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# July 16, 2024

HEATHER COX RICHARDSON

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The Republican National Convention is a moment to reintroduce Trump and MAGA Republicans to voters who have not seen them up close since at least 2021. So far, the convention has proved that the Republican Party is now the MAGA Party. It has not been a smooth unveiling.

Yesterday, just after House speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) announced that delegates were formally nominating Trump as the Republican Party's presidential candidate, the teleprompter failed. Unable to continue without it, Johnson quickly left the stage. This was awkward, since two weeks ago, Johnson said on the Fox News Channel of President Joe Biden: "Unless the president is reading off the teleprompter, I don't think he's capable of making these big decisions and that is something that should alarm all of us...."

The teleprompter having been fixed, Johnson returned forty-five minutes later to introduce Iowa's attorney general, Brenna Bird, who in turn began the process of nominating Ohio senator J. D. Vance for vice president. The last time a Republican vice presidential nominee has been named so late was 1988, and while announcing at the convention has the

benefit of generating enthusiasm for the novel story, it has the downside of bringing an avalanche of opposition. Vance brought the latter.

He is very young—just 39—and has held an elected office for just 18 months, making him notably inexperienced for someone in contention for the vice presidential slot, especially behind a 78-year-old presidential nominee. In the past, he was a never-Trumper, saying that Trump “might be America’s Hitler,” “might be a cynical a\*\*hole,” and is “cultural heroin,” “noxious,” and “reprehensible,” but he came around to embrace the Big Lie that the 2020 election was stolen and to say that if he had been vice president on January 6, 2021, he would have done what former vice president Mike Pence would not: he would have refused to count the certified electoral ballots for President Joe Biden.

Former Wyoming representative Liz Cheney, who was drummed out of the party for standing against Trump’s attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, wrote: “JD Vance has pledged he would do what Mike Pence wouldn’t—overturn an election and illegally seize power. He says the president can ignore the rulings of our courts. He would capitulate to Russia and sacrifice the freedom of our allies in Ukraine. The Trump GOP is no longer the party of Lincoln, Reagan or the Constitution.”

Both ends of the Republican spectrum have also expressed concerns about Vance. The far right has been vocal today about their disdain for Vance’s wife, who is the American-born daughter of Indian immigrants. “Do we really expect that the guy who has an Indian wife and named their kid Vivek is going to support white identity?” Nick Fuentes asked.

On the other side of the Republican spectrum, those who opposed Trump because of his extremism, especially on abortion, are unlikely to have their fears relieved by Vance, who has advocated no-exceptions abortion bans, that people stay in violent marriages, and said: "We are effectively run in this country...by a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives and the choices that they've made. And so they want to make the rest of the country miserable too."

But for all the talk of unifying the country since last weekend's shooting, Trump did not pick Vance to bring Republicans together. His selection of Vance reinforces that the MAGAs have taken over the Republican Party with an ideology that rejects democracy in favor of Christian nationalism. Vance has repeatedly elevated Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's destruction of democracy in favor of a strong leader imposing Christian family structures, ending abortion rights, enforcing anti-LGBTQ+ policies and encouraging attacks on immigrants, and seizing universities. Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts, who is also aligned with Orbán and was key to the production of Project 2025, which echoes Orbán's co-called "illiberal democracy," cheered Vance's selection.

On Monday the convention approved a platform, the document that outlines the party's position for the administration they hope to put into power. The evolution of Republican platforms since 2016 shows the evolution of the Republican Party. The 2016 platform fell pretty much within the norms of the genre, celebrating the nation and attacking the opposition before calling first for tax cuts—standard fare for Republicans since 1980—open markets, and deregulation of business and finance, as

well as a smaller government. It called as well for an end to gay marriage, protection of gun ownership, and opposition to abortion.

In 2020 the Republican Party did not write a platform, simply saying "[t]hat the Republican Party has and will continue to enthusiastically support the President's America-first agenda."

In 2024 the Republican Party platform reiterates the points of a Trump rally. Its capitalization is erratic, as his is, and it is full of sweeping and often incorrect statements. Rather than celebrating the country, it warns that "we are a Nation in SERIOUS DECLINE. Our future, our identity, and our very way of life are under threat like never before." It promises that, under Trump, "We will be a Nation based on Truth, Justice, and Common Sense."

The only real sign of the old party is the platform's promise to make the Trump tax cuts, which have already added \$2.5 trillion to the national debt, permanent. Otherwise, the platform is a MAGA document. It portrays a world that reflects Trump's dystopian vision rather than reality, then promises to fix that dystopia either with vague promises or with culture war victories. In odd passages, it promises to do what Biden has already done: conquer inflation, bring supply chains home, revive manufacturing, and save the auto industry.

The speakers at the convention have largely been MAGA extremists, and the picture they painted of the United States echoed Trump's. They portrayed a country in decline from the heady days of the Trump presidency, but their image was not based in reality. Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin, for example, claimed that "Women, Black Americans,

Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans all saw record low employment under Donald J. Trump," when in fact those record lows have come under Biden. Former CEO of Yammer, South African David Sacks, echoed Russian talking points when he blamed Biden for provoking Russia to invade Ukraine. Tennessee senator Marsha Blackburn attacked "racist DEI requirements."

CNN fact checker Daniel Dale has been kept busy correcting the Republicans' repeated lie that there is a violent crime wave in the U.S. under Biden; the opposite is true. Both violent crimes and property crimes have plummeted since the Trump administration. Republicans are also saying that Democrats "have eroded the American energy dominance that President Trump delivered." In reality, while Biden is trying to shift the U.S. to renewables, Dale noted that "the U.S. under Biden is producing more crude oil than any country ever has... the U.S. is setting fossil fuel world records under this administration. The U.S. produced a global record 12.9 million barrels of crude oil per day in 2023, easily beating the Trump-era high of 12.3 million barrels."

Today's speakers included Nikki Haley, a last-minute addition to the program after the events of the weekend in an apparent attempt to create a sense of unity. She made a good pitch but didn't convince everyone: there were scattered boos at her appearance. Her speech was the high-water mark of the unity effort tonight; the rest of the speakers hammered the idea that the country is divided in two and that Trump's opponents are persecuting him. They singled out the media as a key enemy.

The bitter rift between establishment and MAGA Republicans has been evident in other ways, as well. Attendees booed Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) when he pledged Kentucky's votes to Trump, from whom he has kept his distance. MAGA congressman Matt Gaetz (R-FL) interrupted CNN journalist Kaitlan Collins when she was interviewing former House speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) to taunt McCarthy by pointing out that he had not been asked to speak, adding that if he had been, "You would get booed off the stage." Gaetz was behind the move to throw McCarthy out of his office, and he resigned from Congress shortly thereafter. McCarthy reacted by noting that there is an ethics complaint against Gaetz for sleeping with a minor.

Trump has appeared at the convention with a large bandage on the ear he says was pierced by a bullet on Saturday. Journalists have begun to note that there has been no medical report of Trump's injuries, an odd omission after the intense recent scrutiny of President Biden's health.

Trump seemed oddly subdued on Monday and appeared to fall asleep during the proceedings. His wife Melania has not yet appeared at the convention.

Today, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s son Bobby Kennedy III posted a video of a call Trump made to his father in which Trump appeared to try to win Kennedy's support first by appearing to support Kennedy's opposition to vaccines and then by suggesting that he could get Kennedy a job. "I would love you to do something," Trump said. "And I think it'll be so good for you and so big for you. And we're going to win." He also noted that Biden had called him after the shooting,

saying "it was very nice, actually," and that the cause of the injury he sustained on Saturday felt like "the world's largest mosquito."

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Notes:

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