

## New Trump Ad Suggests a Campaign Strategy Amid Crisis: Xenophobia

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**Highlight:** The ad, which calls Joe Biden soft on China and falsely suggests a former governor of Washington is Chinese, shows that President Trump plans to continue exploiting racial discord in his re-election bid.

### Body

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The ad, which calls Joe Biden soft on China and falsely suggests a former governor of Washington is Chinese, shows that President Trump plans to continue exploiting racial discord in his re-election bid.

President Trump has kicked off his general election advertising campaign with a xenophobic attack ad against Joseph R. Biden Jr., the presumptive Democratic nominee, the opening shot in a messaging war that is expected to be exceptionally ugly.

In a minute-long digital ad released late Thursday that relies heavily on imagery of China and people of Asian descent, the Trump campaign signaled the lines of attack it will use in its attempts to rally the president's base and define Mr. Biden. The ad reprises accusations Mr. Trump has made that the former vice president's family profited from his relationships with Chinese officials and presents selectively edited scenes and statements attempting to portray him as doddering and weak.

For the president and his allies, the approach represents their assessment of the race as it narrows into a one-on-one contest with Mr. Biden, the opponent who is least susceptible to their charges that the Democratic Party is too far outside the political mainstream.

The new ad also shows that while the country has changed drastically in recent weeks amid a national health crisis, the president has not. He continues to lead the nation and run his campaign the way he always has: by belittling his adversaries and exploiting racial discord.

While other presidents have used campaigns during periods of national trauma to try to unite the country, political strategists said that Mr. Trump was taking the opposite approach.

"They're just going to run a white grievance campaign," said Stuart Stevens, who worked on the presidential campaigns of the Republicans Mitt Romney and George W. Bush. "It's not complicated. He's losing with everybody but white men over 50." Mr. Stevens added.

"Trump hasn't changed," he said. "He hasn't changed in 30 years."

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Mr. Biden amplified that criticism with a statement Friday, saying “The casual racism and regular xenophobia that we have seen from Trump and this Administration is a national scourge.”

“Donald Trump only knows how to speak to people’s fears, not their better angels,” he added.

Since the coronavirus started spreading in the United States, Mr. Trump has tried to steer the conversation over his response toward themes and issues he is most comfortable with like nationalism and border security. Until recently, he had been referring to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus.”

Now, with unfounded claims that Mr. Biden and his family have profited from below-board business deals with the Chinese, Mr. Trump is attempting to link his political rival to his chief geopolitical foe at a time when there is rising xenophobia and violence in the United States aimed at Chinese-Americans.

“During America’s crisis, Biden protected China’s feelings,” the online ad says, presenting a montage of clips of Mr. Biden complimenting and praising the Chinese, including the country’s leader, Xi Jinping, and of a news segment accusing Mr. Biden of helping his son Hunter profit off Chinese investments.

The ad also includes an image of a smiling Mr. Biden standing alongside an Asian-American man — an apparent attempt to suggest that the former president has an inappropriately cozy relationship with China. But the man in the image is a Chinese-American, the former governor of Washington, Gary Locke, who also served as President Barack Obama’s commerce secretary and ambassador to China.

The picture, which appears briefly in between clips showing Mr. Biden socializing with Chinese officials and stammering through speeches, was taken at a 2013 event in Beijing where Mr. Locke and the former vice president appeared together.

[Video: Watch on YouTube.]

The ad’s implication that Mr. Biden is soft on China is oddly timed, coming as Mr. Trump’s own stance toward China and Mr. Xi has been more positive. Mr. Trump has been complimenting Mr. Xi, and as recently as last week, the president described the two of them as close allies and good friends.

The Trump campaign defended using an image of an Asian-American to illustrate Mr. Biden’s ties to the Chinese, saying it was selected simply because Hunter Biden accompanied his father on the 2013 trip to China. Mr. Trump has repeatedly accused him, without evidence, of using his father’s official visit to further his own business interests.

“The shot with the flags specifically places Biden in Beijing in 2013,” Tim Murtaugh, a Trump campaign spokesman, wrote on Twitter, referring to the picture with Mr. Locke. “It’s for a reason. That’s the Hunter Biden trip. Memory Lane for ol’ Joe.”

Mr. Murtaugh did not address the fact that Mr. Locke is not Chinese, or that the ad presents the image with no context or explanation.

Mr. Locke responded by accusing Mr. Trump of stoking hatred against Asian-Americans. “The Trump team is making it worse,” he said in a written statement. “Asian Americans are Americans. Period.”

In recent weeks, Asian-Americans have reported being physically attacked, yelled at and spit upon; organizations have begun to track the incidents. Mr. Trump’s rise has only pushed many Asian-Americans further into the Democratic Party, though they were once considered a fairly reliable Republican demographic.

Some Democratic strategists said that the tone and nature of the Trump ad should serve as a wake-up call. The coronavirus pandemic and the human and economic suffering it has unleashed does not mean that politics as usual are on hiatus, they said.

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“This should tell the Biden campaign and every other entity trying to beat Trump that we have to rethink the playbook,” said Kelly Gibson, a Democratic media strategist who advised the campaigns of Andrew Yang and Julián Castro. “So if Democrats don’t sink to his level, at least a little, we will be at a sizable disadvantage. You can’t beat fear with logic, it has never worked and it will never work.”

The Trump campaign’s approach is a coarser version of the strategy that incumbent presidents typically deploy against their opponents: try to define them early before they get a chance to define themselves.

“What the Trump campaign wants to do is introduce on their terms, or in the case of Joe Biden, reintroduce that opponent to the American people before that opponent gets a chance to introduce himself,” said Ken Goldstein, a professor of politics at the University of San Francisco. “Their whole campaign is going to be about disqualifying Joe Biden.”

Though the ad is among the first to come from the Trump campaign directly since Mr. Biden became the presumptive nominee, an undeclared ad war has been raging for months, initially begun during the impeachment of Mr. Trump. In previous ads, including two that CNN refused to air citing “demonstrably false claims,” Mr. Trump has already attacked the Bidens on similar grounds.

And since late February, Priorities USA, one of the largest Democratic super PACs, has spent \$6.5 million on ads attacking Mr. Trump in key swing states; an early round featured former supporters of Mr. Trump voicing their displeasure with his administration. Priorities USA has since started airing ads starkly criticizing the president’s response to the coronavirus outbreak.

In total, Democratic groups have already spent \$15.5 million on general election ads this cycle, according to Advertising Analytics, an ad tracking firm. Many millions more have been spent online as well; Priorities USA alone has spent \$19 million on digital attack ads already, and Acronym, another Democratic outside group, has spent \$10 million.

But it is unclear how much any of this advertising will matter given Americans’ preoccupation with more pressing concerns. Mr. Biden, who lacks the financial wherewithal that Mr. Trump and the Republican National Committee have amassed, could stand to benefit in this regard.

“The shorter the race, the more it favors the person with the least amount of money,” said Mr. Stevens, who saw firsthand in 2012 how Mr. Obama’s financial advantage and the advertising it bought made it difficult for Mr. Romney to define himself.

“One of the major advantages of an incumbent president is monetary,” Mr. Stevens added. “And that’s being mitigated by this virus.”

PHOTO: An image of Joseph R. Biden Jr. and former Gov. Gary Locke of Washington State that was used in a new Trump campaign ad.

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