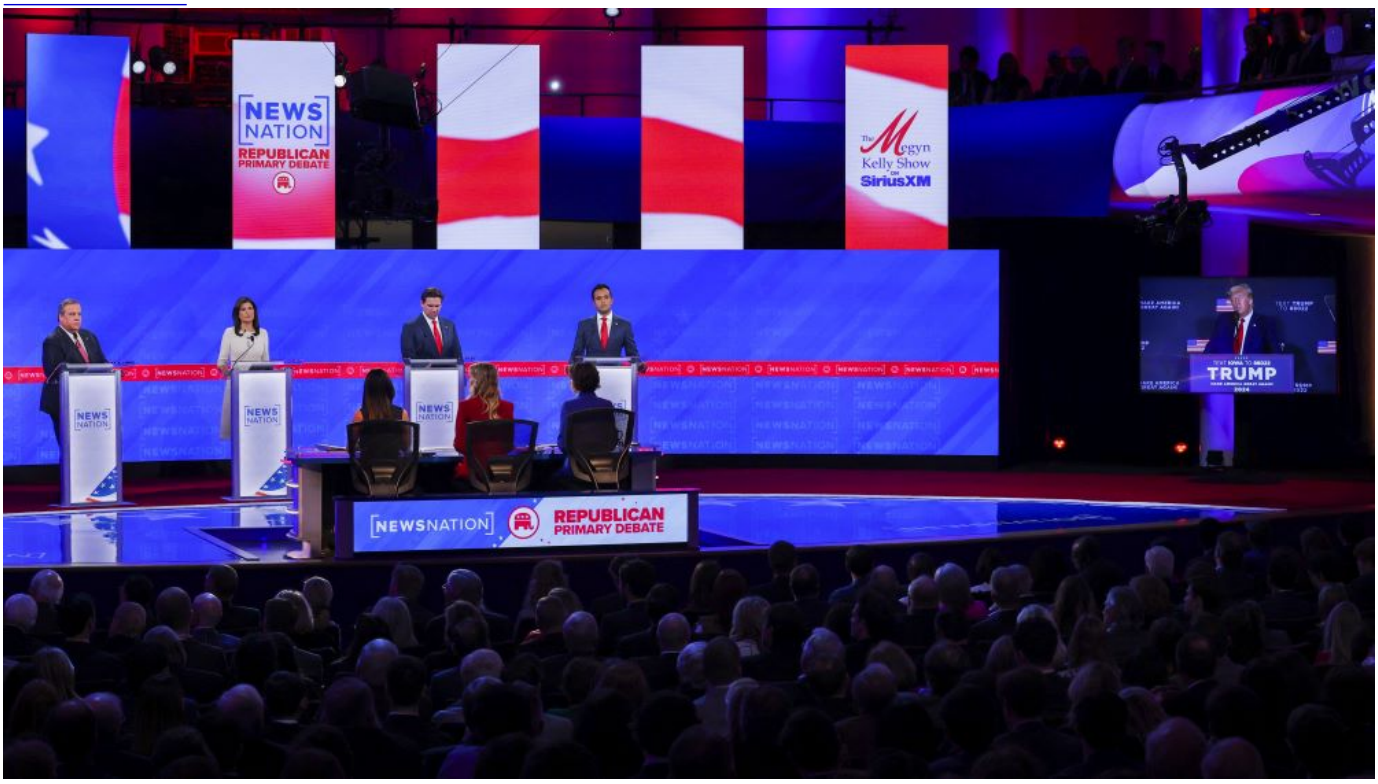
Opinion

NCR Voices



Republican presidential candidate and former U.S. President Donald Trump appears on a screen to the right during the fourth 2024 Republican debate at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa Dec. 6. The other candidates pictured are, from left, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former biotech executive Vivek Ramaswamy. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)



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Sen. Tim Scott is gone. So is North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgam, who only kept his campaign afloat longer than expected because the software entrepreneur could self-finance. Gone, too, is former Vice President Mike Pence. The man who helped usher evangelical Christians into Donald Trump's tent in 2016 was ushered out of the contest by Trump's base, who refused to forgive Pence for choosing the Constitution over the coup.

Looking at the remaining four candidates on the debate stage Dec. 6 — former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy — it was hard not to conclude that it is only a matter of time before they join the ranks of the also-rans. And, they have no one but themselves to blame.

It was 17 minutes into the debate before anyone mentioned Trump's name. Seventeen minutes. DeSantis went after Haley, and Haley hit back. Ramaswamy went after Haley, and Haley pushed back. Then DeSantis again went after Haley and then Ramaswamy. Host Megyn Kelly tried to get a question to Christie, but the other two men continued piling on Haley.

Christie is the only GOP candidate who has repeatedly and consistently criticized former President Donald Trump for his role in seeking to overturn the results of the 2020 election. Again on Dec. 6, he insisted that whatever other qualifications the other candidates brought, their unwillingness to speak the truth about Trump was a huge liability. The former governor must have been paying attention in CCD when they talked about telling the truth!

DeSantis wasn't paying attention, though. He has criticized Trump as a candidate, arguing the former president remains too focused on the past, but he repeatedly refuses to answer whether or not Trump is fit for office. He refused to do so again at the latest debate. Whenever someone asks him about the assault on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, he is evasive.

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Haley, who has benefited the most from the debates so far, balances any criticism of Trump — he is "weak in the knees when it comes to Ukraine" — with praise for his presidency. She generally avoids or soft-pedals questions about the Jan. 6 assault on the Capitol. "It was not a beautiful day, it was a terrible day, and we don't ever want that to happen again," she told Iowa voters, as if the problem was the weather, not an attempt to prevent the peaceful transfer of power. In the debate this week, she again confined her criticisms to policy issues, and would not challenge him on the most important issue, his willingness to overturn the Constitution.

Ramaswamy actually traffics in conspiracy theories about the assault on the Capitol, and he doubled down on the idea that it was an "inside job" during the Dec. 6 debate. He diverts any questions that would require condemning Trump's actions. You suspect when Ramaswamy looks in the mirror, he would smile if he saw Trump peering back at him. Whatever Trump's many faults, he was never an ideologue, but Ramaswamy is at his most passionate when he is bloviating about his mastery of, and commitment to, ideas. The fact that his ideas about the American founding and climate change and the "deep state" are absurd on their face does not seem to bother him. He leans into absurdity. Ramaswamy is the champion of the caricature.

What none but Christie realize is that it would not be enough to try and be the last person standing against Trump. Yes, they need to take down their rivals for that spot. But unless they continually made the case against Trump, unless they argue that want he did after the 2020 election was unconstitutional, that he is unfit to be president, that we need a president who believes in facts not conspiracy theories and names the theories, unless they do all this, Trump will maintain his lock on the top spot. And they would be competing for runner-up.

What Christie doesn't realize is that if you alienate Trump's base, what is left of the GOP's chances? The party has won the popular vote once in this century. Trump got across the finish line in 2016, and nearly did so in 2020, by motivating people who had not voted in years. If they stay home, no Republican can win.

The Republican Party is in a Catch-22. It couldn't happen to a nicer party.