Opinion
Kamala Harris

U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris is seen in Los Angeles Oct. 4, 2019. Former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, announced Aug. 11 that Harris will be his running mate for the November 2020 presidential election. (CNS/Reuters/Eric Thayer)



by Michael Sean Winters

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First, the bad news. Joe Biden's selection of Sen. Kamala Harris as his running mate is a setback for progressives.

"You make a lot of important decisions as president," Biden said in the email announcing the choice. "But the first one is who you select to be your Vice President."

This thoroughly conventional choice of someone who has never challenged the neoliberal economic policies that robbed America's working class for decades – and sent them into the welcoming arms of Donald Trump – does not bode well for a Biden presidency. The times demand a bold, progressive economic restructuring, and it is difficult to see Harris urging such action on Biden.

As I wrote last year, after the first primary debate:

> Harris' debate performance showed her ability as a storyteller as well as her ability to deliver a well-rehearsed attack line, going after Biden's record on busing and making it personal: "That little girl was me." But, at the end of the debate, could anyone answer the question: Why does Harris think she should be president? Or this one: Can anyone describe with any precision where Harris would like to lead the country should she become president? All the encomiums for her debate performance had to do with style, not with policy.

She never did answer those questions, and you could not escape the conclusion that she was running for president because it was the next logical step in her career. Combined with some strategic mistakes, that lack of rationale resulted in catastrophe: she dropped out of the race before a single ballot was cast.

In addition to Harris' anemic presidential run – perhaps a point about which she and Biden could bond – there is the problem of her record and her dependence on Silicon Valley cash to fund her political career. Jesse Mechanic at Huffpost examined her failure to prosecute then-foreclosure king, now-Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin. Joel Kotkin at City Journal explained her regrettable financial ties with Silicon Valley: The single most progressive development in U.S. politics in recent years – candidates who ran campaigns with genuine grassroots fundraising and no high-dollar, special-access-for-donors fundraisers – is a development in which Harris did not participate.

Catholics will recall, and conservatives Catholics have every right to make an issue of, Harris' bizarre comments about the Knights of Columbus. In 2018, she asked a judicial nominee, Brian Buescher, "Were you aware that the Knights of Columbus opposed a woman's right to choose when you joined the organization?"

The question is embarrassing in both its ignorance and its bigotry. Michael Gerson, arguably the most trenchant and incisive critic of President Trump, rightly compared the Harris' questions to the kind of anti-Catholic bigotry we thought was in the nation's past. Whatever difficulties I have with the leadership at the K of C, they do not excuse her dismissiveness towards a religion held by millions of fellow citizens, including her new running mate.

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Now for the good news: The selection of Harris as Biden's running mate may not matter. Politically, the selection of a veep candidate almost never helps, it can only hurt.

In my lifetime, the only selection that genuinely helped a presidential candidate was Bill Clinton's choice of Al Gore as a running mate: Instead of seeking balance, Clinton reinforced his image as a new kind of Democrat — centrist, with a drawl, young — and did so at precisely the moment when Ross Perot's campaign was imploding and voters gave Clinton a second look. George McGovern's choice of Tom Eagleton, like John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin, damaged already crippled campaigns.

In most cases, the selection dominates news in a slow, August news cycle, but it doesn't change minds. This year, is there anyone who has not already made up their mind?

In terms of governance, if the Biden-Harris ticket succeeds, the situation they will face in January may be so grim, they will need to turn to the more progressive ideas championed by Sen. Bernie Sanders and Sen. Elizabeth Warren in this year's presidential primaries. At a time when millions have lost their jobs, and with them their employer-based health insurance, Medicare for All is looking even more obviously like the solution the country needs. Continuing to keep the economy afloat by sending money to the nation's poorest, rather than its richest, citizens represents a defeat of Reaganite laissez-faire economics impossible to conceive of even a few months ago. The Green New Deal is now not only an environmental necessity, it is an economic one, creating millions of good paying jobs converting the economy from one based on fossil fuels to one based on sustainable energy sources.

Regular readers will know that Warren was the person I wanted Biden to choose. I rejoice that we have a woman on the ticket and only wish it has been a progressive woman. After the racial tensions the nation experienced this summer, putting a Black woman on the ticket is to be commended, a strong signal that in the Democratic Party, anti-racism is not negotiable.

Additionally, as a daughter of immigrants, she personifies the life circumstances and hopes of immigrants for whom the Trump administration has been especially hellish.

Harris' impressive personal story and undoubted competence will, day in and day out, give the lie to the ugliest beliefs of both sexism and racism.

The fact that the Democrats have a Black woman on the ticket means race will be at the center of this autumn's election even more so than it was going to be. That makes it even more imperative for progressives to brace themselves to denounce racist and sexist attacks on Harris, and to make that a part of Donald Trump's defeat in November.

Let's be clear: Disappointment in this choice does not change the moral equation in November. Just as I argued last month that Democrats should welcome the support of Republicans disgusted by Trump, let no one think that having Harris on the ticket is a deal-breaker. Bernie Bros and other disappointed progressives must rally to the Biden-Harris ticket and work to make sure that there is plenty of pressure within the party for strongly progressive economic policies to be enacted. Ridding the nation of Trump and Trumpism is a moral imperative of the highest order for progressives here and around the world.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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