

Opinion: Calif.'s job to make America great again

By Joe Mathews

California is on the defensive in its battle with Donald Trump.

We need offense—now.

Trump is attacking our state as if it were just another political opponent. His strategy is not merely to push California; he wants to rob our state of its political legitimacy.



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So the president of the United States has falsely claimed that California's elections are fraudulent exercises involving millions of illegal votes. He's frequently accused our biggest cities of endangering our country by failing to assist with immigration enforcement. He has called California "out of control" and threatened to "defund" state programs.

Such attacks are so potentially damaging (since California is the world's sixth-largest economy and a vital model of diverse peoples prospering together) that we need to be fighting Trump much more directly.

Put simply, California must delegitimize Trump before he delegitimizes us.

There are two ways California must go on offense. First, comes the fist: Californians should aggressively question Trump's legitimacy as president. Second, comes the outstretched hand: we must bolster our state's own legitimacy by reaching out to the rest of America and reaffirming how proud we are to be a part of this country.

Any outrageous allegation Trump makes against us should be answered with greater outrage. If Trump wants to make up claims of fraud in our elections, we should target his own frauds—from questionable business dealings to the confidence game of Trump University. When Trump threatens the funds for state programs, Californians should point out that Trump's budget and tax plans could bankrupt the whole country.

When Trump alleges that California is "out of control," California should press the president on those who control him. Why bother negotiating immigration or energy policy with you, Mr. President, when we can go to the Kremlin or Goldman Sachs, and talk with those who oversee you?

The most powerful line of attack against this president is to question his loyalty to the country. Trump has billed himself as an unapologetic nationalist, vowing to make America great again. But he's deeply vulnerable on nationalist grounds. He constantly slanders the country—lying about the murder rate, equating America's leaders with the murderous autocrat Vladimir Putin, tweeting false insults against important American companies and businesses. Californians must convince our fellow citizens that Trump's attacks on this most American of states are an attack against our entire country.

To emphasize Trump's lack of patriotism, we Californians need to put our American patriotism on full throttle. While Trump denigrates America on Twitter, California leaders should be meeting with counterparts across the country, looking for areas of cooperation. When another state faces emergency, California should be the first to send help. And whenever

another state celebrates a great triumph, our leaders should congratulate them in person.

Our message: We believe Trump is illegitimate, but we respect Republicans, including Trump voters. To make this sell, Californians should deploy the words of California's "great communicator"—Ronald Reagan—as weapons against the current president.

The Gipper left us bon mots for nearly every occasion.

To explain our fight with Trump: "When you can't make them see the light, make them feel the heat."

When we engage in protests: "No arsenal, or no weapon in the arsenals of the world, is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women."

As we counter Trump's war against immigrants: "I, in my own mind, have always thought of America as a place in the divine scheme of things that was set aside as a promised land... any person with the courage, with the desire to tear up their roots, to strive for freedom, to attempt and dare to live in a strange and foreign place, to travel halfway across the world was welcome here."

In that vein, California should shift its energies from opposing Trump's Wall—that's defense—and go on offense by demanding the removal of the California-Mexico border's existing wall, an ineffective eyesore that inconveniences tourists, businesses and those who live in the San Diego-Tijuana region.

Opposing the wall should be part of a California effort to develop our own foreign policy with allies Trump is offending. Governor Brown should convene summits with the leaders of Mexico, Canada, Australia and Germany, and sign environmental, trade and tourism agreements with them. Then Brown should ask: Why doesn't the president make deals like that?

Sun Tzu advised, “If your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him.” This offensive strategy—reaching out to Americans while attacking Trump’s legitimacy—would irritate and isolate him. That’s the best way to weaken Trump—and protect our state and our country.

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