

PATH TO THE VICE PRESIDENCY:

Kamala Harris'

History-Making Journey

BY SHERRIE NEGREA

Vice President Kamala Harris stood on the stage at the Democratic debate in June 2019 in Miami as one of 10 presidential candidates when she attacked the future president who would name her his running mate.

While asserting that she did not believe that Joseph R. Biden Jr. was a racist, she proceeded to criticize him for making comments about working with two segregationist senators and for opposing busing in the 1970s.

"There was a little girl in California who was a part of the second class to integrate her public schools and she was bused to school every day," she said. "And that little girl was me."

Although Harris' comment could have cut a permanent wedge between her and her former rival, some political observers say it sealed her future as his choice for vice president.

"I think that response gave her the vice presidency," says Charles Denyer, author of three books on the United States vice presidency. "It was so memorable; it was so profound. It spoke to the great divide and the racial tension that this country has had for so many years that has been pushed under the rug, and I think she brought it to the attention of the American public."

Early Career Moves

Harris' sharp questioning at the debates was a skill developed during her 23 years as a prosecutor. Her experience as the District Attorney of San Francisco and Attorney General of California provided her with a background in law enforcement that would prove useful to her future political career.

During the campaign, Harris was criticized for her record as Attorney General, particularly by the progressive wing of the Democratic Party because she had refused to intervene in several cases of fatal shootings by police in California. Yet her experience as a prosecutor also showed voters that unlike many female political candidates who tend to focus on social service issues, Harris brought experience in a less traditional field for women.

"What is powerful about Vice President Harris is that her career is rooted in law enforcement and public safety and traditionally male-dominated issues," says Domonique James, founder and CEO of Politics with Purpose, a communications and strategy firm.

"I think that's one of the reasons why she was selected as Biden's vice president candidate. And while she will be effective as a vice president because she has intimate understanding of these issues and where systems fail, she has the ability to reflect on her experience and incorporate it in very timely issues that are happening in society right now."

Running for U.S. Senate

What allowed Harris to move onto the national political stage was her decision to run for the Senate seat vacated by Barbara Boxer in 2016. Harris' election to the Senate gave her a platform to enter the national political debate and vigorously oppose former President Donald Trump's policies.

Denyer argues that Harris ran for Senate specifically to propel her to a presidential campaign. "She had a goal in mind and that was to be the first female president of the United States," says Denyer, author of *Our Nation's No. 2: The Rising Influence of America's Modern Vice Presidency*. "I don't think she was going to be content just being a U.S. Senator."

As a senator, Harris became known as an aggressive questioner of Trump's political appointees. Serving on the Judiciary Committee, she played a key role in grilling Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh about allegations of past sexual misconduct.

Yet Harris also dove into major policy issues, sponsoring a police reform bill that would ban choke holds, racial profiling and no-knock warrants. Many saw her support of the bill and her outspoken criticism of the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police as an evolution of her tough-on-crime position.

"There were clearly some signs that even before she became a senator that she was moving in the direction that there has to be more accountability to police behavior and a better way of keeping statistics on incidents involving police," says

"A great experiment takes great determination. The will to do the work and then the wisdom to keep refining, keep tinkering, keep perfecting. The same determination is being realized in America today."

—Kamala Harris

in her first speech as vice president

Renée White, provost at Wheaton College and a scholar of race, gender and social inequality in America. "I think that set the stage for some of the work that she was trying to do as a senator as well."

Entering the Presidential Campaign

Launching her presidential campaign in January 2019 was Harris' most critical move that led to her eventual consideration for the No. 2 spot. While Harris was initially considered a top contender, her campaign gradually unraveled amid her shifting positions on the issues and the disorganization among her campaign staff.

Yet ultimately her decision to enter the race succeeded in giving her a national political following and the name recognition that could bolster Biden's candidacy.

"If she had not run, she would not have been the No. 2 spot on the ticket," Denyer says. "She performed quite well in the initial debates but she never scored quite as well in the polling. It's really a tale of two stories. She could not take her successful performance in the debates to the polls."

Biden's announcement that he would choose a woman for his running mate raised the prospect that Harris was the best candidate for vice president. Her background as the daughter of immigrant academics from India and Jamaica brought much-needed diversity to the ticket and her experience as a senator and presidential candidate gave her the credibility to tackle the challenge of a contentious campaign.

"When you take her lived experience, being a woman of color, both Black and South Asian, an HBCU graduate and that she is married to a Jewish man and that she is a stepmother, and when you look at the entirety of her career, I think that she just had a modern story and perspective that was appropriate for this time," James says. "I think Barack Obama and Joe Biden had the right combination of experience in 2008, and President Biden and Vice President Harris had the right contrasting experience and vision in 2020, compared to the Trump administration." 🗳️