Shifting Sands: Biden's Exit, and Kamala Harris's Challenge

written by Melissa (Mel) Sanderson | July 22, 2024

The Republican convention is in the can: decisions taken, speeches made, cheers delivered, and courses set. Only one unexpected note – Trump selecting not just a running mate but, many believe, anointing a successor to continue what some see as the dismantling and destruction of 'The Grand Old Party.'

If you're a supporter of green energy trying to be a Republican, not a good few days for you. The pledge to reinstitute profitable but destructive policies, epitomized by 'drill baby drill' and vows to dismantle the Infrastructure Reform Act and the financing it has provided to try to jumpstart a greener economy are clear enough acknowledgements that to the Party leadership, at least, thirteen straight months of record heat and associated human and economic costs are meaningless or at best cause for a jab at Democratic sensibilities.

Candidate/former President Trump might be upset today, as breaking news has driven him from center stage, at least for a while.

President Biden, bowing to political realities and public demand, has withdrawn his bid for a second Presidential term and stepped off the head of the Democratic ticket in favor of his running mate, Vice President Kamala Harris. This decision is an immediate consequence of an abysmal debate performance against Trump, in which Biden sealed his fate by appearing fragile, confused, and too old for the world's most demanding job. (Comment: Not that candidate Trump is much younger. It always was a choice between old men.)

This changes everything, many say.

Does it? Are Democrats rejoicing? I'm not sure I'm hearing that. Biden's choice raises a new set of questions than when the US was simply going to choose between two old white men – a well known dynamic in this country.

Consider the example of Hillary Clinton, one of the most seasoned and best-qualified presidential candidates in modern US history. As First Lady she built international relationships that buoyed her success when she subsequently became Secretary of State. She deeply understood politics and international affairs and had a high public profile. Whether liked or not, she was known.

Can Kamala say the same? I don't believe so. Can Kamala mobilize the female vote? Well, many have questioned where she was when women's rights were attacked and ripped asunder with the revocation of a woman's right to choose. There is a perception that she failed to seize a chance to show leadership on a crucial issue. Can Kamala mobilize the Black vote? Well, like many others of mixed heritage (including former President Barack Obama) some will reject her as "not really Black," while some will reject her as "not White." Worst of all, she's a woman.

The key question is whether a woman can beat Trump and his MAGA followers. The electoral history of the US, going back to Geraldine Ferraro and proceeding through Hillary Clinton, suggests that this is the real issue. Will Americans finally vote for a woman?

With all these questions, why did Biden resign specifically in this way? Well – money matters and possibly if at least one member of 'Biden-Harris" isn't on the ticket all or most of the money already raised by the Democratic party to support its electoral bid might have been at least in limbo if not lost

outright. Or perhaps he just wanted to be loyal to his Vice President, realizing that his decision isn't necessarily binding on the party convention.

Why does all this matter? Well, aside from the impact of US elections on global scenarios including ongoing wars and conflicts, there's that little matter of the health of the planet.

Recall for a minute: thirteen straight months of record-breaking heat with human and economic consequences. If that doesn't demand profound change in the way we conduct our economies and lifestyles it's hard to imagine what would.

There are some who bemoan the costs and doubt the feasibility of change. Better perhaps to surrender to the tyranny of the consumer checkbook and just let China run roughshod over the future, dominating the primary markets that underpin change: specifically mining for and processing the elements that are critical to new technologies such as nickle, copper, lithium, cobalt, and rare earths, among others. China currently processes and transforms over 85% of global critical minerals production. The majority of large Western mining companies haven't entered the fray, unconvinced that demand is sustainable and fundamentally motivated by chasing quarterly profits and high returns regardless of the external costs. This has left junior explorers and developers at the thin point of the spear to develop Western capabilities, hampered by Chinese ability to crush market prices and investor reluctance to shoulder lengthy and risky ROI horizons making government grants and loans essential to their survival.

Laying aside human welfare and the dominance the US has enjoyed for almost 75 years as a result of its thriving economy, let us not forget national security. If the US wants to continue as a

world power, if it wants to be able to continue to protect its perceived interests around the world, there is no easy way out. US military technology above all relies on an array of sometimes exotic niche critical minerals, as well as more readily available ones such as rare earths. The very fledgling US and Western efforts to access, process, and use (as permanent metal magnets for instance) these critical minerals without Chinese inputs (or at least minimizing those) literally depends on the outcome of this election.

Essentially, one party wants to roll back the clock, rely on ‘business as usual’ and imagine that somehow that will work out well for the nation. The other party launched the most extensive system of government industrial policy and economic support the US has seen since World War II to at least try to enable economic change and secure supplies to support military needs. This hasn’t been as well-informed, effective or even fast as one could wish and certainly the current efforts can be improved.

The results of November 2024 will profoundly impact the future of the US and its allies. The Republicans have chosen their slate and their policies. The Democrats must now do likewise. The upcoming convention provides the grassroots of the party a chance to accept and endorse President Biden’s recommendation of Kamala Harris or choose two different challengers. All eyes should be upon Chicago August 19-22 as truly consequential decisions will be made by the ordinary Americans taking part in democracy in action. Their decisions in turn could shape the outcome in November and for at least four years to come.