

It's Time for Nikki Haley to Take Off the Gloves

She's known for using southern charm and a genteel "shame-on-you scold" to fight critics. She needs to start throwing punches.

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By **Mary Ellen Klas**

Mary Ellen Klas is a Politics and Policy Columnist for Bloomberg Opinion. A former capital bureau chief for the Miami Herald, she has covered politics and government for more than three decades.



Let's get ready to rumble. *Photographer: Bloomberg*

When Nikki Haley was elected governor of South Carolina, one of the first things she did was require all state employees to answer their office phones with: “It’s a great day in South Carolina.”

This continued for five years until she left to become Donald Trump’s ambassador to the United Nations. The forced cheeriness was annoying to some state workers, but it explains Haley’s approach to politics – and how she handled being the punching bag for Vivek

Ramaswamy and Ron DeSantis during the fourth Republican presidential debate on Wednesday.

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"I love all the attention, fellas, thank you for that," she said.

Elon University political scientist Jason Kirk, who has studied Haley's record and written a book on her, describes her vibe as a "be better ethos."

She uses southern charm and a genteel "shame-on-you scold" to counter critics. It's also been an effective way of making her hardline conservative convictions sound less so, appealing to an increasing number of independents, moderate Republicans and curious Democrats.

When DeSantis and Ramaswamy ganged up on her, they affirmed her ascent as the candidate to beat for second place. That's the problem.

Trump holds nearly a 50-point lead over his Republican rivals, according to FiveThirtyEight. But as the former president and his extremist allies sink the GOP and threaten American democracy, the moment calls for punch-in-the-nose candor. Anyone who wants to defeat Trump should be talking about the danger of electing a narcissist and would-be dictator who will pardon himself and lay waste to the US justice system.

Haley isn't doing that. We're about five weeks away from the Iowa caucuses and she's still being nice. Which begs the question: Is she just posturing for a slot as vice president or another presidential run in 2028?

Haley has taken a few swipes at the former president, calling him out for racking up \$9 trillion in debt, enabling fraud in Covid relief funding, failing to crack down on China for the fentanyl pipeline and, as she says, leading the country to "chaos."

But even as she trails Trump by 30 points among voters in her home state, her campaign is wasting money on ads attacking DeSantis.

It shouldn't be this way. Haley's record and her position as a norm-breaking Indian American Republican woman in a solidly red state qualify her as a perfect non-MAGA alternative to Trump. But, like most reasonable Republicans, she's caught in the Trump trap.

She's tried to offer a restrained approach to hot-button issues like abortion, book bans, transgender rights and race relations with language that avoids angering Trump's base, but that has made her message a mix of mush.

Lost in this campaign is Haley's record as governor that shows she may have some of the essential skills needed for a president dealing with a divided Congress.

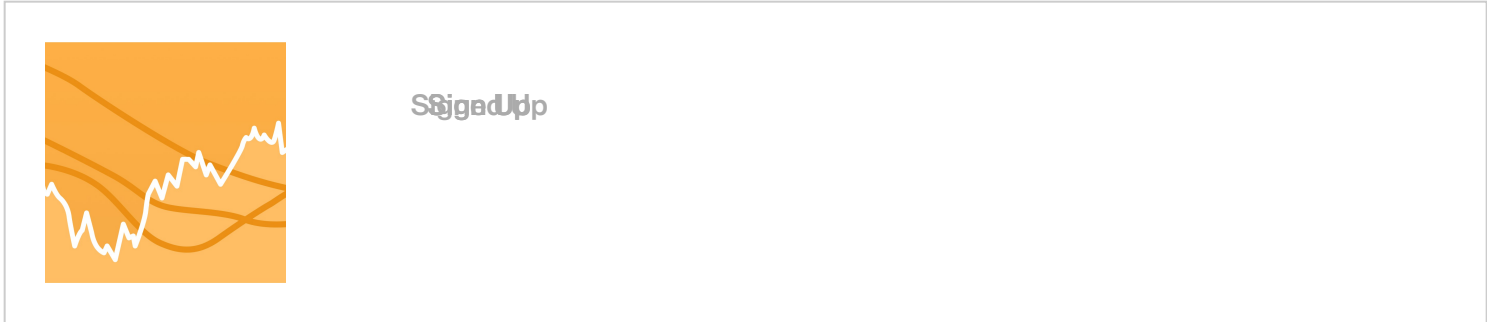
In South Carolina, the legislature has more power over state government than the governor. Haley shattered the glass ceiling, then showed she could throw sharp elbows if needed when intransigent legislators overrode her vetoes and otherwise stood in her way.

Haley has shown skill at leveraging public sentiment and using the bully pulpit to overcome opposition. As a back bench state representative, she was outraged to learn that fewer than 95% of the legislature's floor votes were ever recorded, leaving the public in the dark. She filed a bill requiring publicly recorded roll call votes on every bill. But the good old boys who controlled the chamber hated the idea. They stripped Haley of her committee assignments and removed her as majority whip.

Instead of humiliating her, their retaliatory treatment energized her. Haley ran for governor in 2010 during the Tea Party wave, won the primary and the general election and, based on the attention the voting issue received from her campaign, legislators changed their tune. Within four months of her inauguration, her roll call vote legislation became law.

When fellow Republicans refused to back her proposed income tax cut, a government restructuring bill, and a package of ethics reforms, she issued legislative report cards and told South Carolinians to vote them out of office.

After a white supremacist shot and killed nine Black parishioners in a Charleston church, she persuaded reluctant lawmakers to remove the Confederate battle flag from the Statehouse grounds. Black residents, lawmakers and activists had been fighting for the removal for decades and the debate was reignited with the shootings. Still, it was a politically risky move for Haley.



Haley is a staunch conservative, but her broadening appeal is likely due to her pragmatism. Take her statements on abortion, an issue fraught with risk for Republicans. In one of the early debates she told a national audience “As much as I’m pro-life, I don’t judge anyone for being pro-choice.” She urged Republicans to be “honest” with the American people because Republicans didn’t have the votes in Congress to pass a national abortion ban and that they should stop “demonizing this issue.”

Then, at a forum for conservative Christians in Iowa, she underscored her pro-life stance and said she would have signed a six-week ban when she was governor – a significant shift from the 20-week ban she signed into law. But she also carefully avoided any mention of the fact that she's convinced enacting a federal ban is politically impossible.

To her opponents, her comments are calculated and demonstrate she flip-flops on issues. To her defenders, like former spokesman Rob Godfrey, “One person’s flip-flop is another person’s pragmatist. When you move from campaigning into governing, your critics move with you.”

Sentiment is growing among some Republicans that Haley is the best alternative to Trump, especially after DeSantis’ repeated miscalculations and plummet in the polls.

Last week, Americans for Prosperity, a powerful political network with ties to billionaire Charles Koch, confirmed that it’s ready with millions in cash to back her campaign. JPMorgan Chase & Co. Chief Executive Officer Jamie Dimon, investor Bill Ackman, and

LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman are among a group of billionaires who have historically donated to Democrats who are now supporting Haley.

But unless the donor class support translates into votes, Haley isn't going anywhere and her "be better" charm is unlikely to persuade enough voters to choose her over the Make America Great Authoritarian.

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(A previous version of this column misspelled Jamie Dimon's name.)

To contact the author of this story:

Mary Ellen Klas at maryeklas@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story:

Victoria Benning at vbenning@bloomberg.net



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