

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Republicans Paint Grim Outlook of a Biden Presidency, Praises Trump on Economy, Pandemic During First Day of Convention

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President Trump and Vice President Pence at the first day of the 2020 Republican Convention. By. ANDREW HARNIK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON (AP) — A rising generation of Republican stars offered an optimistic view of President Donald Trump's leadership, but were undermined on the opening night of the GOP's scaled-back convention by speakers issuing dark warnings about the country's future and distorting the president's record, particularly on the pandemic.

As Trump faces pressure to expand his appeal beyond his loyal supporters, Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, the Senate's sole Black Republican, and former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, the daughter of Indian immigrants, sought to cast the GOP as welcoming to Americans of color, despite the party's overwhelmingly white leadership and voting base.

"I was a brown girl in a black and white world," Haley said Monday night, noting that she faced discrimination but rejecting the idea that "America is a racist country." She also gave a nod to the Black Lives Matter movement, saying "of course we know that every single Black life is valuable."

But the prime-time convention proceedings, which featured a blend of taped and live speeches, focused largely on dire talk about Joe Biden, Trump's Democratic challenger in the November election. Speakers ominously warned that electing Biden would lead to violence in American cities spilling into the suburbs, a frequent Trump campaign message with racist undertones. One speaker called Trump the "bodyguard of Western civilization."

Scrambling to find a message that sticks, Trump's team tried out multiple themes and tactics over the course of the night. They featured optimism from those who could represent the GOP's future, attempts to characterize Biden as a vessel for socialists and far-left Democrats despite his moderate record, and humanizing stories about the 74-year-old man who sits in the Oval Office.

Trump and a parade of fellow Republicans misrepresented Biden's agenda through the evening, falsely accusing him of proposing to defund police, ban oil fracking, take over health care, open borders and raise taxes on most Americans. They tried to assign positions of the Democratic left to a middle-of-the-road candidate who explicitly rejected many of the party's most liberal positions through the primaries.

The opening night of the four-day convention reflected the rising urgency fueling Trump's push to reshape a presidential contest that he is losing, at least for now, with Election Day just 10 weeks away. It will continue on Tuesday when first lady Melania Trump will deliver remarks from the White House.

Biden and his running mate, California Sen. Kamala Harris, are keeping a relatively low profile this week. In a tweet Monday night, Biden told supporters to "stay focused."

The emphasis on diversity at Trump's convention was an acknowledgement that he must expand his coalition beyond his largely white base. Polling shows that Black Americans continue to be overwhelmingly negative in their assessments of the president's performance, with his approval hovering around 1 in 10 over the course of his presidency, according to Gallup polling.

One of several African Americans on Monday night's schedule, former football star Herschel Walker, defended the president against those who call him a racist.

"It hurts my soul to hear the terrible names that people call Donald," Walker said. "The worst one is 'racist.' I take it as a personal insult that people would think I would have a 37-year friendship with a racist."

But that emphasis clashed with Trump's instinct to energize his die-hard loyalists.

He featured, for example, Mark and Patricia McCloskey, the St. Louis couple charged with felonies for pointing guns at what prosecutors deemed non-violent Black Lives Matter protesters marching past their home.

"What you saw happen to us could just as easily happen to any of you who are watching from quiet neighborhoods around our country," Patricia McCloskey said, sitting on a couch in a wood-paneled room.

"They've actually charged us with felonies for daring to defend our home," her husband said.

And Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida said Democrats will "disarm you, empty the prisons, lock you in your home, and invite MS-13 to live next door."

Trump's political future may depend on his ability to convince voters that America is on the right track, even as the coronavirus death toll exceeds 177,000 and pandemic-related job losses also reach into the millions

A deep sense of pessimism has settled over the electorate 10 weeks before Election Day. Just 23% of Americans think the country is heading in the right direction, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Trump and his supporters touted his response to the pandemic while standing alongside front-line workers in the White House, although he glossed over the mounting death toll, the most in the world, and his administration's struggle to control the disease.

Organizers also repeatedly sought to cast Trump as an empathetic figure, borrowing a page from the Democrats' convention playbook a week ago that effectively highlighted Biden's personal connection to voters.

Those cheering Trump's leadership on the pandemic included a coronavirus patient, a small business owner from Montana and a nurse practitioner from Virginia.

"As a healthcare professional, I can tell you without hesitation, Donald Trump's quick action and leadership saved thousands of lives during COVID-19," said Amy Ford, a registered nurse who was deployed to New York and Texas to fight the coronavirus.

The first day of the 2020 Republican convention began early in the day as Trump and Vice President Mike Pence were renominated by delegates who gathered in Charlotte, the city that was originally selected to host the convention before the pandemic struck.

Trump paid a surprise visit to the city, where he warned delegates that "the only way they can take this election away from us is if this is a rigged election," raising anew his unsupported concerns about Americans' expected reliance on mail voting during the pandemic. Experts say mail voting has proven remarkably secure.

The fact that the Republicans gathered at all stood in contrast to the Democrats, who held an all-virtual convention last week. The Democratic programming included a well-received roll call video montage featuring diverse officials from across the nation.

The Republicans spoke from the ballroom in Charlotte and were overwhelmingly white before the proceedings moved to Washington for prime-time.

Written by AP's Steve Peoples, Michelle L. Price and Zeke Miller. Peoples reported from New York. Associated Press writers Jill Colvin and Darlene Superville contributed from Charlotte, North Carolina.

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