

5 Takeaways From Another Trump-Free Republican Debate

The party's front-runner took few hits as his rivals bickered, Nikki Haley delivered an assured performance, Tim Scott reasserted himself and Ron DeSantis took his first debate swipes at Trump.

By Shane Goldmacher, Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan
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As he sat in the spin room with the Fox News host Sean Hannity after the second Republican debate on Wednesday night, Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida accurately summed up the spectacle he had just participated in.

“If I was at home watching that,” Mr. DeSantis said, “I would have changed the channel.”

The meandering and at times indecipherable debate seemed to validate former President Donald J. Trump’s decision to skip it. With only occasional exceptions, the Republicans onstage seemed content to bicker with one another. Most of them delivered the dominant front-runner only glancing blows and did little to upend the political reality that Mr. Trump is lapping all of his rivals — whose cumulative support in most national polls still doesn’t come close to the former president’s standing.

Here are five takeaways from 120 minutes of cross-talk, unanswered questions, prepackaged comebacks and nary a word mentioning the heavy favorite’s legal jeopardy.

Punches grazed Trump, but the status quo remains.

The first time he spoke, Mr. DeSantis finally took on Mr. Trump in front of a national audience.

“Donald Trump is missing in action,” Mr. DeSantis said. “He should be on this stage tonight. He owes it to you to defend his record where they added \$7.8 trillion to the debt. That set the stage for the inflation that we have now.”

Allies and some donors had long been itching for such forcefulness.

But by the end of the 120-minute slog of a debate, that line felt more like an aberration that blended into the background. The candidates mostly seemed to intentionally ignore Mr. Trump’s overwhelming lead — other than Mr. Christie, who took an awkward stab at a nickname (“Donald Duck”).

In a memo to donors before the debate, a pro-Mike Pence super PAC had a blunt take: “This race needs to be shaken up, and soon.”

The race seemed barely stirred.

The [91 criminal counts](#) Mr. Trump is charged with went unmentioned — both by the moderators and the candidates ostensibly running against him. And while the former president did sustain more criticism than in the first debate, the seven candidates onstage spent most of the night poking at one another, in what could feel like a pitched battle for second place.

Tim Scott hit Nikki Haley over curtains and a gas tax. Ms. Haley sideswiped Mr. DeSantis over fracking. Vivek Ramaswamy was hit over his past business ties to China. And he accused everyone of not knowing the Constitution. Chris Christie tried to turn things back to Mr. Trump — suggesting at one point that he “be voted off the island.”

It all amounted to a muddy mess.

DeSantis offers a glimpse of what his supporters have wanted.

Mr. DeSantis’s allies believed that his first debate performance, despite some criticism from the news media about a seeming lack of aggressiveness, was effective. And they wanted a repeat performance.

They largely got it. Mr. DeSantis made the most of the night’s lone question on abortion to criticize Mr. Trump for [attacking Florida’s restrictive six-week abortion ban](#). He largely evaded a question about his past remarks about his state’s curriculum on slavery, in which he [suggested some enslaved people were taught valuable skills](#).

At the outset, Mr. DeSantis seemed assertive and in command. Other than an extended back-and-forth with Ms. Haley, he mostly avoided shouting matches.

He also did his best to find spots to enter the discussion, after being largely ignored by the Fox Business moderators for much of the first hour. That enraged his advisers, but he ultimately ended up speaking more than anyone.

He found a way to push back on the moderators at the end, when one asked the candidates to write on whiteboards which candidate they would vote “off the island.” As most of them shook their heads, Mr. DeSantis said the question was “disrespectful,” letting everyone else move on.

But his only glancing mentions of Mr. Trump made it hard to imagine the governor suddenly closing what has become a yawning gap with the former president. And, moments after the debate ended, Chris LaCivita, a senior Trump adviser, issued a

statement calling for the Republican National Committee to cancel further debates, suggesting that Mr. Trump felt at least no immediate pressure to join the debating fray.

Haley cemented her spot near center stage.

Ms. Haley, whose [solid performance at the first debate](#) had ignited fresh interest from some major donors, appeared comfortable standing center stage. She took aim at Mr. DeSantis and fended off attacks from Mr. Scott, whom she first appointed to the Senate.

In between, she rattled off one of the evening's more memorable lines — “every time I hear you, I feel a little bit dumber,” she snapped at Mr. Ramaswamy as he talked about why he joined TikTok.

Ms. Haley, like Mr. DeSantis, targeted Mr. Trump, saying he had focused on the wrong issues — namely the trade deficit — while combating China's growing influence. She ticked off a number of areas where he had left America vulnerable, including the foreign purchase of farmland and the operation of a Chinese spy base in Cuba.

“We need to start focusing on what keeps Americans safe,” she said.

More than anything else, Ms. Haley's rising standing was confirmed by the fact that some rivals began to pick apart elements of her record as governor and United Nations ambassador.

Mr. Scott at one point forced her into a detailed discussion of the gas tax in their state. But she seemed ready to engage.

“Bring it, Tim,” she told him.

Tim Scott reasserted himself.

Tim did, in fact, bring it.

The senator from South Carolina had [faded into the backdrop of the first debate](#) and slumped in the polls. But from the opening moments of Wednesday's contest, he jostled for time and, notably, mixed up his sunny brand of optimism with some sharp jabs at both Mr. Ramaswamy and Ms. Haley.

Notably, he did not target Mr. Trump.

Perhaps his strongest moment of the evening came in the exchange with Mr. DeSantis over Florida's curriculum on slavery. He mostly glided past the specifics — though he said there was “not a redeeming quality” in slavery — to talk about his life story and how it led to him standing at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library as the only Black candidate onstage.

“I have been discriminated against, but America is not a racist country,” he declared.

It was a line familiar to those who have seen him on the stump but squarely in line with his candidacy’s central pitch, and one he hopes can prevent him from falling further toward the periphery of the stage.

Ramaswamy showed a kinder, gentler side.

Immediately after the first debate, many pundits quickly declared Mr. Ramaswamy the winner. He drew outside attention by shredding his opponents with personal attacks. At one point, he went so far as to accuse them of corruption, saying he was the only one onstage who wasn’t bought and paid for.

But the polling data that emerged after the debate did not support the narrative that he had won. Republican voters developed an increasingly negative view of Mr. Ramaswamy, and he is performing poorly in early-state polls compared with his relative strength in national online polls.

So on Wednesday night, it was Ramaswamy 2.0 — a conciliatory candidate who was chastising his competitors for attacking one another and repeatedly going out of his way to say how much he liked and respected them.

Instead, Mr. Christie filled the role of combatant-in-chief on Wednesday, from his new nickname for Mr. Trump to a cringe-inducing reference to President Biden’s “sleeping” with a teachers’ union member — his wife. (Mr. Pence, who was far less a presence than in the first debate, decided to inject that he’d been sleeping with a teacher for decades, too — also, his wife.)

Nobody bought Mr. Ramaswamy’s reinvention. The other candidates seemed at times to be bonding over their shared disdain for him. Ms. Haley prompted laughs from the audience when said she felt dumber every time he talked. Mr. Scott attacked him for doing business in China. And apart from the attacks on Mr. Biden, the harshest lines of the night were aimed at Mr. Ramaswamy.