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OPINION

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Beat Trump by debating his record



Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump visits Atlanta, Wednesday, April 10, 2024, in Atlanta. (AP Photo/Jason Allen)



By **STEVE COHEN**

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Donald Trump could very well win the 2024 presidential race - simply by stealing a winning strategy from Ronald Reagan's successful 1980 playbook. I know, for as a junior campaign staffer, I was there.

A key piece of the Reagan strategy was to give undecided - often independent - voters a "hook to hang their hats on." Give them a way to explain their preference to their friends; something that was reasonable. We did that during the Reagan campaign by focusing on Reagan's tenure as governor of California.

We repeated two specific assertions and spent approximately 80% of the TV advertising budget on the message: first that he turned a state budget deficit into a surplus. And second, that he did so by getting labor and management to talk to each other.

Some smart Trump supporters are using that strategy today, and it is working.

I saw it at a dinner the other night where a formerly "never-Trumper" made a succinct and convincing argument why he was now whole-heartedly in favor of Trump. Despite Trump's many faults, my friend argued that the country and the world were better off after Trump's four years than after President Biden's. Several independents at the table were nearly convinced; and the lone hard-core Democrat was visibly shaken.

My friend detailed four points: first, during the Trump presidency, the economy was very strong — until COVID. Second, the southern border was far more secure. Third, Trump was the first president to actually get NATO members to finally ante up their required 2% of GDP. And fourth, Vladimir Putin didn't attack anyone during Trump's tenure.

Democrats will undoubtedly challenge each claim and focus more energy on Trump's many faults. But both expected counterattacks miss the point: each claim is at least partly accurate. And if independent voters latch on to any of them, Trump will win. They are reasonable, concrete accomplishments that provide undecided voters that credible hook.

My friend's four points are the modern-day equivalent of the Reagan-as-effective governor hook. And they are a riff on Reagan's much more successful message, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" They are at once, plausible, reasonable and defensible.

The Democrats at the table argued that Joe Biden's accomplishments were similar: the economy has rebounded from COVID, and despite food prices and mortgage rates still being too high, unemployment and inflation are low. Yes, they admitted the border is a mess and Vladimir Putin is the personification of evil. And Trump is threatening to pull out of NATO.

Not surprisingly, they prefer to focus on Trump's 90-plus indictments and his millions of dollars in litigation losses. They are hoping that their outrage will be shared by undecided voters — sufficient to outweigh Biden's negatives. Their rage is clouding their thinking, and that could cost them the election.

Relying on negative arguments is a high-risk strategy. Democrats fail to grasp the importance of the four points; they can't honestly say these accomplishments didn't happen.

So what should Democrats do? They should separate Trump from his administration's accomplishments.

First, they should admit that there were Trump accomplishments. And then hammer home that these achievements were the result of having some very good people around him — the likes of whom Trump will never have in a second term.

Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin was largely responsible for the strong economy. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo knew how to keep Putin, Xi Jinping, and Kim Jong Un in check. Yet Mnuchin and Pompeo seriously considered invoking the 25th Amendment and removing Trump after Jan. 6.

At Defense, both Jim Mattis and Mark Esper successfully worked with NATO; and then later resigned from Trump's cabinet with very harsh words about their boss.

Most tellingly, Attorney General William Barr, who helped control the border, commented unforgivingly about Trump's abilities and lawfulness.

In short, the people who were responsible for Trump's very real successes, are not just critical in their assessments of the former president, but unanimous in their opposition to his having a second term.

Painful as they may find it, Democrats need to confront an uncomfortable truth: not everything Donald Trump touched was unsuccessful. They may never admit that some things were better than they are today.

But they need to pound hard on the reality that a second Trump term will be missing the strong, capable people who made those accomplishments possible. And that we can't afford a second Trump term without adults in the room.

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