

Late to the party?

If you took a vacation from election news this summer, here's a recap of the dog-and-pony show - just in time for the conventions

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The Democratic convention starts today, kicking off four days of speeches, celeb sightings and wonkish talk of pledged delegates. The Republicans follow with their own convention next week. And before you know it, a series of debates and campaign ads will send us flying toward November and Election Day.

You've been lazy this summer, not following the race every day, dipping in for a news fix only occasionally. In fact, we're guessing that the last time you were really paying attention, it was early June, and Hillary Clinton was bowing out of the race.

What have you missed? More than two months of supremely ridiculous political antics. Scuffles and scandals, outlandish insults and exaggerated umbrage. And the wildly entertaining spectacle of politicians in their natural habitat.

So it's time to get serious, Americans, and figure out which candidate will get your vote. Today, to help you plug back into politics, we present a handy timeline of the summer's presidential-race highlights.

Summer of shenanigans

What has happened since the presidential race became a two-man battle for the White House? Here's a look at the long summer of election-year absurdity.

June 5

Two days before Hillary Clinton suspends her campaign, she and Barack Obama secretly arrange a meeting. Rumors of their meeting spread when Obama disappears from his campaign plane and a panicked press corps stakes out Clinton's Washington, D.C., home, hoping to catch a glimpse of either candidate. After several hours of live shots from outside Clinton's home, news networks learn that the candidates aren't inside -- instead, they eluded dozens of journalists to meet at the home of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

June 10

The excitement of the Democratic primary over, Hollywood steps in to fill the gap. Scarlett Johansson, an outspoken Obama supporter, tells Politico.com she has been exchanging e-mails with the candidate, who sends her "thoughtful" messages despite his busy schedule. Obama's camp, seeing disaster on the horizon, quickly clarifies that actually, he replied to just one e-mail from the 23-year-old actress . . . through his assistant. "I write saying, 'Thank you, Scarlett, for doing what you do,' " Obama grouses, "and suddenly we have this e-mail relationship."

June 20

Critics cry "Hubris!" when Obama unveils a campaign prop that looks strikingly similar to the official presidential seal. There are differences -- instead of "E Pluribus Unum," for example, the seal says "Vero Possumus," which roughly translates to "Yes We Can." But it is *not* popular, offering plenty of ammunition to critics who say Obama is presumptuous and arrogant. The seal is quickly retired.

June 24

After John McCain's admission that he's computer "illiterate" draws some concern from the wired world, a campaign spokesman assures folks at an Internet conference that "John McCain is aware of the Internet." The groundbreaking announcement makes its way onto T-shirts almost immediately.

June 27

In the spirit of unity, Obama and ex-candidate Clinton make their first joint appearance, in a New Hampshire town called Unity. The too-cute concept is amplified by their matching outfits: Obama's powder-blue tie is the same shade as Clinton's pantsuit, inspiring comparisons to an uneasy couple at a prom.

June 29

Appearing on *Face the Nation*, retired Gen. Wesley Clark all but ruins his chance at being chosen as Obama's running mate when he bashes McCain with the insult heard 'round the political world: "I don't think riding in a fighter plane and getting shot down is a qualification to be president."

July 8

The Obama family appears on *Access Hollywood*, where daughter Sasha, 7, outs her dad for not liking ice cream. New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd gleefully reports this as evidence of the candidate's "finicky, abstemious tastes." Soon after, Obama announces that the interview -- which contradicted the Obamas' insistence on their daughters' privacy -- was a mistake. He tells Matt Lauer on the *Today* show: "We won't be doing it again."

July 10

McCain adviser Phil Gramm, in an interview with The Washington Times, asserts that the country's economic woes are exaggerated, then says Americans have become "a nation of whiners." McCain, quickly distancing himself from the comment, quips that he'd send Gramm away as ambassador to Belarus. Within 10 days, Gramm has quit the campaign.

July 14

America gasps at the cover of the July 21 issue of The New Yorker, which features a satirical illustration of the Obamas as militant Muslim extremists, burning an American flag in the fireplace while a portrait of Osama bin Laden hangs above the mantel.

To The New Yorker, it's satire. To the Obama campaign, it's "tasteless and offensive." And to cable news networks, the weeks-long chatter is ratings gold.

July 14 and 15

Twice, while campaigning in Arizona, McCain talks about the Russian government "reducing energy supplies to Czechoslovakia." The problem: Czechoslovakia hasn't existed as a unified country since 1993.

July 22

Obama is on a seven-nation tour through the Middle East and Europe, accompanied by all three networks' top anchors and a plane full of national reporters. The McCain camp, pushing an argument that the media are in love with Obama, hands out credentials to its traveling press: "McCain Press Corps . . . JV Squad . . . Left behind to report in America."

July 23

McCain visits a grocery store in Bethlehem, Pa. While he and a shopper talk rising grocery prices, a campaign cameraman bumps into a shelf of applesauce and the jars tumble to the floor, resulting in a puddle of glass shards and Mott's finest. Cleanup in Aisle 6!

July 26

Rapper Ludacris releases a song on YouTube called *Politics As Usual (Obama Is Here)* to support Obama -- but it doesn't exactly provide good PR for the campaign.

Ludacris on Hillary Clinton: "that b---- is irrelevant."

On McCain: "McCain don't belong in any chair unless he's paralyzed."

And on our current president: "Bush is mentally handicapped."

The Obama campaign calls the song "outrageously offensive." Meanwhile, critics are quick to point out that Obama had previously named Ludacris as one of the "great talents" among music moguls.

July 30

At a rally in Springfield, Mo., Obama tells his audience that we can reduce our energy use if we inflate our tires properly. The McCain campaign pounces -- within days, they're distributing tire gauges that read "Obama's Energy Plan."

July 30

The McCain camp rolls out an ad comparing Obama to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, calling him "the biggest celebrity in the world."

Paris Hilton's mom, Kathy, a McCain donor, angrily calls the ad "frivolous."

And Paris Hilton herself soon responds with a video online, one that urges a compromise on energy policy and makes her look smarter than some of the people involved in the campaigns.

The Obama camp's official response to the ad: "Whatever."

Aug. 1

The Wall Street Journal poses a weighty question: Is Obama, with his good eating habits and his dedication to the gym, "too fit to be president?" The reporter digs up Americans willing to say things like, "I won't vote for any beanpole guy." The talkers on cable news go wild.

Aug. 8

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, authors of the rapture-focused "Left Behind" series, feel they need to issue a statement that -- despite a McCain ad that seems to suggest it -- Obama is not, in fact, the Antichrist. The August heat is getting to everyone.

Aug. 8

The Los Angeles Times reports that actor George Clooney and Obama use their BlackBerries to text each other all the time, which leads every pundit in America to ask: Just how much policy advice is the actor providing?

Clooney responds, insisting: "I have never texted or e-mailed Senator Obama. And I'll offer a million dollars to anyone who could prove otherwise."

Aug. 11

The conservative Christian group Focus on the Family pulls a video from its Web site after it gets a little too much attention. The 2-1/2 minute video -- which has since popped up elsewhere online -- urges people to "pray for rain" on the night of Obama's Democratic convention speech at an outdoor Denver stadium.

"Would it be wrong to pray for rain?" asks Focus on the Family's Stuart Shepard. "We're not asking for hail the size of canned hams or lightning bolts to set the bunting on fire. Just rain. Beautiful rain. Network-cameras-can't-see-the-podium rain."

Aug. 13

After shaking an enthusiastic supporter's hand at a campaign stop in Michigan, Cindy McCain ends up with one arm in a sling.

Aug. 14

Singer Jackson Browne sues the McCain campaign for using his song *Running on Empty* in a campaign commercial without permission. The legendary liberal, saying his reputation has been damaged, seeks more than \$75,000 in damages.

Aug. 16

McCain and Obama are both interviewed at a forum by pastor Rick Warren of California's Saddleback Church. Viewers are assured that McCain, who's interviewed after Obama, has been placed in a "cone of silence" so he won't hear the questions beforehand. But then The New York Times reports that McCain was in his car, not a "cone of silence," during Obama's interview. A mini scandal erupts, with bloggers across the country suspicious that McCain cheated.

Aug. 20

When a reporter asks how many homes McCain and wife Cindy own, McCain can't recall the exact number. The Obama camp responds with an ad -- stat! -- that answers the question. "It's seven. Seven houses."

Within hours, the campaigns are scuffling over which candidate is really "in touch with regular Americans," with spokesmen and surrogates making digs about each candidate's personal wealth.

"Regular Americans," meanwhile, tune in to the Olympics and wait for the summer to end.

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