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POLITICS

Republican Candidates' Sparring Resumes Mere Hours After Their Debate

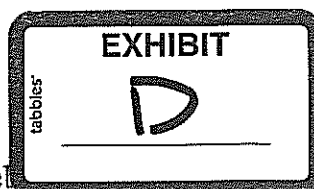
By MATT FLEGENHEIMER and JONATHAN MARTIN DEC. 16, 2015

Senator Ted Cruz, facing the most aggressive effort yet to sully his reputation with conservatives, absorbed a flood of attacks Wednesday from Senator Marco Rubio over immigration policy and national security, an offensive aimed at halting Mr. Cruz's rise among Tea Party and evangelical voters.

In public and in private, Mr. Rubio and his allies raised questions about whether Mr. Cruz had changed his position on a pathway to legal status for people already in the country illegally, deploying a barrage of emails, news clips and opposition research to suggest that his record on the subject was not so different from Mr. Rubio's.

Mr. Cruz, the Texas senator, responded by tying Mr. Rubio's past support for a pathway to citizenship to recent concerns about terrorist threats and refugees. He also echoed some far-right commentators who have repeatedly suggested that Mr. Rubio, of Florida, is more willing to present himself as a pragmatist on immigration when speaking to Spanish-language news outlets.

"To this day, he supports granting citizenship to 12 million people here illegally," Mr. Cruz told reporters in Los Angeles on Wednesday. "Last night was the



first time he admitted it, and admitted not only on Spanish-language television but on English-language television.”

Yet if the tussle seemed likely to persist through the holidays, Mr. Cruz’s steady performance in Tuesday night’s debate underscored his ascendance in the Republican race, where he has passed Donald J. Trump in some recent Iowa polls.

At the same time, the debate and its aftermath highlighted the race’s volatility in New Hampshire and beyond, adding little clarity on who might emerge as center-right Republicans’ choice.

Mr. Trump, who leads in national polls, slogged through an uneven debate night, though previous forgettable performances had little effect on his support. Perhaps most notably, he resisted repeating past criticisms of Mr. Cruz in and after the debate.

After facing two forces at the debate to which he was unaccustomed — an often unsympathetic crowd and an effectively pugnacious Jeb Bush — Mr. Trump returned to his campaign comfort zone with a rally on Wednesday.

“Ted Cruz was very nice to me last night,” he told supporters at a Mesa, Ariz., airport hangar. The police estimated his crowd at 5,000 — and Mr. Trump put the number at three times that.

Mr. Bush appeared energized, beating rivals to cable news just eight hours after the debate.

After appearing to irritate Mr. Trump in a series of exchanges during the debate, a triumph that bordered on cathartic for many supporters of his long-languishing campaign, Mr. Bush and his team moved quickly to convince his donors that he was seizing the momentum gained through his pointed attacks on Mr. Trump.

“I don’t think he’s a serious candidate. I don’t know why others don’t feel compelled to point that out, but I did,” he said on CNN. “Donald Trump is not going to be president of the United States by insulting every group on the planet, insulting women, P.O.W.s, war heroes, Hispanics, disabled, African-Americans.”

Mr. Bush finds himself battling on two fronts in New Hampshire, increasingly seen as decisive for his campaign. In addition to Mr. Trump, he must contend with establishment favorites like Mr. Rubio and Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, who had a strong showing Tuesday and has been rising in polls in the state, which holds the nation's first primary.

Underscoring Mr. Christie's growing stature, backers of both Mr. Bush and Gov. John Kasich of Ohio criticized him Wednesday.

"'Mr. Tell It Like It Is' shamelessly pandered," a Bush aide, Matt Gorman, wrote in an email to reporters, pointing out that Mr. Christie had called Mr. Trump "a serious candidate" in an interview on conservative talk radio.

And a "super PAC" supporting Mr. Kasich was to begin running ads Wednesday in New Hampshire on Mr. Christie's fiscal record, an acknowledgment of Mr. Christie's new strength there and a sign of the chaos in the race.

"For the jumbled-up establishment lane, it's now even more congested," said Matt Strawn, a former Iowa party chairman. "And Cruz's lane is totally clear."

Mr. Rubio traveled on Wednesday to Iowa and New Hampshire. For the second consecutive debate, the focus afterward was in large measure on him and the party's approach to immigration.

"It's easy to stand up and say: 'I will destroy ISIS. I will make the sands in the Middle East glow in the dark,'" he said in Manchester, N.H., mocking a bit of bravado Mr. Cruz offered this month.

His campaign also reveled in what it saw as a tentative, overly parsed statement from Mr. Cruz on Fox News on Wednesday.

"The fact that I introduce an amendment to remove part of the Gang of Eight bill doesn't mean I support the rest of the Gang of Eight bill," Mr. Cruz said after repeated questions about comments he made, showing support for letting unauthorized immigrants stay, while the immigration overhaul was being debated.

Mr. Cruz told CNN that the confrontations with Mr. Rubio were unsurprising. “Senator Rubio’s campaign has been running attack ads against me,” he said, “and I think they’re concerned” at the prospect of conservatives’ uniting around Mr. Cruz.

The Cruz-Rubio dynamic appears to be growing more confrontational beyond the debate stage and campaign trail. Republicans in Iowa this week received their first piece of mail from a group run by backers of Mr. Rubio, criticizing Mr. Cruz for his vote to limit the National Security Agency’s metadata program. (Mr. Cruz has said an alternative program strengthened the country’s capacity to fight terrorism.)

“These men undermined our intelligence agencies’ ability to stop terrorist attacks,” the mailer read, below a photo of Mr. Cruz, Mr. Paul, President Obama and Senator Harry Reid.

Mr. Rubio’s intentions in Iowa are something of a mystery. But leading Republicans there said his best hope for making himself the mainstream alternative to Mr. Trump and Mr. Cruz would be to finish close to them, and well above other right-of-center Republicans, in the caucuses.

For others, the debate — the last major scheduled event for Republican candidates this year — prompted new questions about the viability of their campaigns.

Carly Fiorina, appearing on CNN, chafed at a remark about her struggles in polls. “Oh wow, you’re like declaring an end to my candidacy,” she said. “I think we’re just getting started.”

Minutes later, Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, widely seen as a standout in the so-called undercard debate of low-polling candidates, made a pitch to viewers after a questioner said he was funny.

“I am hilarious. Send money if you want to keep me in this race,” he said. “I’m not speaking again until somebody sends \$100,000.”

Adam Nagourney, Fernanda Santos and Ashley Parker contributed reporting.

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