TA Tomorrow's Affairs
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Assessment of tomorrow

By: James Oliphant

'Natalie' jibe has Democrats eyeing Ossoff for a 2028 presidential run

For years, Democrats have been searching for a presidential candidate who can take the fight to Donald Trump in a way that leaves lasting damage. They haven't had much luck.

Hillary Clinton tried and failed. Joe Biden got it done until he couldn't. Kamala Harris didn't seem to quite make it out of the starting blocks.

The latest Democratic hope would appear to be Jon Ossoff, a U.S. senator from Georgia who spent much of last week being the internet's main character after blasting Trump in a public and very unsubtle way.

"While the sailors on the Lincoln fight his war, while he fruitlessly drains our munitions and oil reserves, the president sleeps through his meetings, he golfs, and trades stocks," Ossoff said at a campaign rally, referring to the sailors aboard the beleaguered aircraft carrier the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln.

"He doesn't want to do the job," Ossoff went on. "He wants to build his ballroom and travel with Natalie on their apparently defenseless flying palace gifted by the Emir of Qatar."

Ossoff was dissing the Air Force One donated by Qatar to Trump, while "Natalie" was a reference to Natalie Harp, the president's youthful executive assistant. And those three words, travel with Natalie, blazed across social media skies like the Wicked Witch's aerial handwriting.

That's as far as Ossoff went, but the internet – and Ossoff's MAGA critics – filled in the blanks for him. Trump said Ossoff, 39, reminds him of the late comic Pee-wee Herman. The White House's director of communications labeled him "Jon Jackoff" and another aide called him a "feminine theater kid."

(Yes, that was the level of discourse emanating from Washington last week. Be grateful if you happened to miss it.)

Harp, who has become a fixture at Trump's side, acts as an information gatekeeper, often printing out social media posts and news articles for him to read. She's earned the moniker "the human printer" as a result.

When Trump snuck out of Air Force One in Turkey earlier this month due to a threat from Iran, Harp was one of the few aides to join him for the secret escape flight. Ossoff's remark placed her relationship with the president beneath a white-hot spotlight.

In doing so, it became clear that Ossoff got under the skin of Trump and his allies, something celebrated by Democrats who have long complained that there are few politicians willing to bloody the president's nose a bit.

The political world has changed

But not everyone was a fan: David Axelrod, the longtime Democratic consultant who was a mastermind behind Barack Obama's White House run, faulted Ossoff for going there.

While praising Ossoff on X for his takedowns of Trump, he called the mention of Harp "gratuitous" and "unnecessary" and argued that it "distracted and detracted from the power" of his message.

Axelrod received a telling response from legions of frustrated Democrats who accused the cable-news stalwart of being out of touch.

"You're 100% wrong," one wrote. "The political world has changed since you were a player in it, and if we continue to operate under the antiquated rules of the past, we'll keep losing."

Axelrod put a finger on what has long been a divide within the party over whether to focus on slamming Trump or instead reassure Americans that candidates share their concerns about inflation, jobs and other issues. And it was Michelle Obama, of course, who famously came up with the adage: "When they go low, we go high."

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But that was then. Ossoff's viral assault threw the 2028 talk into overdrive. It wasn't just because of the shot across Trump's bow but more about what else he brings to the fold: He's a senator who won a Democratic seat in a state that voted straight Republican for decades, and he has a proven history of Black voter support, something crucial for a Democratic presidential nominee.

Ossoff has tried to find the right balance between making the race about Trump and pledging relief for economy-minded voters, all while delivering broadsides in a characteristically blunt approach.

He has labeled Trump and his allies "the Epstein class" – a reference to the disgraced financier and sexual predator – and has called Trump's second term "the most corrupt administration of all time."

But Ossoff has also touted his record working with Republicans in Congress on legislation while being careful to position himself as more of a centrist than a progressive.

Ossoff has maintained he isn't interested in a presidential bid, but that's standard practice for a politician running for re-election. He can't be caught looking ahead while campaigning to return to the Senate.

A truly generational election

The 2028 election is shaping up to be a truly generational one. The 80-year-old Trump, who has dominated Republican politics for a decade, won't be on the ballot. Neither likely will be a Clinton, a Biden or an Obama.

Vice President JD Vance, 42, is the current favorite for the GOP nomination, but the mix might also include Secretary of State Marco Rubio, 55, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, 47, U.S. Senator Tim Scott, 60, and former Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin, 59, among others.

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For Democrats, the field is wide open, but there is a strong belief within parts of the party that the nominee should hail from a competitive swing state such as Michigan, Pennsylvania or, yes, Georgia. Or even from a conservative state such as Governor Andy Beshear of Kentucky.

As of this week, the prediction site Kalshi has U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as the current favorite but with just a 19% chance. Ossoff had risen to second place at 18%.

As a card-carrying progressive from New York City, Ocasio-Cortez, 36, would seem to lack the widespread appeal that the party is looking for, and there are similar concerns about California Governor Gavin Newsom, 58, – although both have been regular foils for Trump.

Alternatively, former Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, 44, a Michigan resident, U.S. Senator Mark Kelly of Arizona, 62, a former astronaut, Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro, 53, or Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, 55, may end up being a better fit – if only to try and avoid the "socialist" tag that Republicans are certain to attempt to pin on the nominee.

Harris, 61, is also expected to make another

run – and could be viewed as the early-season favorite considering that Democrats will hold their first presidential primary in 2028 in South Carolina, where Black support is vital to success.

The new coin of the realm

But next door to South Carolina sits Georgia, where Ossoff earned the support of 90% of Black voters during his 2021 Senate run. Ossoff got his start in politics interning for civil rights icon John Lewis and frequently speaks to Black congregations in churches across the state.

That's not a bad basis from which to seek the nomination – Ossoff could follow in the footsteps of Bill Clinton, another moderate Southern politician who brought together factions within the party to reach the White House at the relatively young age of 46.

> The true measure of a candidate these days is whether they can go viral

As for the race in front of him, Ossoff is leading in polls over his Republican opponent Mike Collins, a top Trump ally. Should he win, he'll be free to reassess his options – and his constituents likely won't mind seeing him give it a shot.

Should he lose, he will be doubly free to run for president. After all, losing isn't the stain on the resume it once was. The true measure of a candidate these days is whether they can go viral. As Ossoff demonstrated again last week, that's the new coin of the realm.