

# [***Biden needles Trump in hopes of pushing him off message***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B65-GYK1-DY7V-G00D-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Three words from Joe Biden's somber speech about Donald Trump had one man in the back of Charleston's Mother Emanuel AME Church the most excited: "He's a loser."

The man, cracking up, poked the woman next to him with a "Can you believe it?" expression on his face. He made the old grade-school "L" with his right thumb and index finger on his forehead, then poked the woman again so she looked.

The president, speaking at the South Carolina church earlier this month, was smiling too as he took a swipe at his likely Republican opponent. Biden has been taunting Donald Trump - and appearing to relish it - calling him the "former president" or saying, "he's already Herbert Hoover" - an allusion to [*Trump's comments*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/08/politics/trump-economy-crash/index.html) that he didn't want an economic crash on his watch because he didn't want to be like the 31st president.

Biden greeted Trump's Iowa caucuses victory with a smirking video in which he said, "You know it's kind of funny: all these Republican candidates in the primary trying to beat Donald Trump, and I'm still the only person to beat Donald Trump."

Biden has been hoping Trump is paying attention. And, people close to Trump tell CNN, he is.

"I do think he's trying to get under his skin, and I think it's the smartest thing the Biden campaign has done yet," a person close to Trump said. "It rattles him and takes him off message."

As he looks ahead to a likely rematch in November, Biden has laid out the stakes of the election in as stark terms as any American election ever. But as serious as he is about what's at stake for democracy in 2024, aides to the president's reelection campaign tell CNN that the needling will keep up as they shift fully into general election mode - even if it prompts criticism that the president has let himself be dragged into Trump's way of playing ***politics***.

Part of it is personal: Biden enjoys mocking an opponent he finds so offensive. Part of it is strategic: the president and his campaign operatives are hoping to trigger a man well known for watching his own coverage, obsessing over what people say about him or responding in ways the Biden team hopes will make him look ridiculous and give them more grist for attacks.

Either way, Biden and his campaign - which have been confronted with troubling poll numbers about waning support among their 2020 coalition - see this strategy as a way to produce content that is proving to be some of the most effective for riling up the Democratic base and breaking through the noise.

Zeroing in on what they see as Trump's insecurities isn't complicated.

Biden is "not doing it just for the sake of making Donald Trump mad or for the satisfaction of punching him in the nose. He's doing it because it takes the conversation about the campaign to a place that's good for him," said Kate Bedingfield, who was a deputy campaign manager for the president in 2020 and later his White House communications director. (She's currently a CNN contributor and is not advising the 2024 campaign).

"Loser" is at the top of the Biden campaign lists of attacks. It's also, Biden aides believe, a good way to reinforce their core message of 2024 as a battle for American democracy.

"It is Donald Trump who continues to deny the truth about the 2020 election. We are stating facts: Joe Biden is a winner. He won that one. Donald Trump is a loser. He lost that one," said senior Biden campaign adviser T.J. Ducklo. "So us calling him a loser is simply a response to an issue that he continues to raise himself."

The same reasoning applies to how they've tried to push back on Trump's claims he oversaw a better economy, with Biden dropping Hoover comparisons rather than just rattling through bar graphs and statistics. And when it comes to raising questions about Trump's mental state, the campaign has highlighted videos of Trump appearing to confuse his last remaining primary rival, former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, with former Democratic Speaker Nancy Pelosi - believing that's a more effective way of pushing back on years of Republican attempts to suggest that Biden has dementia.

[*"I don't agree with Nikki Haley on everything, but we agree on this much: She is not Nancy Pelosi,"*](https://x.com/JoeBiden/status/1749131121114091648?s=20) read a post on X written by campaign aides for Biden's account.

[*"Good one, Donald,"*](https://x.com/JoeBiden/status/1749584237043253436?s=20) read another post written for Biden on Monday that included a side-by-side of a video clip of Trump in 2020 predicting "a stock market collapse the likes of which you've never had" if Biden had won juxtaposed with a Fox News clip showing stock market gains.

But Ducklo said the campaign's main focus remains appealing to both base voters and those who aren't paying close attention to ***politics***. Aides point to several examples of such taunting videos they say are some of their most viewed to date - and which they say should lead to more engagement.

"The goal is to break through a fragmented media environment by delivering our message in a compelling way that cuts through. That's the goal," Ducklo said. "If that's triggering to our opponent, that sounds like a him problem."

Trump advisers try to stop him from taking the bait

Trump's campaign dismissed Biden's strategy. "Joe Biden can't run on his disastrous record so that's why he's resorted to non-sensical attacks in order to gaslight the American people," Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung told CNN. "But voters won't forget that Biden will go down as the worst president in American history."

Still, Trump's advisers have warned him against taking the bait from Biden. They point to what happened as Biden started leaning into saying Trump is a threat to democracy.

While Trump's team thinks the argument is "ridiculous," as one adviser put it, they also don't want Trump drawing more attention to it on the trail.

Yet that's exactly what he did in the final days before the Iowa caucuses - in a direct response to Biden's campaign speech in Pennsylvania, which had focused heavily on the argument that Trump is a danger to America. Trump flipped that back on Biden by saying actually he is the threat to democracy.

In the process, though, Trump moved the focus off anything else he was saying to try to appeal to voters.

His campaign is trying to make the election about immigration, inflation and the economy, the person close to Trump said, "but Trump isn't disciplined enough not to address Biden's attacks."

Triggering Trump has emboldened Biden

Since 2016, Democrats have been caught up in how much to follow Michelle Obama's famous "when they go low, we go high" line. California Gov. Gavin Newsom has been the most vocal urging Biden to hit at Republicans more forcefully, but he's far from the only one. Democrats have complained for years that the president didn't seem ready for the kind of fight Trump was bringing.

Much of that was because Biden, despite his own cutting sense of humor in private, believes that the devolution of civility in ***politics*** has hurt the country, several people who've spoken with him say. No one should expect Biden to get into making up nicknames or bullying, but the success his team has had triggering Trump so far has only encouraged him and aides to do more.

"Successful warfare is about exploiting your enemy's weakness, and Donald Trump has shown time and again that he will react in a really volatile way," Bedingfield said. "It's not playing Trump's game as much as it is making a strategic choice."

Trump haters are lapping it up.

"The Biden campaign has really upped its troll game," George Conway, the anti-Trump lawyer who's active online, posted in response to the "Good one, Donald" social media post.

So are the Biden fans.

Omar Cornute, a United Auto Workers leader from St. Louis, said he was laughing along at Biden's speech accepting the union's endorsement in Washington on Wednesday. The president made a face and faux crossed himself when invoking Trump's recent comments predicting an economic crash - and his hope that it'd happen in the next year - then followed it up with the Herbert Hoover line.

"I love it," Cornute said. "I wish he didn't have to, but you have a candidate who's not smart. And you have a candidate who wants to run us into a civil war in America. He makes an a\*\* of himself time and time again. You can't do anything but point out his warts."

Rep. Robert Garcia, a California Democrat who is an avid Biden booster, agreed.

"Donald Trump is himself a walking joke, so it's good for the White House team and for the campaign team to gently remind folks and to reach them in a way that's interesting and different," said Garcia, who's active online attacking Republicans. "The joke's on Donald Trump. All you have to do is tell people what he said and that's enough."

By Edward-Isaac Dovere and Alayna Treene, CNN

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