

THE AUSTRALIAN

Trump needs to take fight up to Biden and land some punches

JOE HOCKEY

By **JOE HOCKEY**, CONTRIBUTOR11:00PM OCTOBER 11, 2020 •  473 COMMENTS

Donald Trump divides the world into winners and losers. At the moment he is losing.

A good friend told me of one meeting he had in the Oval Office with the President. They were discussing some US technology and the President didn't like the look of the equipment. He wanted better aesthetics.

My friend responded that it might not be pretty but the thing that mattered was the lethality of the punch: "Much like Mike Tyson, Mr President." Trump responded: "I watched Tyson lose two fights. Conversation over."

Trump is not only losing the national vote by an average 10 per cent; in the battleground states, he is 5 per cent behind Biden. The local polls are more revealing in the key states he won in 2016 like Wisconsin (5 per cent behind), Pennsylvania (7 per cent), Michigan (7 per cent), Florida (4 per cent), Arizona (3 per cent), North Carolina (1 per cent) and Ohio (1 per cent). Yet the Republicans have pulled advertising in some of these key states. They are running out of money.

The immediate question is whether Trump is capable of a knockout punch between now and the final bell, because on points he is tracking towards a thumping loss. The foundations for a comeback are still there. Most importantly, he is still full of fight. He has driven his many critics mad with his rapid recovery from the coronavirus. It's extraordinary. In just over one week he has gone from a hospital bed in Bethesda to a rally in Florida.

And Trump will not only claim this reaffirms his strength – "I feel better than I have in 20 years" – but will claim he knows how to defeat the virus. He declared he is going to get all Americans the

miracle treatments he received.

Out of fear Trump is now speaking directly to seniors, where he has been bleeding support over the past few months. Late last week in a message from the Rose Garden, he specifically targeted Americans over 65 saying “to my favourite people in the world, the seniors. I am a senior, I know you don’t know that, nobody knows that ... but I am a senior”. He went on to pledge his unqualified support for their health and wellbeing.

Trump is now moving to a Sun Belt strategy of targeted campaigning in Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, Texas and Arizona. This week is aimed at shoring up his weakening base. He will also have intermittent visits to Pennsylvania. He cannot afford to lose that state under any scenario.

Trump must stop talking about himself. He has to give Americans a reason to vote for him and being Donald Trump is not enough.

He must follow the lead of Mike Pence who won the debate with Kamala Harris. I knew Pence won when CNN and MSNBC commentators started criticising Harris for her performance.

The former Indiana governor is an experienced debater and he won focusing on what matters to swing voters like our Mary Milwaukee. He talked about jobs and the threat of the Green New Deal. He had Harris on the back foot on taxes, law and order, China and border protection. Harris landed a few good punches on mismanagement of the coronavirus – the Trump-Pence achilles heel – and it’s having a big impact on Mary Milwaukee’s parents, who have been solid Trump supporters but are having second thoughts.

Joe Biden and Harris have left themselves open to an attack at the suggestion they will stack the US Supreme Court if they get control of the White House and the Senate. Americans don’t like people fiddling with their institutions. If Trump lets this opportunity pass then it’s game over.

Like a good prizefighter he has to ignore the pain of the punches that hit him and focus on landing punches on his opponent. And empathy helps.

Trump rarely shows empathy. It’s not his natural instinct; he views it as a weakness. Last week Pence grieved for all those lost to coronavirus and it resonated.

Trump needs to prosecute the case that 97 per cent of Americans have not had coronavirus and of those that have, 97 per cent survived. He must grieve for the losses but get on with the battle. Like the wartime President Americans would expect, he has some good news to sell as well. The mortality rate is falling and vaccines are just around the corner.

And Trump must get back to the issues that helped in 2016 – job creation through “made in America”, secure borders, freedom of religion and the right to own a gun, a stronger military and more affordable healthcare. When did Trump last talk about infrastructure?

On taxes he can throw a knockout punch. Biden has pledged to reverse the Trump corporate tax cuts. In Australian politics that would be a knockout punch for an opponent during a recession. Instead, Trump is still tweeting about Hillary Clinton.

During my seven election campaigns in Australia, the leader always had someone who could pull them into line. Good campaign teams led by fearless advisers were essential. At times I was in the room for those frank and honest character assessments. And, yes, I copped a few myself.

Trump has no one to tell him when he is wrong, having sacked the critics and ostracised the contrarians. Almost none of the 2016 team is there. And many mainstream Republicans who were “Never Trumpers” have morphed into movements like The Lincoln Project and Republican Voters Against Trump. These well-funded groups have done unprecedented damage to his re-election campaign. Their ads are sniper shots with horrifying accuracy. What’s more, they got into Trump’s head by running the ads in Washington DC on the TV networks he watches every morning. They are experienced Republican campaigners running against an inexperienced incumbent.

Sometimes leaders can get away with an inexperienced team and little message discipline. They have usually been through hell and high water themselves and are smart enough to build a kitchen cabinet of experienced, wise advisers. Trump hasn’t held a formal cabinet meeting since May and trusts only his own judgment – and he craves regular reaffirmation like one of his predecessors, Richard Nixon.

Even the best fighter cannot win without a good support team in their corner. It’s time for Trump to forget about the aesthetics, get back in the ring and start landing some heavy blows.

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