

DeSantis Accuses Trump of ‘Cowardice’ for Refusing to Debate Rivals

Gov. Ron DeSantis escalated his attacks on the former president after Mr. Trump bragged about debating Hillary Clinton in 2016.

By Nicholas Nehamas
New York Times

Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida accused former President Donald J. Trump of “cowardice” for refusing to participate in the Republican presidential primary debates after Mr. Trump boasted about facing Hillary Clinton in 2016 following the [release of the “Access Hollywood” tape](#).

“Trump denigrates military service by claiming it is ‘braver’ that he debated Hillary Clinton than what soldiers endure on the battlefield,” Mr. DeSantis, a former Navy lawyer, [wrote on the social media platform X](#) on Sunday. “Debating isn’t ‘brave’; it’s the bare minimum any candidate should do. Hiding from debates, on the other hand, is an example of cowardice.”

The Florida governor was responding to comments that Mr. Trump — who has said he is too far ahead of his rivals in the polls to debate them — had made during a [speech to New York Republicans](#) on Saturday. In his remarks, Mr. Trump recounted how a general had praised him for taking the debate stage against Mrs. Clinton in 2016 even though [a damaging recording of him making vulgar statements about women](#) had recently been made public.

Mr. Trump claimed the general had told him: “Sir, I’ve been on the battlefield. Men have gone down on my left and on my right. I stood on hills where soldiers were killed. But I believe the bravest thing I’ve ever seen was the night you went onto that stage with Hillary Clinton after what happened.”

Mr. DeSantis has often been hesitant to directly attack Mr. Trump, who remains popular with Republican voters, limiting his criticisms to certain topics such as his inability to serve two terms and his failure to achieve policy objectives like building a border wall and “draining the swamp” during his first administration. One of Mr. DeSantis’s other go-to attacks has been on Mr. Trump’s decision not to take part in the four Republican debates held so far. But calling the former president a coward represents something of an escalation for Mr. DeSantis as his campaign continues to underperform expectations.

The former president, who has a history of [manufacturing anecdotes](#), did not name the general. Steven Cheung, a spokesman for the Trump campaign, said that Mr. DeSantis was having “a meltdown of epic proportions by regurgitating Democrat talking points.”

“The fact is that Ron’s getting blown out in every single poll, and nothing he has done up to this point has changed his almost nonexistent standing with voters,” Mr. Cheung added.

A [new poll](#) of Iowa Republicans released Monday showed that Mr. Trump had increased his lead over Mr. DeSantis to more than 30 points, with voters in the state set to decide the first G.O.P. nominating contest in roughly five weeks.

Throughout his career, Mr. Trump has shown a remarkable resilience to scandals that would have destroyed other political candidates. Although many observers thought the “Access Hollywood” tape would torpedo Mr. Trump’s chances of winning the 2016 election, [he apologized](#) and then dismissed his comments as “[locker room talk](#)” during the debate against Mrs. Clinton.

So far in the 2024 primary campaign, Mr. Trump’s standing with Republican voters has only strengthened, even as he faces [indictments in four criminal cases](#).