

Civilizational Weirdness

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (October 2024)



According to media sources, the Democrat Presidential and Vice-Presidential nominees scored a significant blow to their Republican opponents by calling them “weird.”

“I don’t know who came up with the message, but I salute them,” said David Karpt, a Strategic Communications Professor at George Washington University.

Karpt said labeling Republican comments as “weird” is the sort of concise take that resonates quickly with Harris supporters. Plus, Karpt noted, “it frustrates opponents, leading them to further amplify it through off-balance responses.”

Pure genius to reimagine what a sophisticated strategic campaign might strive to achieve. What else might the Presidential candidate, supported by her serviceable VP

candidate/companion, re-imagine? How about the entire list of Democrat positions of the past four years, including but not limited to: the non-existent border and the role, any role, for ICE; energy, drilling, pipelines, fracking, leading to the elimination of gas cars by 2040 and the imposition of the EV mandate; defunding the police; the trillion dollar Green New Deal; tax on tips, mandatory gun buy-back; support for Israel; and of course, the ban on plastic straws.

And yet, we are told position shifts and reversals on all positions—otherwise known as trying to hide the incumbent record of the last four years—are not significant. Flip-flops on all issues with the prospect of flop-flips back to original positions once in office are made right by the simple fact that currently serving Vice-President and Presidential candidate Kamala Harris's "values have not changed." A pithy re-imagining of the same might be a Gandhi-esque, "Be the change you want to see imposed on others in the world."

I suggest there are problems with both the flaunting of 'weird' and claiming of 'values.' First weird. It is beyond weird that an in-your-face New York billionaire has been able to capture a loyal base from among rural and working-class people across the country, and incrementally, across the racial divide. Populism is born of disillusionment of politicians who do not give groups of people a voice, and for whatever reason, Trump has spoken the language of those excluded and hit economically hardest by changes of past years.

This economic and social portrait is echoed in award-winning fashion in J.D. Vance's memoir and subsequent film, *Hillbilly Elogy*. Vance's realistic depiction of poverty should be good news for all, and an incentive to hunker down on creating better educational and employment opportunities. But the progressive narrative of racism leading to the necessity of equality of outcome is the ideology that rules education, the media, Hollywood and beyond, making J.D. Vance's character and

book really weird—defined as anything outside the progressive narrative.

Problem is, Vance—and I quote Walter Mattheau in *Grumpy Old Men*—is “straight as a grisly’s dick.” To be clear, and so as not to offend, Mattheau was referring to Jack Lemon’s honesty and not his sexual orientation. J.D. escaped poverty and family addiction for education and service to his country, more education at Yale Law School, and success in business. He subsequently married the daughter of Indian immigrants, and they have three bi-racial children. So not weird so much as a successful realization of the diverse and multicultural American dream. A Democrat with the same pedigree would be deemed an exemplar of the progressive playbook.

So, here’s how ‘weird’ and ‘values’ are conjoined. It can be true that conservatives err on the side of resisting needed change while clinging to a nostalgic Rockwellian version of a past that never was. It can also be true that the progressive left—a majority of Democrats—disparage any version of history that fails to make a binary distinction between oppressors and the oppressed. Binary, polarized views have displaced real dialogue with results that undermine societal values generally agreed to, until the present time.

The value-driven generational bargain used to be a realization of, and tension between, needed change and what needs to be conserved. Conservatism was not complete inability to change; progress was not measured by how much of the past is blown up. Change could be swift or incremental, but complete change was not a progressive goal, it was an anarchistic nightmare.

John F. Kennedy’s universally admired words, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” would brand him closer to MAGA than a progressive Democrat today. In terms of policy, particularly addressing much needed change to racial policy, the great progressive Democrat was actually fairly timid. He intended but could not

fully act. Real change only came later from Kennedy's less progressive Presidential replacement, Lyndon B. Johnson. Could it be that Democrats are nostalgic for a past that never was? Kennedy has always been the Democrat's Rockwellian version of Camelot (until Kamalot), with style over substance to sustain the narrative. Kennedy wanted progressive change but was held back by his assessment of the degree to which change was permissible based on the generational bargain at that time. He may have erred on the side of too little change. Being on the right side of history is often adjudicated by timing.

Which makes it astonishingly, jaw-droppingly weird for Kamala Harris to justify changing her position on everything as both necessary and value-driven. Bernie Sander's naive interview response was telling—Kamala's is a practical and temporary faux-pivot until power is secured. The value candidate Harris places upon the acquisition of power has not changed, will not change.

Believe in nothing, be willing to do anything. Rare is the politician today driven by personal conviction. It isn't just that the wrong people tend to run for office, it is a sad fact that giving away party favours almost always beats reducing, conserving, saying no. More is not less on the political stump.

So, what does Presidential candidate Harris believe? Are her motives value-driven? As a hard-arsed prosecutor she had to pivot left to to be accepted as a progressive; as a progressive politician she has pivoted right to be possibly elected to highest office, and with the holy grail in hand, she will have to pivot hard left to accommodate her leftist base who have held their nose to allow for a centrist pretense, for a time.

The willingness to actually change one's position is not a character flaw. It is a strength to reconsider long held views, to change one's beliefs based on new information, to

admit to error based on faulty assumptions. But Kamala's temporary change represents an extreme and ironically ubiquitous means of achieving success in politics: that is, political expediency according to weather vane optics at the expense of believing in anything that has the whiff of personal conviction. Power is an end in itself, an aphrodisiac, the only value of value.

The borrowed thinking of ideology drives the binary narrative that rules education, entertainment, the media and politics. Ideology requires conformity, discourages discussion, kills critical thinking and free speech. Ideologues are tough enough, but those who believe in nothing are far more difficult. The non-believer Kamalians are deceptive, are clever, are always about self in the guise of service to the moving target of their contrived cause. Worse, the tactics, the strategy, Kamala's ruse, might work.

The debate didn't help. It should have been an opportunity for clarity. But Kamala's practiced tactics trumped Trump. For better or worse, Trump is a known quantity. Kamala's many policy reversals afforded Trump a historic opportunity to metaphorically hold her feet to the fire. Trump blew his chance to expose; and if Harris was honest about her policy transformation, she blew her chance to be known. Her goal of practiced obfuscation was realized.

True, the ABC moderators were biased—fact checking and follow up question imbalances tell the tale—but disturbingly, Trump spent much of the debate histrionically chasing squirrels. I've heard conservative commentators reframing Trump's performance as a win—it was not—perhaps forgetting that the purpose of a debate is to clarify for the undecided which candidate is coolest under pressure and most likely to act in their best interests. Since then, others have argued Harris' post debate bump was minimal; I would argue, the lost

opportunity could have pierced the narrative in a manner Kamal's handlers could not have handled.

Trump was more substantive on policy, but fixating on rally attendance and migrant dog-eating rumours is not how the candidate wins the mushy middle. Christopher Rufo has followed with [investigative](#) journalism and given the rumour some legitimacy—cats, not dogs turns out—but that is hardly the point.

Trump's strongest issue is the border debacle with an unknown number—perhaps twenty million—illegal migrants walking into the US under the Biden administration. Crowding, crime, cost and chaos makes the necessity of dealing with this issue a self-evident truth that the Democrats have failed to deal with—and still being in power, continue to ignore. Kamala made a weak attempt to blame Republicans for not supporting Democrat border legislation, which set Trump up for the perfect knock-out moment. But rather than focus on overwhelming American support, projected migrant costs and the need for an immediate, decisive and humane deportation, Trump repeatedly claimed all illegal migrants are bad people. No population of millions can be said to have all bad people, and to exaggerate and claim as much undermined an overwhelming reason to vote Republican. The advantage of a past President seeking re-election is the opportunity to be presidential, and that did not happen.

But, but, but, you react, Kamala told all those lies about Trump. Yes, and she understood that the big lie, unabashedly declared and repeated—i.e. 'blood bath' 'dictator' 'abortion band' 'Project 2025,' comments without context—is an effective debate technique. Accusations against Trump, and Harris' denial of previous positions held, could easily have been fact checked—instant, incontrovertible proof exists for each point debated. It is easy to be a post-game quarterback, but one wonders why Trump didn't stop and demand the moderators fact check any one of Kamala's big lies, as effective,

dispassionate rebuttal. The moderators' likely refusal would have been dramatic without Trump having to be dramatic. A flattening of unregulated repartee would have helped people see Trump's actual policies, and Harris' lack thereof.

All of which leads to a scary realization. Accusations leveled—including the seemingly innocuous accusations of being weird—do not need to be verified to be effective. The sad truth is—tinged with depressing irony—in a time of unlimited and instant access to information, the veracity of lies big and small either goes unchecked, or else, to the narrative-believing public, don't matter.

For complicated reasons—decline of religion, family, country, coupled with supremacy of my wants, my needs, my story—we do not expect or demand objective truth in our lives. What politicians have said or done is not a blue print for accountability, it is yesterday's forgotten news.

In the decimation of meritocracy as a cultural norm— that singular quality which accounts for American ascendancy—America has capitulated to political expediency and personal opportunism over the interests of people.

Winning a political debate today will rarely tell the voter who is the best candidate, who will most auspiciously work towards promises made. And given the ubiquity of lying, it is unlikely to reveal the content of character. Debates reveal clever tactics, composure, impulse control, and dedication to coaching. The objective mind and critical thinking have low to no currency, even as elections teeter, democracy erodes and civilizations raise and fall on the whims and wisdom of its citizens.

Reframing the debate as Trump's win because of his more substantive emphasis on policy is disingenuous. Kamala won the perception game, leaving the question, what next? One hopes the election does not turn on the perception of weirdness.

For all the machinations of candidate intrigue and polar-opposite versions of truth, it all comes down to the voting public's willingness to extend, to ferret for and see through optics—or in parlance of our disparaged past—to separate the wheat from the chaff. Regrettably, the effort-laden individual obligation to find truth is at a historic low. Such is the sorry state of affairs on the eve of fifty sorry states wanting to believe that values and not nihilism is driving this election and their lives..

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes* (Castle Quay Books, June, 2024), and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife. His website is larrymccloskeywriter.com.

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