

‘IF HE WANTS TO WIN...’ Victor Davis Hanson’s Advice for Trump

[Rob Bluey](#)

August 18, 2024

In the summer of 1988, Democrat presidential candidate Michael Dukakis held a 17-point lead over [Republican George H.W. Bush](#), according to a Gallup poll. By the November election, however, it was a different story. Vice President Bush had erased Dukakis’ double-digit advantage, winning by 8 percentage points nationally and capturing 41 states.

Renowned historian [Victor Davis Hanson](#) believes there’s an important lesson for former President Donald Trump from the 1988 campaign—one that will make the difference between winning a second term or losing to Vice President Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election. Like Harris today, Dukakis was undefined in the minds of many Americans. Bush’s campaign manager, Lee Atwater, systematically set out to change how voters viewed the liberal Massachusetts governor. Through a series of famous political ads and negative stories about Dukakis, Americans started to sour on the Democrat.

In an interview with The Daily Signal, Hanson revealed how it happened: [Dukakis] kept saying, “I’m not ideological. I’m not a liberal. I’m a competent governor. It’s about competence. It’s about technocracy. [I engineered the Massachusetts miracle](#). This is not about George Bush, the conservative, or me, the Massachusetts liberal.”

Then Atwater stepped up and said, “Yes, it is. Here’s the Willie Horton ad. Here’s the tank ad. Here’s the Boston Harbor ad. And when I get done,” Atwater said, “I’m going to take the bark off you.”

The reason I’m mentioning this is Dukakis on Aug. 1 was 17 points ahead in the polls. And when they got done with him, he lost almost by 8 points. It’s the same time frame that Trump has to work in.

Atwater’s decision was controversial at the time—and continued to reverberate in Republican campaigns in the future.

Hanson explained:

Lee Atwater sort of hijacked the ... elder Bush aristocratic campaign. And once he was successful—if you remember, he died shortly of a brain tumor—he was asked to apologize to Dukakis.

Everybody said, “We’re never going to do that again.” Basically, the Republican establishment said, at the national level ... “We would rather lose nobly than win ugly.”

And they never did quite that again, against [Barack] Obama or Bill Clinton, and the result is, they’ve lost seven out of the last eight popular votes, and they’ve never won 51% since.

Hanson’s [advice for Trump](#): “Show everybody who [Harris] is and why she won’t run on her record and why she won’t tell us that she’s still proud of being a radical.”

Importantly, he noted, Trump should avoid ad hominem attacks, insults about Harris’ identity, and her sordid affair with former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown. Given the condensed [window of the presidential race](#), there’s simply no time to waste, Hanson said. That makes defining [Harris’ radical policy positions](#) of paramount importance for Trump. “If he does that, he will win in the way that Bush did,” Hanson said. “If he doesn’t, he will lose.”