

## DeSantis' Flameout Should Surprise No One

The candidate who named his super PAC “Never Back Down” spent the last seven months doing just that.

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By **Mary Ellen Klas**

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End of the road. Photographer: Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images North America

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' decision to drop out of the 2024 presidential race should surprise no one. Nor should his feckless endorsement of Donald Trump.

The candidate who named his political action committee “Never Back Down,” spent the last seven months explaining why he kept backing down.

Even his endorsement of Trump was a classic example of the Florida governor's backtracking. It was just a week ago when DeSantis stood before an Iowa audience and

trashed fellow Republicans who “kiss the ring” of the former president.

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“You deserve a nominee that’s going to put you first not himself first,” he crowed. On Sunday, DeSantis not only gave Trump’s gold ring a big, fat smooch, he timed it strategically to result in maximum political damage to the last-standing rival, Nikki Haley.

DeSantis botched his campaign rollout on Elon Musk’s social media site. He constantly overruled his advisers, shuffled campaign managers, relied on inexperienced staff, and blew through political committee directors. He raised more money than any other campaign, yet lost every county in the Iowa caucuses and ended up without even enough spare change to buy a New Hampshire snow shovel or South Carolina barbecue.

His pre-recorded announcement Sunday came after his disastrous showing in Iowa, where he barely beat Haley for second place as he trailed Trump by 30 percentage points. But he showed no contrition.

“Winston Churchill once remarked that success is not final, failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts,” DeSantis intoned. “While this campaign has ended, the mission continues down here in Florida. We will continue to show the country how to lead.”

DeSantis is no Churchill. He got into the race on the premise that he believed that Trump, wounded by legal troubles and a campaign focused on retribution and an authoritarian consolidation of power, would never beat Biden. But he was so consumed by his own selfish ambitions that he ignored Trump’s assault on conventional norms.

- If DeSantis had any courage, he wouldn’t have used his withdrawal to criticize Haley for upholding the norms once embraced by the Republican

Party.

- If DeSantis had any courage, he would have used his campaign to criticize Trump for attempting to overthrow the peaceful transition of power.
- If DeSantis had any courage he would have condemned Trump's pledge to issue pardons to the Jan. 6 insurrectionists, politicize the Department of Justice and rewrite the Constitution.
- If DeSantis had any courage, he would have said that a campaign that exists to aggrandize the power of the president to retaliate against his opponents isn't worthy of his endorsement.

But like every other Republican leader who wants to normalize Trump's authoritarian agenda, DeSantis demonstrated he's not courageous. He's an opportunistic coward.

We saw all this coming. Anyone who's watched DeSantis govern Florida warned us.

After Trump's defeat in 2020, DeSantis decided he was best positioned to be the heir to the MAGA movement. He accelerated his presidential ambitions and the Florida Legislature became his puppet.

DeSantis designed every policy to exploit the anger and resentment of the White working-class voters he thought he needed to win their support on the national stage.

But whether it was his plan to relocate migrants from the Texas border to Martha's Vineyard, or his effort to accuse former felons of voter fraud, or his targeting Disney for its opposition to the so-called "Don't Say Gay" law, time and again he and his staff made strategic blunders or botched legal maneuvers. Lawmakers repeatedly had to retroactively fix the laws he passed. It was a trend that didn't get the national attention it deserved, but it demonstrated DeSantis' flaws as an executive.

During his swift ascent as a national political figure, DeSantis relied on a compliant Florida Legislature to push through his extremist initiatives, including limiting abortion to six weeks, banning classroom instruction on sexual orientation, restricting gender-affirming medical care for transgender youth and limiting academic freedom in universities. He declared that "Florida is where woke goes to die."

Like Trump's open embrace of authoritarianism, DeSantis has led Florida not by persuasion, but by bullying and intimidation. He got legislators to comply by using strong-arm tactics and extra-legal means to create law, often punishing anyone he perceived as disloyal.

But as DeSantis soaked up attention from right-wing media and Republicans across the country parroted his policies, his culture war agenda made little difference to voters who said their top concerns are the economy and immigration.

"He learned a lot in this presidential race about kind of what works and what doesn't," one of his advisers told me. "I think this will change him some. I don't know what that looks like at this point."

The defeat appears to have taught him one thing. His decision to stiff-arm mainstream media was a strategic blunder that he openly acknowledged last week on the Hugh Hewitt podcast. "I should have just been blanketing," he said. "I should have gone on all the corporate shows."

But if Trump continues to maintain his hold on the GOP, expect more ring-kissing from the ambitious DeSantis, not navel gazing.

At 45 years old, he can use the remaining three years of his term to work on restoring his long-sought perch as the heir apparent to the MAGA movement. There's no guarantee he can resurrect his damaged national profile, fix his prickly personality and emerge to mount another presidential campaign in 2028.

"He's running a campaign putting himself and his issues first," DeSantis declared on the night before his Iowa campaign imploded. It was an attempt to wound Trump, but it came without a hint of self-awareness.

He was right. Americans deserve a nominee that's going to put Americans first "not himself."

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