

Republican Convention: Best and Worst Moments From Night 1

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Body

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Welcome to Opinion's commentary for Night 1 of the Republican National Convention. In this special feature, Times Opinion writers rank the evening on a scale of 1 to 10: 1 means the night was a disaster for Republicans; 10 means it could lead to a big polling bump for Trump-Pence. Here's what our columnists and contributors thought of the event, which highlighted Kimberly Guilfoyle, Nikki Haley, Donald Trump Jr., Tim Scott and President Trump himself.

Best Moments

Wajahat Ali At least I laughed out loud.

Jamelle Bouie Nikki Haley's speech. Haley was a blast from the past, in that she very much represents the George W. Bush era of the Republican Party, a happy warrior for low taxes, small government and belligerence abroad. Haley is a very talented and effective politician, and it is not hard to imagine a future in which Trump has receded from view, and figures like her take the reins of the party.

Elizabeth Bruenig Tim Scott's speech was well-delivered and powerfully written, but more potent was the fact that he didn't even have to misquote or disingenuously misinterpret recent remarks and past policies of Joe Biden to call into question Biden's antiracist bona fides.

Linda Chavez Watching Kimberly Guilfoyle do her best Evita imitation. Was it hydroxychloroquine or too much Red Bull? What was the deal with her paying homage to her mother from "Aguadilla, Puerto Rico," and her father, "also an immigrant." Someone should tell her that Puerto Ricans are natural-born American citizens — and even Donald Trump hasn't figured out how to take that away. The man she wants re-elected would make sure there are fewer people like her in the next generation.

Gail Collins I hope you got to hear Kimberly Guilfoyle, Don Jr.'s girlfriend, rant about Democrats (a.k.a. "the socialists"). A little scary but super-energetic. And Nikki Haley delivered pretty well. Too bad she's not in the administration any more.

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Michelle Cottle President Trump's East Room chat with essential workers on the front lines of the pandemic. Yes, he looked super-awkward, and he wandered off on odd tangents, like how much truckers love him and how mean people have been about hydroxychloroquine. But it was a rare — very rare — attempt to show appreciation of other people. Good for him!

Nicole Hemmer Tim Scott deftly bracketed Donald Trump at the top of his speech, then used his time to introduce himself. In a party that is defined, for now, solely by loyalty to the president, Scott managed to deliver a speech in which he, not Trump, played the starring role.

Matt Labash As a reasonably devoted person of faith, I enjoyed all the God references. To their credit, at least nobody at the Republican convention was shy about invoking the G-word. Though I also like to think God has better things to do than to thumb the scale on the side of a presidential candidate who some of my fellow evangelicals have compared to "the second coming of God." If God doesn't see it otherwise, I'd have to reconsider atheism.

Liz Mair We're constantly being told that the big Republican star from South Carolina who will have the best shot at becoming the party's 2024 nominee is Nikki Haley. Tonight proved that conventional wisdom wrong. Tim Scott is the real Republican star out of the Palmetto State.

Daniel McCarthy Americans don't like dynasties, as Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton found out in 2016. But as George W. Bush and John Quincy Adams show, they sometimes elect a president's son, and Donald Trump Jr. set himself up as an articulate and bold voice for the new Republican Party, particularly with his call to end forever wars.

Melanye Price If the goal was to scare (mostly white) people into believing that everything you hold dear is under attack, it was quite successful. If you're Chinese-American, believe protesting is a constitutional right, support gun control or understand that all Democrats are not socialists, you are afraid that Trump could win another term and embolden more hostile actors.

Bret Stephens Nikki Haley and Tim Scott offering their personal biographies as powerful evidence that America is not a fundamentally racist country. Each of them will be formidable contenders for the 2024 Republican nomination.

Mimi Swartz The Trumpers laid down their campaign theme with a steamroller. Empathy is for weaklings who want sand kicked in their face. Socialists want to take your guns, your freedom of speech and your school choice. Liberty is on the line. Joe Biden has been a Washington hack for 47 years. No quarter will be given — even if you need it because Covid-19 took your job away.

Héctor Tobar Ronna McDaniel, chair of the Republican National Committee, made a short, effective speech that hit at the central paradox of last week's Democratic convention: Joe Biden being a nice guy isn't a political program.

Peter Wehner Watching Nikki Haley launch her 2024 campaign. Her speech was mediocre and misleading, but at this convention, it qualifies as practically Lincoln-esque. Honorable mention goes to the former football star Herschel Walker using the phrase "social justice" — in an affirmative way — at the R.N.C.

Will Wilkinson It was a phantasmagorical nightmare of barking demagoguery and disinformation. In that context, Senator Tim Scott's address — which came across like a solid pre-Trump Republican stump speech — was a balm to the soul. He projected a soothing fantasy of a well-governed America not infected by fatal contagion where Donald Trump is an abstract figure who signed a few good bills and big-spending Democrats merely threatened our pocketbooks, not the continued existence of Western civilization. I've never been less annoyed to hear that tax cuts raise revenue.

Worst Moments

Wajahat Ali My cup runneth over. The terrifying and surreal segment featuring the McCloskey couple from St. Louis was a textbook example of white supremacy. The warning? People of color are going to invade the suburbs. They pointed their guns at peaceful Black Lives Matter demonstrators and somehow think they are the victims?

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Jamelle Bouie Nikki Haley's speech. In 2015, Dylann Roof, a white supremacist who saw Black Americans and other nonwhites as threats to America as he imagined it, walked into Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., prayed with a group of Black worshipers and then killed them. Toward the end of her speech, Haley cited the aftermath of this event to rebuke Black Lives Matter protesters, contrasting the reaction there with the protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. Weaponizing the massacre in Charleston for the sake of attacking protests against police brutality — in a speech urging the country to re-elect a president who ran explicitly on racist resentment and reactionary nostalgia — was obscene.

Elizabeth Bruenig Even if Donald Trump Jr.'s speech had been overflowing with good content, the form would've obscured it, with obnoxious rhetorical turns like "Beijing Biden" (what?), "the Loch Ness Monster of the swamp" (mind-bending) and "the silenced majority" (for God's sake).

Linda Chavez The McCloskeys — the gun-toting couple who threatened peaceful protesters in their gated community — were introduced by a disingenuous film showing looting, arson and a broken gate. They referred to the protesters as a mob "that descended on our neighborhood." In their speech, the couple doubled down on the message, saying that Biden will "abolish the suburbs." It's a canard borne of desperation as suburban voters flee the G.O.P.

Gail Collins Lots of competition, but I hit bottom watching the couple brag about having waved guns at protesters marching past their yard. ("They want to abolish the suburbs altogether!")

The virtual parade of the delegates from their home states was really flat compared with the Democrats' version. This is the party of a reality TV star and they can't even figure how to make the easy stuff appealing.

Michelle Cottle Kimberly Guilfoyle was so apocalyptic and shouty that she seemed on the verge of spontaneous combustion. Her delivery might have worked in a packed arena, but it was terrifying in a quiet auditorium empty enough that her voice echoed. Close second: Her boyfriend, Don Jr., was slightly less loud but similarly amped-up and scary. And what was going on with his eyes?

Nicole Hemmer They didn't shout like Kimberly Guilfoyle, but Mark and Patricia McCloskey got their message through loud and clear. Video of them waving guns at anti-racist protesters made them an emblem of white fear and resentment, and they lived up to that reputation tonight.

Matt Labash Someone forgot to tell Kimberly Guilfoyle that this was the Republican National Convention, not Evita tryouts. (Has she stopped yelling yet?) A lot of speakers made mention of prayer tonight, and she had me saying one myself: I asked God to short out my cable connection until it was over.

Liz Mair Kim Guilfoyle forgot a bunch of things tonight. She forgot she had no audience, so the applause lines were just surrounded by dead air. She forgot she had a microphone, so she didn't need to turn the volume up to 11 (or 500). She forgot you can't paper over the lack of a crowd with more yelling, so she yelled a lot. And then some more.

Daniel McCarthy Nikki Haley was effective when she spoke about South Carolina and her family's background, but her use of Jeane Kirkpatrick's language served as a reminder that Haley is a comparative lightweight as a policy thinker, too much the creature of the old Republican establishment.

Melanye Price "The China Virus," "Beijing Biden" and other China baiting were the lowest moments. They have to know that they are fomenting potentially hostile actions toward Asian-Americans. The fact that they did it is just another example of the belligerent nature of Trump-era intolerance and willingness to run with racist tropes despite the consequences.

Bret Stephens Representative Matt Gaetz, warning of MS-13 next door, and Kimberly Guilfoyle, doing an unwitting imitation of Edvard Munch's "The Scream," were the lowlights for me.

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Mimi Swartz Donald Trump Jr. Please. Maybe his anger and hatred served as raw sirloin for the base, but his smugness and hyperbole were just beyond the pale. Biden a leader of the radical left? Come on. Runner-up: Kimberly Guilfoyle. Gurl, take a breath.

Héctor Tobar Kimberly Guilfoyle's awful, shouted harangue. As the volume reached a peak halfway through — "Don't let them destroy your families, your lives and your future!" — you could hear the pops of a few million televisions turning off.

Peter Wehner So many to choose from. But let's settle on the Trump lap dog Charlie Kirk's opening speech, in which he said the choice is between Trump and those "eliminating everything that we love" and informed us that Trump is "the bodyguard of Western civilization." Uh-huh.

Will Wilkinson Kimberly Guilfoyle's crazed, screaming rant took the cake. She seemed to take her inspiration from Benito Mussolini, Judge Jeanine Pirro and that Will Ferrell "Saturday Night Live" character who can't modulate his voice. A G.O.P. star is born.

What Else Mattered

Wajahat Ali We saw a snapshot of what will happen if Trump wins in 2020, a family run and ruled kakistocracy. They had Donald Trump's son give a talk. His title? "The president's son." A democracy as vibrant as ours shouldn't die for dynastic rule by idiots.

Jamelle Bouie The big problem with the night is that it was thematically muddled. What was the message, exactly? That the country is in chaos? That it is on the verge of prosperity? That Biden is a dangerous radical? That he is ineffectual and incompetent? Each speaker brought something different, and the result was a series of mutually exclusive messages that may appeal to the president's fans but may not persuade voters who are on the fence.

Elizabeth Bruenig Liberals pioneered identity politics with the best of intentions: It really is important to listen to and honor the experiences of people who don't come from the ranks of the privileged elite. But its vulgar manifestation is eminently exploitable, and with two women of color (Kimberly Guilfoyle and Nikki Haley) stumping for Trump alongside a Black senator (Tim Scott), the G.O.P. has emphatically proven that two can play that game.

Linda Chavez There was no unifying theme for the evening: a little pandemic, a little "promises kept" and a dash of crazy. Speakers in a nearly empty auditorium seemed more artificial and stilted than Democrats' Zoom chats. The effort to portray Joe Biden and the Democrats as Marxists, radicals and socialists will fail. There are still real Stalinists in the world, and Trump has been willing to cozy up when it suits him.

Gail Collins Donald Trump Jr. was a star of the night, but if he was supposed to make the viewers see Dad's behind-the-scenes warmth, he really gave a good impersonation of an Ohio assistant state party chairman. Still, let's keep in mind that the poor guy had a really awful childhood.

Michelle Cottle The question of where the president's convention would fall on the spectrum of "rallying his base" vs. "expanding his appeal" was definitively answered: It's all about that MAGA base. Lots of grievance politics. Lots of scaremongering. Much talk of socialism and cancel culture.

Nicole Hemmer Based on the first night's speeches, you would think cancel culture is a bigger threat than Covid-19. But Trump's campaign strategy is not to ask "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" but "Can you imagine how mad would it make the libs if I won a second term?!"

Matt Labash Many hate the new crowd-less convention format. I love it. For those of us who dislike conventions, the worst parts are usually the speakers and the half-in-the-bag audience who applaud like trained chimps at every soppy cliché, insincere tribute and outright lie. Many speakers still did their part tonight, having little or nothing of value to say. But without the tedious applause interruptions, at least they took half as long to say it.

Liz Mair Pundits love to deride Donald Trump Jr. as a dimwitted joke, but the joke was on them tonight. He did nothing to persuade undecided voters, but he proved that he has the ability to command a stage and speak to the

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party's grass roots. Junior Mints is not a joke, and he has the rudimentary chops of being a real contender. He comes across as much more authentically tough and ideologically and culturally committed than the likes of a Tom Cotton, with better looks, greater star appeal, higher name ID and probably some of his own money to spend, to boot.

Daniel McCarthy Almost every speech was an omnibus, covering several policy achievements while warning of what Biden's policies would do to America. Far more substantive than what we heard from the Democrats last week — Trump's Republican Party weds longtime traditionalist concerns and libertarian ones, such as an anti-euthanasia position with the "right to try" experimental medicines in desperate cases.

Melanye Price This first night seemed more joyless than the first night of the Democratic Convention. It's a strange way to demonstrate how much you love America by castigating significant swaths of the population and frightening others. Unless their plan is to attract the angriest people to their party, I'm not sure why this is the approach.

Bret Stephens Like it or not, the first night of the Republican convention made an effective case that Donald Trump was an energetic and surprisingly empathetic president; that Joe Biden was a career politician who accomplished nothing over 47 years; and that Democrats have more sympathy for rioters and cancel-culture warriors than they do for law-abiding citizens and freethinkers. Liberals may think this is all lies and slander, but they dismiss it at their political peril.

Mimi Swartz There were an awful lot of elephants in the room, and I don't mean Republicans. Showing rescued Americans evoked children in cages on our borders; most normal Republicans were conspicuous by their absence; law-and-order talk overlooked the fact that so many members of the administration are being investigated. Then there are all those deaths from Covid-19. Promises made, promises kept? Hey, what about that wall?

Héctor Tobar This version of the convention infomercial made a halfhearted effort in its first 30 minutes to exhibit the humanity and intimacy so much on offer in the Democratic infomercial. Then came the insults, and the weirdly stilted speeches from a cast of embittered people and politicians, all selling fear wrapped in various packages.

Peter Wehner There are three notable themes that emerged. One is that on the first day of the R.N.C. we witnessed a cult of personality that at times rivaled Jonestown, minus (thankfully) the mass suicide. The second was how fully the R.N.C. has embraced Trump's inversion of reality. The bolder the deception, the better. Third, a relentless effort to portray Democrats not just as radical but malevolent, committed to destroying America and to relish doing so. The G.O.P. came across as one pissed-off party.

Will Wilkinson The cultlike air of the proceedings, the constant lies about the catastrophic Covid-19 pandemic, the night's motif of incendiary anti-urban fear-mongering showed us that the president and his party are in such profound disarray that they fear they're losing their own voters, feel they need to double down on their most distasteful themes to nail them down, and can't afford to waste a moment reaching out and appealing to wavering independents and Democrats.

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