



Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz participate in an interview with CNN's Dana Bash on Aug. 29. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/CNN)



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Political interviews, like the one CNN's Dana Bash conducted with Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz last night, are not usually the stuff of high drama in a campaign, but these are not usual times. The late decision by President Joe Biden to step aside, the lack of a primary season in which a candidate like Harris would be grilled repeatedly on issues, the compressed nature of the campaign, Republican complaints that Harris had not sat for an interview in weeks, all lent more than typical consequence to Bash's interview.

The first verdict? Dana Bash gets an A. She pressed both Harris and Walz when they tried to dodge a question. She included policy questions and personality questions. She asked many of the questions any of us would want to ask if we were sitting in a café with the candidates. Bash is a pro. At a time when the media is under scrutiny for its occasional fascination with ephemeral concerns and esoteric issues, Bash focused on the kinds of questions most Americans care about.

Harris' performance gets a B, maybe a B minus. Many of her answers were responsive and factually accurate, from discussing the economic mess left by Covid to former President Donald Trump's sabotage of a bipartisan immigration bill. But, in both cases, Harris failed to create the kind of narrative that would take root in the imagination of both the Democratic base and those few undecided swing voters who will decide the election in November.

At the beginning of the debate, Harris said her principal goal on Day 1 would be to strengthen the middle class. She repeated the line from her convention speech about charting "a new way forward." She did an excellent job articulating some of the problems that the pandemic inflicted on the economy, and which the Biden-Harris administration inherited. She thoughtfully listed some of the accomplishments the Biden-Harris administration achieved, from lowering the cost of certain prescription drugs to massive investments in manufacturing jobs.

What was missing was a narrative. The swing voters in Pennsylvania will not be satisfied with any appeal that fails to acknowledge the complicity of past Democratic presidencies with the policies which ruined their communities. The sense of betrayal some rural voters in the Midwest feel to the Democrats is acute. They were loyal to

the Democrats, and first Bill Clinton and then Barack Obama sold them down the river for trade agreements that multinational corporations wanted but which hollowed out thousands of communities throughout the country. Harris needs to figure out how to reach those voters and nothing she said in the Bash interview really helped her achieve that.

When Bash tried to nail Harris down on her policy switches, Harris returned to the line: "My values have not changed." That was an important thing to say. But in future interviews, Harris needs to also explain why she did change. She told Bash, "It is important to build consensus," and I wish she had elaborated that insight, that governing requires compromise, principled compromise, but compromise nonetheless. If Harris can find a way to articulate the value of pragmatism, I suspect it would resonate with middle America.

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At the very least, she would be well served to include a well-read Catholic in her debate prep team. She would be well advised to answer this question about having changed her position on certain issues by quoting St. John Henry Newman: "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." Put that quote out there, and then talk about how her career in California instilled a certain parochialism in her worldview, a parochialism that was challenged first in the Senate and exploded while serving as vice president. This might also have the benefit of allowing Harris to disassociate herself from the various pathologies in California with which Fox News is constantly trying to tarnish her.

At the end of the interview, Bash asked Harris about the now iconic photo of one of her grand-nieces watching her acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. Bash specifically asked about the racial and gender significance of her nomination. Harris did not take the bait. "I am running because I believe that I am the best person to do this job at this moment," she said.

This interview was important. How important remains to be seen. In July after his disastrous debate performance, [President Biden did a high stakes interview](#) with George Stephanopoulos on ABC News. The president was much better — sharper, more lucid — than he had been during the debate, but he was not so sharp that he was able to set aside questions about his age. The clock kept ticking.

In 1979, [Roger Mudd interviewed Sen. Edward Kennedy](#) and no one expected it to be a consequential event. But when Mudd asked Kennedy why he was thinking of running for president, he was silent at first, then meandering, finally almost shockingly discursive. Yet he still came within a whisker of defeating the incumbent president, Jimmy Carter, in the primaries.

Donald Trump has had some trainwreck interviews over the years. We all remember [when he told Chris Matthews](#) on "Hardball" that in enacting abortion bans, "there has to be some form of punishment" for women who procure abortions. Or when he disparaged Sen. John McCain's heroism [in an interview](#) with Frank Luntz at the Family Leadership Summit. These seemed to cost him nothing as enough people thought the remarks were showmanship, not to be taken seriously.

It is easy to understand why Harris did not do an interview in the period between the time of the June debate and Biden's decision to withdraw in July: Any interviewer would have tried, from a variety of angles, to get her to comment on the one thing about which she, of all people, could not comment: Whether or not Biden should drop out. It is more difficult to understand why Harris did not subsequently agree to three or five or ten interviews, which would have lowered the significance of any one of them.

For whatever reason, Harris chose to do this interview with Bash, and to do it now. There was more content than any of us got at the convention, but it was still largely about setting a tone, communicating a message that is stacked with contentless words — hope, change, forward. That may or may not satisfy undecided voters in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Harris and Walz did not hurt themselves. It isn't clear that they helped themselves. The key will be what her campaign learns from this.

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