

# [***Opinion: How Joe Biden is flipping the script on Trump***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BHB-X681-DY7V-G335-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The reviews are in. President Joe Biden's State of the Union appears to be a [*smash hit*](https://www.newsweek.com/joe-biden-state-union-reviewed-1877180). It could not have come at a more critical moment in his presidency. Just as even the staunchest of admirers had started raising questions about whether he could sustain the challenges of campaigning due to his age, Biden seized the moment and offered fire and brimstone right there on Capitol Hill.

Biden took the gloves off and came out swinging. While he followed the tradition of listing policy accomplishments and his hopes for the coming year, Biden spent a great deal of time warning what a second term for his "predecessor" would mean and speaking loud and clear about the threat to our democracy.He connected former President Donald Trump to a broken Republican Party that is no longer interested in governing. The Party of Lincoln, he made clear, has become the party of reactionary extremism.

This was not the kind of speech many Americans are used to hearing from Biden, a politician who prides himself on the continual search for bipartisanship, civility and political calm. He is a politician who prefers to reach out with an olive branch rather than with a boxing glove. Not on Thursday night. In taking an unusually aggressive tone, Biden unveiled what seems to be a new strategy in his campaign to retain the White House - and it's the kind of strategy he needs to defeat Trump.

The president lit into Republicans for being more interested in fighting over the border than fixing the border. He blamed Trump and the GOP for a dangerous assault on reproductive rights, with the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade as a culmination of this effort: "[Trump is] the reason it was overturned, and he brags about it." He added: "My God, what freedom else would you take away?" Biden also mocked red state legislators for celebrating infrastructure projects in their states and districts despite opposing the legislation that provided the funding. And he painted a bleak picture internationally, where autocratic forces are gaining ground in their march against democracy.

Without any sense of irony, Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson later complained that Biden's speech was "overly partisan," somehow ignoring the fact that one of his key members, Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, wore a MAGA hat and heckled the commander in chief while Trump sent out nasty posts in real time on Truth Social. Biden's unofficial catchphrase offers a handy rejoinder here: C'mon man.

The complaints should not deter Biden - the heated rhetoric we saw Thursday night should be central to the president's reelection campaign.

In certain respects, Biden appears to understand the basic logic behind Trump's political strength. Despite the fact that countless Americans dislike the former president, Trump has doubled down on his persona and focused his energy on relentlessly attacking the people and institutions around him. His mantra might be: Just make sure that they like the other guy less. As president, Trump went after the media, various investigators, the "Deep State," "radical" Democrats, members of his own party and the electoral process itself. By tearing everyone and everything else down, Trump seems to hope that he is the last man standing.

Of course, this strategy is not new to Trump. One of the original masterminds of this tactic was the notorious campaign operative from South Carolina, Lee Atwater.

Atwater ran a smashmouth, below-the-belt campaign for President George H.W. Bush in 1988 that focused on bringing down the Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis. Atwater, who was a [*professional wrestling*](https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2020/04/wwe-and-politics-art-imitates-life-and-life-imitates-art/)[*fan*](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/atwater/etc/script.html), understood its link to ***politics***, playing into the spectacle and achieving victory by defining the opponent as a "heel."

He managed to transform the image of Dukakis from a competent, non-ideological, bipartisan technocrat into an ACLU card-carrying, flag-burning leftist.By the time the campaign was done, voters could mistake Dukakis for Che Guevara. Atwater's approach was extremely destructive. Most infamously, he played on racial anger within the White community with a series of ads featuring an African American prisoner who committed rape and assault while he was released as part of a Massachusetts furlough program. Later in his life, Atwater [*apologized*](https://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/13/us/gravely-ill-atwater-offers-apology.html) for what he had done.

While Biden would never want to go down the Atwater path - nor should he - the broader idea is that his reelection campaign must center around going after Trump. Touting his own virtues will not be enough; he needs to be ready to rumble with Trump by repeatedly reminding the public about the chaos and dysfunction the former president sowed on the country and the GOP. As the primaries and caucuses demonstrated, Trumpism is Republicanism. Conservatives who fight against this reality, like former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley or former Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, either lose or are ousted from the party.

Unlike Atwater in 1988, who manufactured an image and then sold it to the public, Biden has a great deal of real material to work with. All he has to do is remind voters what happened during the Trump presidency and highlight what Trump has been saying on the campaign trail. The basic fact is that Biden is running against a one-term president who tried to overturn an election, who has cost his party legislative seats, whose finances could be teetering on the brink and is under multiple indictments and civil suits (Trump denies all wrongdoing). It helps that Trump, who is often his own worst enemy when it comes to courting controversy, will be sure to remind voters how he will handle the power of the presidency.

If Biden wants to go after the voters who turned out for Haley in the primaries, dampen the enthusiasm of Trump supporters and win over the swing voters who remain undecided, his best bet is to keep swinging and focus his campaign on the grim reality that is another Trump presidency. If he wants to make certain that a good number of the unenthusiastic progressives turn up, he needs to remind them that no matter how upset they are with his decisions, it is worth imagining what the alternative would look like under Trump 2.0.

Of course, the country benefits when politicians can rally the American people behind a bold, inspirational vision of the future.

But that's not where American ***politics*** is right now, and Biden's numbers aren't getting any better. "***Politics*** ain't beanbag," as the saying goes, and now it has become as hard as granite wall. If he is to win, Biden needs to keep doing what he did during the State of the Union and continuing going after Trump and the entire Republican Party with hammer and tongs.

To win reelection, Biden doesn't have to be loved, he just has to be disliked less than Trump.

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