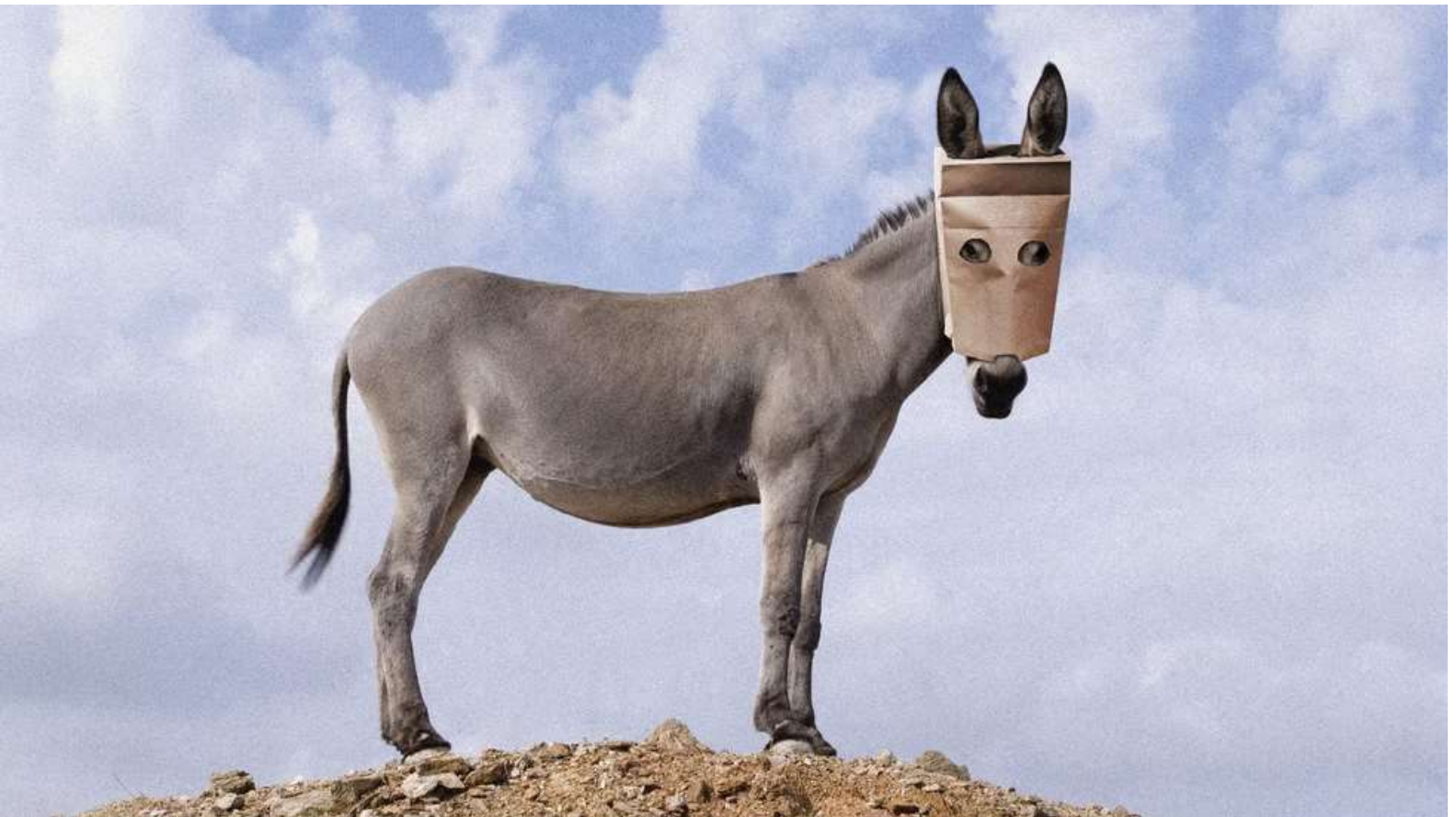


IDEAS

# Where Do the Democrats Find These Guys?

A personal history of electoral losses

By Caitlin Flanagan



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THE OLD SAYING is “Democrats fall in love; Republicans fall in line.” But that’s not quite true. Democrats wait for a dream candidate to come along—a Bill Clinton or a Barack Obama—and they go out of their minds with excitement and ardor. But when they don’t find one, they kiss a frog and wait to see what happens. Then they stand at the altar wondering what the hell they’ve gotten themselves into, the church doors swing open, and Michael Dukakis walks down the aisle.

It’s a pattern I’ve watched Democrats enact my whole life: Terrible Candidate/Important Election. It’s the opposite of a Hail Mary pass. It’s an Act of Contrition. Bless me, father, for I have sinned: I played John Kerry at wide receiver.

So here we are, with Donald Trump rattling his cage and Ron DeSantis emerging as Florida’s Duke of Wellington. Who knows what other rough beast could be slouching toward Iowa to be caucused. And Democrats? They’ve got a good man who’s a terrible candidate, and getting worse by the week.

My first experience with TC/IE took place when I was 10. The big one: 1972, McGovern versus Nixon. I grew up in Berkeley, California, and I never once saw a Nixon bumper sticker; every single car, including our own, had a McGovern sticker. He was going to be an excellent president because he was going to stop the war in Vietnam. One afternoon, looking out the car window at a sea of McGovern signs, I asked my mother if she thought Nixon would get any votes at all, and she said, “Oh, honey, he’s going to win.”

*What?* I was in a fifth-grade blue bubble and hadn’t even known it.

I know my mother was trying to prepare me, but how do you prepare a 10-year-old for Election Night, 1972? Even my own parents seemed unprepared for Nixon to carpet-bomb 49 states. I was allowed to stay up to watch the results come in. “Oof,” my father said every time another state went to Nixon. “Oof” or “A body blow.” Wednesday would be a day of healing.

As bad as the defeat was, it came with a moral clarity—only strengthened over the decades—that that war was a travesty. It made the Iraq War look like the landing at Normandy. It seemed to me, in my childish apprehension of things, that this was what it meant to be a Democrat: that even in loss you had the consolation of knowing

that your candidate was right and just, and that however small your part had been, you had aligned yourself with the thrilling possibility of justice.

**T**RAVEL WITH ME NOW to a Long Island living room, where 12 orders of kung pao chicken are slowly congealing and Walter Mondale is getting shellacked. It was the first election I was old enough to vote in, and I'd gone back to my parents' town to watch the outcome. Mondale did not run on ending a terrible war. He ran on a nuclear freeze, the Equal Rights Amendment, and cutting the deficit. Feel the excitement? Ronald Reagan was 17 years older than Mondale, but he always looked fantastic. You'd spend hours fuming about all the rat-bastard things he was doing to the country, and then catch a glimpse of him on television and think, *But for some reason, I kind of like that guy.*

Mondale barely squeaked out a win in his home state of Minnesota. It wasn't exactly heartbreaking to watch him lose; it was mostly a sense of confusion. *Where did they find this guy?* The prospect of waiting up to watch Mondale give a concession speech was heinous; his whole campaign had been a concession speech. Everyone left early; no one took home any kung pao chicken.

One thing was very clear to me after that election: What we needed was charisma. What we got was Michael Dukakis.

Dukakis said he was going to "rekindle the American spirit of invention and daring," but he wasn't a rekindling kind of guy; he was a *let's make sure this campfire is fully doused* kind of guy. He said he would save us from "the limited ambitions" of the Reagan administration. The whole problem with the Reagan administration was that its ambitions were limitless. He was probably hindered by the dumbest fact about American politics: We usually choose the taller guy, and Dukakis was 5 foot 8.

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Exciting interlude: Bill Clinton! Finally, some relief. Sex appeal, competence, Fleetwood Mac, and two terms. Also the 1994 crime bill, which accelerated mass incarceration, so—like every single president before and after—he left a complicated record.

**J** OHN KERRY. That was the election when I finally realized that either the Democratic Party was high or I was. You could not imagine a more unelectable person. Kerry came back from a four-month hitch in Vietnam convinced that American war crimes were widespread, largely covered up, and encouraged by the officers who sent men into battle. He became the spokesman for a group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and in a Senate hearing, he described a recent meeting in which members talked about things that they had done: “raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in a fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan.” He said that the men sent to Vietnam had been given the chance to die for the “biggest nothing in history.” The next day he took part in the most powerful anti-war protest of that era, and perhaps of any era, in which veterans stood outside the Capitol and hurled their medals and service ribbons back at the government that had awarded them. One man threw his cane over the fence.

It was one of many turning points in the anti-war movement. But it came with a steep cost, perhaps steeper than Kerry realized. When he testified, there were still American POWs in Vietnam. He implied that war crimes weren't rare and terrible events but everyday occurrences. He dishonored 2.5 million service members. No one who does that can ever become commander in chief.

*I mean, isn't that freaking obvious?*

The one good thing about Kerry was that he represented rock bottom. It would be impossible to nominate another candidate so clearly bound to fail as John Kerry.

**I** SPEAK TOO SOON.

Hillary Clinton was the subject of decades of intense and volatile rage, much of which was directed at her by misogynists and lunatics. But to paraphrase Michael Jordan, misogynists and lunatics vote, too.

When she delivered her concession speech the day after the election—she'd had to pull herself together the night before—she seemed to be in a state of shock, and to feel somewhat culpable for what had happened to America. (Not an entirely misplaced emotion; there are at least 10 nonstops a day from New York to Michigan.)

In the speech, she repeated one of the big lines of her campaign: that someday we would elect a woman president and break “the tallest, hardest glass ceiling.” Did she honestly think that a rich white woman who had gone to Wellesley and Yale would have an inherently harder time becoming president than any Black man in America?

She did. The problem with Hillary Clinton's campaign was Hillary Clinton.

**J**OE BIDEN announced his first presidential campaign in June 1987, a few weeks before my first wedding. We both experienced a long streak of summer richness and promise, but by September the honeymoons were over. I had traded the bridal registry at B. Altman's for a classroom in Metairie, Louisiana, and five sections of high-school English; Biden's campaign had blown up in an astonishing plagiarism scandal.

In an early primary debate, Biden had lifted—almost word for word—a speech off a British Labour politician named Neil Kinnock. This included telling the audience that he was the first person in his family to go to college in “a thousand generations” (taking the lineage back to Cro-Magnon Biden), and that he came from a family of coal miners. That no one in his family had worked in a mine and that there were college graduates on his mother's side of the family were the least of his problems. Someone working for his rival for the nomination, Dukakis (remember him?), sent reporters a tape of the two men making their almost identical speeches, and the scandal kept growing from there.

It turned out that, in various speeches, Biden had lifted passages from Robert F. Kennedy and at least one line from John F. Kennedy (and not an obscure one, a greatest hit: “Each generation of Americans has been summoned,” which is the kind of thing you can say when you yourself have been summoned to defend the free world, not to take a summer lifeguard job in Delaware). He'd also lifted lines from some of Hubert Humphrey's speeches. In that pre-internet era, it took a few days for reporters to find all of these quotations, but then there was a grand finale: In law

school, he'd been assigned to write a 15-page paper, five pages of which turned out to have been plagiarized. He then held a press conference.

The goal of the press conference was to clear all of this up, and the effect of the press conference was to make viewers think that Joe Biden was a big dummy: "I've done some dumb things, and I'll do some dumb things again. I've done some dumb things as a senator. I've done some dumb things as a lawyer. So, ladies and gentlemen, I've done something very dumb." To my knowledge, it's the only instance of a "Dumber days ahead" speech, and on that point alone it's engaging. What Biden wanted America to know was that, yes, of course, he was a doer of dumb things, but he was basically a nice guy.

His approach to the problem was to address not the question of why he'd done these things, but rather *how* he'd done them. On the law-school paper: "I took the cases out of the *Law Review* article and the footnotes out of the *Law Review* article—and I honestly thought what I was doing was the right way of doing it—and the representation of what the cases said from the *Law Review* article. And then at the end of the *Law Review* article when they set out and said, 'This is what all this means,' I wrote that in my paper—and I footnoted it! I footnoted the *Law Review* article! I used, in a 15-page paper, I used five pages"—he holds his hand up, fingers splayed: *five*—"of the *Law Review* article." He seemed to genuinely believe that this one footnote was a mark in his favor, not the clue that led the reader straight to the article he'd copied.

Regarding his speeches, he wanted the reporters to understand that "I don't write speeches; I *do* them."

*Hub?*

"I do them on the backs of envelopes," he said, and for a moment you thought you might be about to board a train hurtling toward Gettysburg, but instead he explained the series of events that led to his lifting Neil Kinnock's speech for his closing argument in the debate.

He said that the day before the debate, he'd realized that "I didn't have a close." He said, "Usually what I do, as you've observed, is I wait for the debate to go on and see where the debate takes us. So, to make an appropriate close, not some canned thing."

This would seem to obviate the need for coming up with a close, but when he got to Iowa, the need for one was pressing. “So I’m getting in the car, and there’s a young man named David Wilhelm who runs my campaign. And I said, ‘David, I don’t have a close.’ He says, ‘Well, we prepared you seven or eight closes!’ And I said, ‘I don’t agree with any of ’em. They don’t have any feeling to ’em. And he says, ‘Well, why don’t you do what you did on the Kinnock thing; that expresses what you mean.’ And I said, ‘You’re right!’ And I said, ‘Thinking about it—that applies to me!’ And that’s honest to God what happened—we were riding over in the van. And I mean I said that to my—” Here he seems to be getting ready to say “I said that to myself,” but then catches himself. “I mean I said that to him.”

It is at this point that we get the full Biden, because he turns to the side and asks an aide, “Was he in the van?” There’s a beat, presumably long enough for some panicked underling to mime *Fuck if I know!* And then Biden says, “I think he was.”

The entire point of this illustration is to tell us about a particular conversation with a particular person in a particular van, and a sentence later he tells us he doesn’t know if that person was even in the van. But God love him, he kind of sells it.

**M**UCH OF THE CRITICISM lately of President Biden’s apparent senescence is based on something that happens to many old people: Age is determined to be the cause of some peculiar habit of behavior or thought, when in fact that habit has been with the person throughout his life. A lot of what people are calling the “gaffes” of old age are just Joe Biden. He’s a bullshitter, a teller of tall tales. His method has always been to give informal speeches that are discursive, anecdote-laden, in which the editing process takes place in real time. His classic move is to turn a forensic intelligence on the unimportant part of a situation and then to gloss over—or skip entirely—the main point. Barack Obama is said to have observed that it’s impossible to overestimate Joe Biden’s ability to fuck things up, and in large part that has to do with the endless, improvisational talking. But that gabbing is also the reason he was so effective at getting people to consider changing their votes when he was a senator and then the vice president. He doesn’t use verbal communication as a means of transmitting facts. He uses it to bond with someone. Talking is a kind of lubricant, easing people along to a new point of view—at the very, very least, you know that if you agree to change your vote, he might stop talking. He doesn’t hold grudges, he doesn’t shit-talk, and he tends to see the best in others.

It's just that, as he ages, the whole system is slowing down, and his ability to bounce his way through gaffes and to revise stories in the midst of telling them ("Was he in the van? I think he was") is diminishing. In the 1987 press conference, you can watch him remember that Anwar Sadat is dead halfway through saying the words "Anwar Sadat," but he finesses it and keeps on rolling.

If Joe Biden had been the nominee in 2016 instead of Hillary Clinton, Trump would never have been elected. People didn't hate Joe Biden back then. But now, for a dozen reasons—many of them not his fault—regard for him has plummeted.

In the early decades of the last century, a Viennese surgeon named Eugen Steinach claimed that he could restore the virility of old men by grafting tissue from monkey glands onto their testes. The procedure was later modified to one that left the animal kingdom undisturbed and was essentially just a partial vasectomy. Sigmund Freud underwent the procedure, as did William Butler Yeats (in Ireland it earned him the nickname "The Gland Old Man"). They both raved about the results, which in and of itself is testament to the fantastical imaginings of old men.

Old men dream of youth and often embarrass themselves in its pursuit. Many younger people in the Democratic Party seem to think Joe Biden's already out the door. Gavin Newsom isn't just measuring for curtains; he's packing the U-Haul. But Biden's never been a quitter, and his great optimism has helped him survive the tragedies that have befallen him. He very well might want to run again, which would be a disaster.

In the middle of his second term, Barack Obama invited Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the White House for lunch. His plan was to gently suggest the possibility of her retiring before he left office, so that there would be no chance of her seat going to a conservative. She was then 85 and had had cancer five times. Nothing doing. She stayed right where she was, and soon enough we got Amy Coney Barrett.

Have you ever had to take the keys away from an old relative? It's not easy. Sometimes you give up the fight to keep the peace. And then you hope against hope that everything will be all right.

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