AI image of her seeming to endorse him. That, she said, "brought me to the conclusion that I need to be very transparent about my actual plans for this election as a voter. The simplest way to combat misinformation is with the truth. I will be casting my vote for Kamala Harris and Tim Walz in the 2024 Presidential Election."

After explaining why she was supporting Harris and Walz and urging her fans to do their own research, Swift signed off: "Taylor Swift, Childless Cat Lady."