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Trump wants to take over D.C., but can Harris make it the 51st state?

This is a supremely consequential election for Washington, which usually weathers the churn of administrations, but now faces a reckoning in 2024.

By Petula Dvorak, *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2024



Kamala Harris during freshman year at Howard University with classmate Gwen Whitfield in November 1982. Almost every weekend was spent at the Mall protesting apartheid and calling for divestment. (Courtesy of Kamala Harris)

This one is different for D.C.

Because in other election cycles, the District simply weathers the churn of administrations.

You can see it best in our bars and restaurants.

“It’s been a Republican hangout before,” one of the regulars at the Monocle, Capitol Hill’s legendary congressional hangout, recently told me, in between sips of bourbon. Then it became a largely Democratic watering hole (and the unofficial clubhouse of the senate’s nine female members).

Flip, flop. The politics change, the crowds wear different lapel pins and the people of D.C. keep the wheels turning.

We don’t get a vote in Congress after all, so what does it matter to us?

But when Americans head to the polls in November, it’s going to be all-or-nothing for the almost 700,000 Washingtonians who live in the nation’s capital.

Former president Donald Trump is going after the District — he wants federal control and has promised a total “takeover” of the city he called a “horrible killing field” during his speech at the Republican National Convention last week.

Never before has the District been so targeted by a candidate.

But with Vice President Harris in the race, D.C. is poised to have its biggest advocate ever for statehood in the Oval Office.

Let’s be honest, Harris is practically a native Washingtonian.

She came of age in D.C. as a Howard University student, in her Gen X shoulder pads and big earrings, (she’s only two months short of the official start of the Gen X birth years, so she counts) and often emphasized how important it was for her to leave California and come to “Chocolate City” at a pivotal time of her life.

“I became an adult at Howard University,” Harris said in a 2019 Robin Givhan column. “Howard very directly influenced and reinforced — equally important — my sense of being and meaning and reasons for being.”

There are so many like her who get this.

Alberta Forbes Baker, for example.

Baker left Rochester to come to “The Mecca,” as Howard University has been called, in the 1980s. After graduation, she tried to return to her hometown, but the pull back to D.C. was too strong.

“The DMV is where I grew up, where I became an adult,” she said.

So she returned and has stayed in the region since, as a past president of the Howard University Alumni Club of Greater Washington.

Same goes for Monique LeNoir, who grew up in California, like Harris. She even went to high school with Harris's sister in Oakland.

But then she left for D.C. and Howard University, like Harris. LeNoir stayed in the nation's capital, raising her two sons in the District. She understands the power and perspective of coming of age in D.C. that Harris would bring to the office.

"There has never been a time in our nation's history when we needed a leader with such a unique perspective," LeNoir said.

They're honorary native Washingtonians.

And that means District statehood and autonomy will have its most powerful advocate yet in a president.

"We're all very hopeful," Baker said.

Because let's be honest, past Democratic presidents have supported statehood, sure. But it's been largely performative.

"I don't think Kamala Harris will just sign [pro-statehood] legislation," said Sen. Michael D. Brown (D-D. C.), one of the District's nonvoting, shadow senators.

President Biden and Obama gave the campaign to make D.C. the 51st state a thumbs-up. President Bill Clinton even testified in favor, Brown said.

But Harris is positioned to be a fierce advocate.

"I think she'll speak out on it, and she'll push for it," Brown said. "And that's something that we haven't had in a president."

Meanwhile, no presidential candidate before Trump has so vigorously threatened D.C.'s autonomy as a campaign platform.

"It's almost like he has a vendetta," Baker said.

He tried to roll tanks through the streets of D.C. in a July 4 ego parade when he was in office in 2019.

No tanks, said the people who gave him only 4 percent of the vote.

He sent the National Guard — Humvees and thwack-thwacking helicopters — into our neighborhoods in 2020, when the Black Lives Matter demonstrations scared him.

Then he told his supporters to march to Capitol Hill after he lost the election, launching a bloody insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021.

He's been clear that he's coming for D.C. if he returns to office.

"It would be a terrible catastrophe for D.C.," Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D) said in an interview this month.

The congressional GOP members have been fighting proxy wars in D.C. throughout Biden's term, threatening to take over D.C.'s police department and City Council. The folks who preach small government and can't even pass a budget think they want to get into micromanaging which D.C. streets get speed humps and street cameras?

Please.

D.C. votes overwhelming Democratic. And the residents will vote for Harris if she's the nominee. But the truth is, the votes won't matter. And that — not crime or the D.C. infrastructure that Trump keeps banging on — is what this is all about.

"It's got nothing to do with freedom or justice or anything else for the Republicans," Brown said. "It just has to do with two more Democrats in the United States Senate."

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/08/11/why-kamala-harris-chose-howard-university-what-she-did-weekends-there/>